

THE DISCARDED IMAGE

AN INTRODUCTION TO
MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE
LITERATURE

BY

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CHAPTER I

THE MEDIEVAL SITUATION

The likeness of unlike things
MULCASTER

Medieval man shared many ignorances with the savage, and some of his beliefs may suggest savage parallels to an anthropologist. But he had not usually reached these beliefs by the same route as the savage.

Savage beliefs are thought to be the spontaneous response of a human group to its environment, a response made principally by the imagination. They exemplify what some writers call pre-logical thinking. They are closely bound up with the communal life of the group. What we should describe as political, military, and agricultural operations are not easily distinguished from rituals; ritual and belief beget and support one another. The most characteristically medieval thought does not arise in that way.

Sometimes, when a community is comparatively homogeneous and comparatively undisturbed over a long period, such a system of belief can continue, of course with development, long after material culture has progressed far beyond the level of savagery. It may then begin to turn into something more ethical, more philosophical, even more scientific; but there will be uninterrupted continuity between this and its savage beginnings. Something like this, it would seem, happened in Egypt.¹ That also is unlike the history of medieval thought.

¹ See *Before Philosophy*, J. A. Wilson, etc. (1949).

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The peculiarity of the Middle Ages can be shown by two examples.

Some time between 1160 and 1207 an English priest called Lazamon wrote a poem called the *Brut*.¹ In it (ll. 15,775 sq.) he tells us that the air is inhabited by a great many beings, some good and some bad, who will live there till the world ends. The content of this belief is not unlike things we might find in savagery. To people Nature, and especially the less accessible parts of her, with spirits both friendly and hostile, is characteristic of the savage response. But Lazamon is not writing thus because he shares in any communal and spontaneous response made by the social group he lives in. The real history of the passage is quite different. He takes his account of the aerial daemons from the Norman poet Wace (c. 1155). Wace takes it from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (before 1139). Geoffrey takes it from the second-century *De Deo Socratis* of Apuleius. Apuleius is reproducing the pneumatology of Plato. Plato was modifying, in the interests of ethics and monotheism, the mythology he had received from his ancestors. If you go back through many generations of those ancestors, then at last you may find, or at least conjecture, an age when that mythology was coming into existence in what we suppose to be the savage fashion. But the English poet knew nothing about that. It is further from him than he is from us. He believes in these daemons because he has read about them in a book; just as most of us believe in the Solar System or in the

¹ Ed. F. Madden, 3 vols. (1847).

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anthropologists' accounts of early man. Savage beliefs tend to be dissipated by literacy and by contact with other cultures; these are the very things which have created Lazamon's belief.

My second example is perhaps more interesting. In the fourteenth-century *Pèlerinage de l'Homme* by Guillaume Deguileville, Nature (personified), speaking to a character called Grâcedieu, says that the frontier between their respective realms is the orbit of the Moon.¹ It would be easy to suppose that this is the direct offspring of savage mythopoeia, dividing the sky into a higher region peopled with higher spirits and a lower region peopled with lower. The Moon would be a spectacular landmark between them. But in reality the origins of this passage have very little to do with savage, or even with civilised, religion. By calling the superior *numen* Grâcedieu the poet has worked in something of Christianity; but this is merely a 'wash' spread over a canvas that is not Christian but Aristotelian.

Aristotle, being interested both in biology and in astronomy, found himself faced with an obvious contrast. The characteristic of the world we men inhabit is incessant change by birth, growth, procreation, death, and decay. And within that world such experimental methods as had been achieved in his time could discover only an imperfect uniformity. Things happened in the same way not perfectly nor invariably but 'on the whole' or 'for the most part'.² But the world studied by astronomy seemed quite different. No *Nova* had yet been

¹ In Lydgate's trans. (E.E.T.S. ed. F. J. Furnivall, 1899), 3415 sq.

² *De Gen. Animalium*, 778a; *Polit.* 1255b.

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observed.¹ So far as he could find out, the celestial bodies were permanent; they neither came into existence nor passed away. And the more you studied them, the more perfectly regular their movements seemed to be. Apparently, then, the universe was divided into two regions. The lower region of change and irregularity he called Nature (φύσις). The upper he called Sky (οὐρανός). Thus he can speak of 'Nature and Sky' as two things.² But that very changeable phenomenon, the weather, made it clear that the realm of inconstant Nature extended some way above the surface of the Earth. 'Sky' must begin higher up. It seemed reasonable to suppose that regions which differed in every observable respect were also made of different stuff. Nature was made of the four elements, earth, water, fire, and air. Air, then (and with air Nature, and with Nature inconstancy) must end before Sky began. Above the air, in true Sky, was a different substance, which he called *aether*. Thus 'the *aether* encompasses the divine bodies, but immediately below the *aethereal* and divine nature comes that which is passible, mutable, perishable, and subject to death'.³ By the word *divine* Aristotle introduces a religious element; and the placing of the important frontier (between Sky and Nature, Aether and Air) at the Moon's orbit is a minor

¹ There is a tradition that Hipparchus (fl. 150 B.C.) detected one (see Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* II, xxiv). The great *Nova* in Cassiopeia of Nov. 1572 was a most important event for the history of thought (see F. R. Johnson, *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England*, Baltimore, 1937, p. 154).

² *Metaphys.* 1072b. Cf. Dante, *Par.* xxviii, 42.

³ *De Mundo*, 392^a. Whether this essay is Aristotle's or merely of the Aristotelian school does not matter for my purpose.

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detail. But the concept of such a frontier seems to arise far more in response to a scientific than to a religious need. This is the ultimate source of the passage in Deguileville.

What both examples illustrate is the overwhelmingly bookish or clerkly character of medieval culture. When we speak of the Middle Ages as the ages of authority we are usually thinking about the authority of the Church. But they were the age not only of her authority, but of authorities. If their culture is regarded as a response to environment, then the elements in that environment to which it responded most vigorously were manuscripts. Every writer, if he possibly can, bases himself on an earlier writer, follows an *auctor*: preferably a Latin one. This is one of the things that differentiate the period almost equally from savagery and from our modern civilisation. In a savage community you absorb your culture, in part unconsciously, from participation in the immemorial pattern of behaviour, and in part by word of mouth, from the old men of the tribe. In our own society most knowledge depends, in the last resort, on observation. But the Middle Ages depended predominantly on books. Though literacy was of course far rarer then than now, reading was in one way a more important ingredient of the total culture.

To this statement a reservation must however be added. The Middle Ages had roots in the 'barbarian' North and West as well as in that Graeco-Roman tradition which reached them principally through books. I have put the word 'barbarian' in inverted commas because it might otherwise mislead. It might suggest a

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far greater difference in race and arts and natural capacity than really existed even in ancient times between Roman citizens and those who pressed upon the frontiers of the empire. Long before that empire fell, citizenship had ceased to have any connection with race. Throughout its history its Germanic and (still more) its Celtic neighbours, if once conquered or allied, apparently had no reluctance to assimilate, and no difficulty in assimilating, its civilisation. You could put them into togas and set them to learning rhetoric almost at once. They were not in the least like Hottentots dressed up in bowler hats and pretending to be Europeans. The assimilation was real and often permanent. In a few generations they might be producing Roman poets, jurists, generals. They differed from the older members of the Graeco-Roman world no more than these differed from one another in shape of skull, features, complexion, or intelligence.

The contribution of the barbarian (thus understanding the word) to the Middle Ages will be variously assessed according to the point of view from which we study them. So far as law and custom and the general shape of society are concerned, the barbarian elements may be the most important. The same is true, in one particular way, of one particular art in some countries. Nothing about a literature can be more essential than the language it uses. A language has its own personality; implies an outlook, reveals a mental activity, and has a resonance, not quite the same as those of any other. Not only the vocabulary—*heaven* can never mean quite the same as *ciel*—but the very shape of the syntax is *sui generis*. Hence in the

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Germanic countries, including England, the debt of the medieval (and modern) literatures to their barbarian origin is all-pervasive. In other countries, where the Celtic languages and those of the Germanic invaders were both almost completely obliterated by Latin, the situation is quite different. In Middle English literature, after every necessary allowance has been made for French and Latin influences, the tone and rhythm and the very 'feel' of every sentence is (in the sense that we are now giving to the word) of barbarian descent. Those who ignore the relation of English to Anglo-Saxon as a 'merely philological fact' irrelevant to the literature betray a shocking insensibility to the very mode in which literature exists.

For the student of culture in a narrower sense—that is, of thought, sentiment, and imagination—the barbarian elements may be less important. Even for him they are doubtless by no means negligible. Fragments of non-classical Paganism survive in Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Irish, and Welsh; they are thought by most scholars to underlie a great deal of Arthurian romance. Medieval love-poetry may owe something to barbarian manners. Ballads, till a very late period, may throw up fragments of prehistoric (if it is not perennial) folklore. But we must see these things in proportion. The Old Norse and Celtic texts were, and remained till modern times, utterly unknown outside a very limited area. Changes in language soon made Anglo-Saxon unintelligible even in England. Elements from the old Germanic and the old Celtic world undoubtedly exist in the later vernaculars.

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But how hard we have to look for them! For one reference to Wade or Weland we meet fifty to Hector, Aeneas, Alexander, or Caesar. For one probable relic of Celtic religion dug out of a medieval book we meet, clear and emphatic, a score of references to Mars and Venus and Diana. The debt which the love-poets may owe to the barbarians is shadowy and conjectural; their debt to the classics, or even, as now appears, to the Arabians, is much more certain.

It may perhaps be held that the barbarian legacy is not really less, but only less flaunted and more disguised; even that it is all the more potent for being secret. This might be true as regards the romances and ballads. We must therefore ask how far, or rather in what sense, these are characteristically medieval products. They certainly loomed larger in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century picture of the Middle Ages than in the reality. There was a good reason why they should. Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser, the lineal descendants of the medieval romancers, continued to be 'polite literature' right down to the age of Hurd and Warton. The taste for that sort of fiction was kept alive all through the 'Metaphysical' and the Augustan Age. Throughout the same period the ballad also, though often in a somewhat degraded form, had kept alive. Children heard it from their nurses; eminent critics sometimes praised it. Thus the medieval 'Revival' of the eighteenth century revived what was not quite dead. It was along this line that we worked back to medieval literature; following to its source a stream which flowed past our door. As a result, Romance and Ballad coloured

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men's idea of the Middle Ages somewhat excessively. Except among scholars they do so still. Popular iconography—a poster, a joke in *Punch*—wishing to summon up the idea of the Medieval, draws a knight errant with castles, distressed damsels, and dragons *quant. suff.* in the background.

For the popular impression, as often, a defence can be made. There is a sense in which the Romances and Ballads perhaps really deserve to rank as the characteristic or representative product of the Middle Ages. Of the things they have left us these have proved the most widely and permanently pleasurable. And though things which in varying degrees resemble them can be found elsewhere, they are, in their total effect, unique and irreplaceable. But if by calling them characteristic we mean that the sort of imagination they embody was the principal, or even the very frequent, occupation of medieval men, we shall be mistaken. The eerie quality of some ballads and the hard, laconic pathos of others—the mystery, the sense of the illimitable, the elusive reticence of the best romances—these things stand apart from the habitual medieval taste. In some of the greatest medieval literature they are wholly lacking: in the Hymns, in Chaucer, in Villon. Dante can take us through all the regions of the dead without ever once giving us the *frisson* we get from *The Wife of Usher's Well* or *The Chapel Perilous*. It looks as if the Romances and such Ballads were in the Middle Ages, as they have remained ever since, truanies, refreshments, things that can live only on the margin of the mind, things whose very charm depends on their not

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being 'of the centre' (a locality which Matthew Arnold possibly overvalued).

At his most characteristic, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a wanderer. He was an organiser, a codifier, a builder of systems. He wanted 'a place for everything and everything in the right place'. Distinction, definition, tabulation were his delight. Though full of turbulent activities, he was equally full of the impulse to formalise them. War was (in intention) formalised by the art of heraldry and the rules of chivalry; sexual passion (in intention), by an elaborate code of love. Highly original and soaring philosophical speculation squeezes itself into a rigid dialectical pattern copied from Aristotle. Studies like Law and Moral Theology, which demand the ordering of very diverse particulars, especially flourish. Every way in which a poet can write (including some in which he had much better not) is classified in the Arts of Rhetoric. There was nothing which medieval people liked better, or did better, than sorting out and tidying up. Of all our modern inventions I suspect that they would most have admired the card index.

This impulse is equally at work in what seem to us their silliest pedantries and in their most sublime achievements. In the latter we see the tranquil, indefatigable, exultant energy of passionately systematic minds bringing huge masses of heterogeneous material into unity. The perfect examples are the *Summa* of Aquinas and Dante's *Divine Comedy*; as unified and ordered as the Parthenon or the *Oedipus Rex*, as crowded and varied as a London terminus on a bank holiday.

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But there is a third work which we can, I think, set beside these two. This is the medieval synthesis itself, the whole organisation of their theology, science, and history into a single, complex, harmonious mental Model of the Universe. The building of this Model is conditioned by two factors I have already mentioned: the essentially bookish character of their culture, and their intense love of system.

They are bookish. They are indeed very credulous of books. They find it hard to believe that anything an old *auctour* has said is simply untrue. And they inherit a very heterogeneous collection of books; Judaic, Pagan, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoical, Primitive Christian, Patristic. Or (by a different classification) chronicles, epic poems, sermons, visions, philosophical treatises, satires. Obviously their *auctours* will contradict one another. They will seem to do so even more often if you ignore the distinction of kinds and take your science impartially from the poets and philosophers; and this the medievals very often did in fact though they would have been well able to point out, in theory, that poets feigned. If, under these conditions, one has also a great reluctance flatly to disbelieve anything in a book, then here there is obviously both an urgent need and a glorious opportunity for sorting out and tidying up. All the apparent contradictions must be harmonised. A Model must be built which will get everything in without a clash; and it can do this only by becoming intricate, by mediating its unity through a great, and finely ordered, multiplicity. This task, I believe, the Medievals would in any case have undertaken.

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But they had a further inducement in the fact that it had already been begun, and indeed carried a fair way. In the last age of antiquity many writers—some of them will meet us in a later chapter—were, perhaps half-consciously, gathering together and harmonising views of very different origin: building a syncretistic Model not only out of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoical, but out of Pagan and Christian elements. This Model the Middle Ages adopted and perfected.

In speaking of the perfected Model as a work to be set beside the *Summa* and the *Comedy*, I meant that it is capable of giving a similar satisfaction to the mind, and for some of the same reasons. Like them it is vast in scale, but limited and intelligible. Its sublimity is not the sort that depends on anything vague or obscure. It is, as I shall try to show later, a classical rather than a Gothic sublimity. Its contents, however rich and various, are in harmony. We see how everything links up with everything else; at one, not in flat equality, but in a hierarchical ladder. It might be supposed that this beauty of the Model was apparent chiefly to us who, no longer accepting it as true, are free to regard it—or reduced to regarding it—as if it were a work of art. But I believe this is not so. I think there is abundant evidence that it gave profound satisfaction while it was still believed in. I hope to persuade the reader not only that this Model of the Universe is a supreme medieval work of art but that it is in a sense the central work, that in which most particular works were embedded, to which they constantly referred, from which they drew a great deal of their strength.

CHAPTER II

RESERVATIONS

I do not exercise myself in great matters:
which are too high for me.

PSALM CXXXI

To describe the imagined universe which is usually presupposed in medieval literature and art is not the same thing as writing a general history of medieval science and philosophy.

The Middle Ages, like most ages, were full of change and controversy. Schools of thought rose, contended, and fell. My account of what I call the Medieval Model ignores all this: ignores even the great change from a predominantly Platonic to a predominantly Aristotelian¹ outlook and the direct conflict between Nominalists and Realists. It does so because these things, however important for the historian of thought, have hardly any effect on the literary level. The Model, as regards those elements in it which poets and artists could utilise, remained stable.

Again, the reader will find that I freely illustrate features of the Model which I call 'Medieval' from authors who wrote after the close of the Middle Ages; from Spenser, Donne or Milton. I do so because, at many points, the old Model still underlies their work. It was not totally and confidently abandoned till the end of the seventeenth century.

¹ The text of Aristotle in Latin translations (themselves often of Arabic translations) begins to be known in the twelfth century.

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In every period the Model of the Universe which is accepted by the great thinkers helps to provide what we may call a backcloth for the arts. But this backcloth is highly selective. It takes over from the total Model only what is intelligible to a layman and only what makes some appeal to imagination and emotion. Thus our own backcloth contains plenty of Freud and little of Einstein. The medieval backcloth contains the order and influences of the planets, but not much about epicycles and eccentrics. Nor does the backcloth always respond very quickly to great changes in the scientific and philosophical level.

✓ Furthermore, and apart from actual omissions in the backcloth version of the Model, there will usually be a difference of another kind. We may call it a difference of status. The great masters do not take any Model quite so seriously as the rest of us. They know that it is, after all, only a model, possibly replaceable.

The business of the natural philosopher is to construct theories which will 'save appearances'. Most of us first meet this expression in *Paradise Lost* (VIII, 82) and most of us perhaps originally misunderstood it. Milton is translating σώζειν τὰ φαινόμενα, first used, so far as we know, by Simplicius in his commentary on the Aristotelian *De Caelo*. A scientific theory must 'save' or 'preserve' the appearances, the phenomena, it deals with, in the sense of getting them all in, doing justice to them. Thus, for example, your phenomena are luminous points in the night sky which exhibit such and such movements in relation to one another and in relation to an observer at a

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particular point, or various chosen points, on the surface of the Earth. Your astronomical theory will be a supposal such that, if it were true, the apparent motions from the point or points of observation would be those you have actually observed. The theory will then have 'got in' or 'saved' the appearances.

But if we demanded no more than that from a theory, science would be impossible, for a lively inventive faculty could devise a good many different supposals which would equally save the phenomena. We have therefore had to supplement the canon of saving the phenomena by another canon—first, perhaps, formulated with full clarity by Occam. According to this second canon we must accept (provisionally) not any theory which saves the phenomena but that theory which does so with the fewest possible assumptions. Thus the two theories (a) that the bad bits in Shakespeare were all put in by adapters, and (b) that Shakespeare wrote them when he was not at his best, will equally 'save' the appearances. But we already know that there was such a person as Shakespeare and that writers are not always at their best. If scholarship hopes ever to achieve the steady progress of the sciences, we must therefore (provisionally) accept the second theory. If we can explain the bad bits without the assumption of an adapter, we must.

In every age it will be apparent to accurate thinkers that scientific theories, being arrived at in the way I have described, are never statements of fact. That stars appear to move in such and such ways, or that substances behaved

thus and thus in the laboratory—these are statements of fact. The astronomical or chemical theory can never be more than provisional. It will have to be abandoned if a more ingenious person thinks of a supposal which would ‘save’ the observed phenomena with still fewer assumptions, or if we discover new phenomena which it cannot save at all.

This would, I believe, be recognised by all thoughtful scientists today. It was recognised by Newton if, as I am told, he wrote not ‘the attraction varies inversely as the square of the distance’, but ‘all happens as if’ it so varied. It was certainly recognised in the Middle Ages. ‘In astronomy’, says Aquinas, ‘an account is given of eccentrics and epicycles on the ground that if their assumption is made (*hac positione facta*) the sensible appearances as regards celestial motions can be saved. But this is not a strict proof (*sufficienter probans*) since for all we know (*forte*) they could also be saved by some different assumption.’¹ The real reason why Copernicus raised no ripple and Galileo raised a storm, may well be that whereas the one offered a new supposal about celestial motions, the other insisted on treating this supposal as fact. If so, the real revolution consisted not in a new theory of the heavens but in ‘a new theory of the nature of theory’.²

On the highest level, then, the Model was recognised as provisional. What we should like to know is how far down the intellectual scale this cautious view extended.

¹ 1^a xxxii, Art. I, *ad secundum*.

² A. O. Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (1957), p. 51.

In our age I think it would be fair to say that the ease with which a scientific theory assumes the dignity and rigidity of fact varies inversely with the individual’s scientific education. In discussion with wholly uneducated audiences I have sometimes found matter which real scientists would regard as highly speculative more firmly believed than many things within our real knowledge; the popular *imago* of the Cave Man ranked as hard fact, and the life of Caesar or Napoleon as doubtful rumour. We must not, however, hastily assume that the situation was quite the same in the Middle Ages. The mass media which have in our time created a popular scientism, a caricature of the true sciences, did not then exist. The ignorant were more aware of their ignorance then than now. Yet I get the impression that when the poets use motives from the Model, they are not aware, as Aquinas was, of its modest epistemological status. I do not mean that they have raised the question he raises and answered it differently. More probably it has never been before their minds. They would have felt that the responsibility for their cosmological, or for their historical or religious, beliefs rested on others. It was enough for them that they were following good *auctours*, great clerks, ‘thise olde wise’.

Not only epistemologically but also emotionally the Model probably meant less to the great thinkers than to the poets. This, I believe, must be so in all ages. Quasi-religious responses to the hypostatised abstraction *Life* are to be sought in Shaw or Wells or in a highly poetical philosopher such as Bergson, not in the papers and

lectures of biologists. Delight in the Medieval Model is expressed by Dante or Jean de Meung rather than by Albertus and Aquinas. Partly, no doubt, this is because expression, of whatever emotion, is not the business of philosophers. But I suspect this is not the whole story. It is not in the nature of things that great thinkers should take much interest in Models. They have more difficult and more controversial matters in hand. Every Model is a construct of answered questions. The expert is engaged either in raising new questions or in giving new answers to old ones. When he is doing the first, the old, agreed Model is of no interest to him; when he is doing the second, he is beginning an operation which will finally destroy the old Model altogether.

One particular class of experts, the great spiritual writers, ignore the Model almost completely. We need to know something about the Model if we are to read Chaucer, but we can neglect it when we are reading St Bernard or *The Scale of Perfection* or the *Imitation*. This is partly because the spiritual books are entirely practical—like medical books. A man concerned about the state of his soul will not usually be much helped by thinking about the spheres or the structure of the atom. But perhaps there was in the Middle Ages another factor also at work. Their cosmology and their religion were not such easy bedfellows as might be supposed. At first we may fail to notice this, for the cosmology appears to us, in its firmly theistic basis and its ready welcome to the supernatural, to be eminently religious. And so in one sense it is. But it is not eminently Christian. The Pagan ele-

ments embedded in it involved a conception of God, and of man's place in the universe, which, if not in logical contradiction to Christianity, were subtly out of harmony with it. There was no direct 'conflict between religion and science' of the nineteenth-century type; but there was an incompatibility of temperament. Delighted contemplation of the Model and intense religious feeling of a specifically Christian character are seldom fused except in the work of Dante.

One difference between describing the Model and writing a history of thought has been, undesignedly, illustrated in the previous chapter. I there cited both Plato and Aristotle: but the role I had to give them was philosophically humiliating—the one called as witness to a scrap of daemonology, the other for some exploded physics. Naturally, I was not suggesting that their real and permanent place in the history of Western thought rested on such foundations. But they concerned us less as great thinkers than as contributors—indirect, unconscious, and almost accidental contributors—to the Model. The history of thought as such would deal chiefly with the influence of great experts upon great experts—the influence, not of Aristotle's physics, but of his ethics and his dialectical method on those of Aquinas. But the Model is built out of the real, or supposed, agreement of any ancient authors—good or bad, philosophers or poets, understood or misunderstood—who happened, for whatever reason, to be available.

These explanations will perhaps set at rest, or re-direct, one doubt which a prospective reader might possibly

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feel on first dipping here and there into this book. I can imagine such a preliminary reconnaissance leading to the question 'But how far down the intellectual scale did this Model of yours penetrate? Are you not offering as the background for literature things which were really known only to a few experts?' It will now be seen, I hope, that the question 'how far up' the real potency of the Model was operative is at least equally pertinent.

There was no doubt a level below the influence of the Model. There were ditchers and alewives who had not heard of the *Primum Mobile* and did not know that the earth was spherical; not because they thought it was flat but because they did not think about it at all. Nevertheless, elements from the Model appear in such a homely and artless compilation as the *South English Legendary*. On the other hand, as I have tried to indicate, there were certainly levels, both intellectual and spiritual, which were in a sense above the Model's full power.

I say 'in a sense' because these metaphors of *above* and *below* might otherwise carry a false suggestion. It might be supposed that I believe science and philosophy to be somehow intrinsically more valuable than literature and art. I hold no such view. The 'higher' intellectual level is higher only by one particular standard: by another standard the poetic level is higher. Comparative evaluations of essentially different excellences are in my opinion senseless.¹ A surgeon is better than a violinist at operating and a violinist better than a surgeon at playing the violin.

¹ Cf. the maxim (quoted in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*) *heterogenea non comparari possunt*.

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Nor am I at all suggesting that the poets and artists are wrong or stupid in omitting from their backcloth much which the experts think important. An artist needs some anatomy; he need not go on to physiology, much less to biochemistry. And if these sciences change much more than anatomy changes, his work will not reflect their progress.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MODEL

At sight of all this World beheld so faire.

MILTON

No one who has read the higher kinds of medieval and Renaissance poetry has failed to notice the amount of solid instruction—of science, philosophy, or history—that they carry. Sometimes, as in the *Divine Comedy* or Lyndsay's *Dreme* or Spenser's *Mutability cantos*, the theme is so chosen that it permits and invites such matter. Sometimes such matter is organically connected with a theme which, by our standards, seems well able to have dispensed with it; as the character and influence of the planets are worked into the *Knight's Tale* or the *Testament of Cresseid*. It may also seem to us to be 'dragged in by the heels' where, I believe, the medieval author would have felt it to be wholly relevant. When the poet of *Gawain* begins with the fall of Troy he is not merely padding. He is obeying the principle of 'a place for everything and everything in its right place'; fitting Gawain through Arthur and Arthur through Brut and Brut through Troy into the total 'historial' Model. The commonest method, however, is by digression; such digressions as we find in the *Roman de la Rose* on Fortune (4837-5070), on free will (17,101-778), on true nobility (18,589-896), on the function and limitations of Nature (15,891-16,974), on the merely derivative immortality of gods or angels (19,063-112). In places readers may

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disagree as to how far a piece of cosmology or metaphysics constitutes a digression. The long dramatisation (in a Christianised form) of Aristotle's distinction between Nature and the realm above her which occupies Deguileville's *Pèlerinage* from line 3344 to line 3936 (of Lydgate's version) may be thought relevant. And some think that the treatment of free will in *Troilus*, v, is no digression.

The simplest form in which this tendency expresses itself is mere catalogue. We have in Bernardus catalogues of Hierarchies, stars, mountains, beasts, rivers, woods, vegetables, fish, and birds (I Metr. III); in the *Hous of Fame*, of musicians (III, 1201 sq.); in the *Franklin's Tale*, of virtuous women (F 1367 sq.); in the *King's Quair*, of beasts (st. 155-7); in the *Temple of Glas*, of famous lovers (55 sq.); in Henryson's *Trial of the Fox*, of beasts (*Fables*, 881 sq.); in the *Court of Sapience*, stones (953 sq.), fish (1198 sq.), flowers (1282 sq.), trees (1374 sq.), birds and beasts (1387 sq.). In Douglas' *Palice of Honour* we have sages, lovers, Muses, mountains, rivers, and 'nobill men and women both of scripture and gentyll stories'. The whole plan of Petrarch's *Trionfi* seems to be devised for the purpose of admitting as many catalogues as possible.

At first one suspects pedantry, but that can hardly be the true explanation. Much, though not all, of the knowledge was too common to reflect any particular distinction on an author. Henryson might expect, and justly, to be admired for describing the characters of the planets so vividly; hardly for knowing them. The same objection holds against the view which I took when, years ago, I

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first dealt with medieval literature. I thought that in an age when books were few and the intellectual appetite sharp-set, any knowledge might be welcome in any context. But this does not explain why the authors so gladly present knowledge which most of their audience must have possessed. One gets the impression that medieval people, like Professor Tolkien's Hobbits, enjoyed books which told them what they already knew.

Another explanation might be based in Rhetoric. Rhetoric recommended *morae*—delays or padding. Does all this science and 'story' come in simply *longius ut sit opus*, 'that the work may be longer'? But this perhaps overlooks the fact that Rhetoric explains the formal, not the material, characteristic. That is, it may tell you to digress; not what to put into your digressions. It may approve Common Places; it can hardly decide what shall achieve the status of a Common Place. From reading Dr Curtius¹ on the *locus amoenus*, that pleasant woodland scene at which so many poets tried their hand, an unwary reader might get a wrong impression (which naturally I do not attribute to Dr Curtius himself). He might think that Rhetoric accounted not only for the treatment of this Common Place but for the popularity that made it common. But Rhetoric is no such closed system. It is Nature—the character of shifting light and shade, of trees and running water and a gentle breeze, and their effect on human nerves and emotions—which caused the *locus* to be *amoenus*, and only therefore to be *communis*. In the same way, if all the catalogues and digressions are filled with a

¹ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 195 sq.

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certain sort of matter, this must be because writers and their audience liked it. Digression need not deal with the large, permanent features of the universe unless you want. The long-tailed similes in Homer or the 'episodes' in Thomson usually do not. They are more often 'vignettes'.

Again, the Rhetorical explanation could hardly be extended to cover the visible arts, where we are met with the same phenomenon. They also continually re-state what was believed about the universe. I have already mentioned¹ the cupola above Chigi's tomb which magnificently re-states the Boethian doctrine of Providence and Destiny. It does not stand alone. The planets look down from the capitals in the Doge's palace, each surrounded by his 'children', by the mortals who exhibit his influence.² At Florence they meet us again, strangely disguised by the influence of Saracenic iconography, in Santa Maria del Fiore;³ and again in Santa Maria Novella, paired off, after the manner of the *Convivio*, with the Seven Liberal Arts.⁴ The Salone (Palazzo della Ragione) at Padua⁵ is, in a different art, a close parallel to Spenser's Mutability cantos. We have the planets, their children, the Zodiacal signs, the Apostles, and the labours of men all arranged under their appropriate months.

And just as the planets are not merely present in the *Testament of Cresseid* but woven into the plot, so in the buildings the cosmological material is sometimes woven into what we may call the plot of a building. One might at first suppose that the constellations depicted on the

¹ See above, p. 87.

³ *Ibid.* fig. 63.

² Seznec, *op. cit.* fig. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.* fig. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 73.

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cupola above the altar in the old sacristy of San Lorenzo at Florence were mere decoration; but they are in the right positions for 9 July 1422 when the altar was consecrated.¹ In the Farnesina Palace they are arranged to suit the birth-day of Chigi for whom the work was done.² And the Salone at Padua is apparently designed so that at each sunrise the beams will fall on the Sign in which Sol would then ride.

The lost art of Pageant loved to re-state similar themes. And it has lately been shown that many Renaissance pictures which were once thought purely fanciful are loaded, and almost overloaded, with philosophy.³

Here, as at the outset of this book, we see a striking yet deceptive parallel between medieval and savage behaviour. This labour to reproduce in earthly mimicry the great operations of nature⁴ looks very like the savage's attempt to control or encourage such operations by imitating them—to bring rain by making a noise as like a thunderstorm as a man with a stick and a tom-tom can achieve. But medieval and Renaissance credulity ran in the opposite direction. Men were far less prone to think they could control the translunary forces than to think that those forces controlled them. Astrological determinism, not imitative magic, was the real danger.

The simplest explanation is, I believe, the true one. Poets and other artists depicted these things because their

¹ Sez nec, *op. cit.* p. 77.

² *Ibid.* p. 79.

³ See E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958).

⁴ 'Most of the first clocks were less chronometers than exhibitions of the pattern of the universe' (L. White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, Oxford, 1962, p. 122).

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minds loved to dwell on them. Other ages have not had a Model so universally accepted as theirs, so imaginable, and so satisfying to the imagination. Marcus Aurelius¹ wished that men would love the universe as a man can love his own city. I believe that something like this was really possible in the period I am discussing. At least, fairly like it. The medieval and Renaissance delight in the universe was, I think, more spontaneous and aesthetic, less laden with conscience and resignation, than anything the Stoical emperor had in mind. It was, though not in any Wordsworthian sense, a 'love of nature'.

Merely to imitate or to comment on the human life around us was therefore not felt to be the sole function of the arts. The labours of men appear on Achilles' shield in Homer for their own sake. In the Mutability cantos or the Salone they appear not only for their own sake but also because of their relation to the months, and therefore to the Zodiac, and therefore to the whole natural order. This does not at all mean that where Homer was disinterested the later artist was didactic. It means that where Homer rejoiced in the particulars the later artist rejoiced also in that great imagined structure which gave them all their place. Every particular fact and story became more interesting and more pleasurable if, by being properly fitted in, it carried one's mind back to the Model as a whole.

If I am right, the man of genius then found himself in a situation very different from that of his modern successor. Such a man today often, perhaps usually, feels himself

¹ IV, 23.

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confronted with a reality whose significance he cannot know, or a reality that has no significance; or even a reality such that the very question whether it has a meaning is itself a meaningless question. It is for him, by his own sensibility, to discover a meaning, or, out of his own subjectivity, to give a meaning—or at least a shape—to what in itself had neither. But the Model universe of our ancestors had a built-in significance. And that in two senses; as having 'significant form' (it is an admirable design) and as a manifestation of the wisdom and goodness that created it. There was no question of waking it into beauty or life. Ours, most emphatically, was not the wedding garment, nor the shroud. The achieved perfection was already there. The only difficulty was to make an adequate response.

This, if accepted, will perhaps go far to explain some characteristics of medieval literature.

It may, for example, explain both its most typical vice and its most typical virtue. The typical vice, as we all know, is dulness; sheer, unabashed, prolonged dulness, where the author does not seem to be even trying to interest us. The *South English Legendary* or *Ormulum* or parts of Hoccleve are good examples. One sees how the belief in a world of built-in significance encourages this. The writer feels everything to be so interesting in itself that there is no need for him to make it so. The story, however badly told, will still be worth telling; the truths, however badly stated, still worth stating. He expects the subject to do for him nearly everything he ought to do himself. Outside literature we can still see

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this state of mind at work. On the lowest intellectual level, people who find any one subject entirely engrossing are apt to think that any reference to it, of whatever quality, must have some value. Pious people on that level appear to think that the quotation of any scriptural text, or any line from a hymn, or even any noise made by a harmonium, is an edifying sermon or a cogent apologetic. Less pious people on the same level, dull clowns, seem to think that they have achieved either a voluptuous or a comic effect—I am not sure which is intended—by chalking up a single indecent word on a wall. The presence of a Model whose significance is 'given' is likewise no unmixed blessing.

And yet, I believe, it is also connected with the characteristic virtue of good medieval work. What this is, anyone can feel if he turns from the narrative verse of, say, Chapman or Keats to the best parts of Marie de France or Gower. What will strike him at once is the absence of strain. In the Elizabethan or Romantic examples we feel that the poet has done a great deal of work; in the medieval, we are at first hardly aware of a poet at all. The writing is so limpid and effortless that the story seems to be telling itself. You would think, till you tried, that anyone could do the like. But in reality no story tells itself. Art is at work. But it is the art of people who, no less than the bad medieval authors, have a complete confidence in the intrinsic value of their matter. The telling is for the sake of the tale; in Chapman or Keats we feel that the tale is valued only as an opportunity for the lavish and highly individual treatment. We feel the same difference on

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turning from Sidney's *Arcadia* to Malory's *Morte*, or from a battle in Drayton to one in Lazamon. I am not suggesting a preference, for both ways of writing can be good; I am only underlining a difference.

With this attitude goes the characteristically medieval type of imagination.¹ It is not a transforming imagination like Wordsworth's or a penetrative imagination like Shakespeare's. It is a realising imagination. Macaulay noted in Dante the extremely factual word-painting; the details, the comparisons, designed at whatever cost of dignity to make sure that we see exactly what he saw. Now Dante in this is typically medieval. The Middle Ages are unrivalled, till we reach quite modern times, in the sheer foreground fact, the 'close-up'. I mean things like the little dog's behaviour in the *Book of the Duchess*; or 'So stant Custance and looketh hire aboute'; or, of Constance again, 'ever she prayeth hire child to hold his pees'; or, when Arcite and Palamon met for the combat, 'Tho chaungen gan the colour in hir face'; or the reluctance of the ladies-in-waiting to handle Griselda's clothes. But not by any means only in Chaucer. I mean the young Arthur turning alternately pale and red in Lazamon, or Merlin twisting like a snake in his prophetic trance; and Jonah in *Patience* going into the whale's mouth 'like a mote at a minster door'; and in Malory all the practical and financial detail and even Guenever's recognisable cough; or the fairy bakers rubbing the paste off their fingers in *Huon*; or Henryson's ineffective mouse running

¹ See also E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Berne, 1946), trans. W. Trask, Princeton, 1957.

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up and down the river bank with many a 'pitous peep'. We even see the Almighty 'laughing His heart sore' at the old alewife in *Kynd Kittok*. This sort of vividness is now part of every novelist's stock-in-trade; a tool of our rhetoric, often used to excess so that it hides rather than reveals the action. But the medievals had hardly any models for it, and it was long before they had many successors.¹

Two negative conditions made it possible: their freedom both from the pseudo-classical standard of decorum and from the sense of period. But the efficient cause

¹ At first the reader may complain that the quality I am describing is simply the character of all good imaginative writing whatever. I believe not. In Racine there are no foreground facts at all, nothing for our senses. Virgil relies chiefly on atmosphere, sound, and association. In *Paradise Lost* (as its theme demands) the art lies less in making us imagine the concrete than in making us believe we have imagined the unimaginable. Homer, had they known him, could have helped the medievals. Two details—the baby's fear of the plumed helmet and Andromache's tearful smile (*Iliad*, vi, 466–84)—are very much in their manner. But in general his art is not very like theirs. The detailed descriptions of work—launching a ship, preparing a meal—by being formalised and constantly repeated produce a quite different effect. We feel not the seized moment but the changeless pattern of life. He brings his people before us almost entirely by making them talk. Even so, their language is distanced by the epic formula; song, not speech. Eurycleia, the moment she has recognised her old master, promises him a confidential report on the behaviour of the domestics during his absence (*Odyssey*, xix, 495–8). The Old Family Servant is pin-pointed forever. We read her mind, but we do not actually hear her voice. Not as we hear Launcelot's fumbling reiteration 'And therefore, madam, I was but late in that quest' (Malory, xviii, 2), or Chaucer's monosyllabic replies to the eagle (*Hous of Fame*, iii, 864, 888, 913). Indeed it may be doubted whether the characteristic merits of the four great poets I have mentioned (Racine, Virgil, Milton, Homer) are even compatible with the medieval vividness. No one kind of work admits every excellence.

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surely was their devout attention to their matter and their confidence in it. They are not trying to heighten it or transform it. It possesses them wholly. Their eyes and ears are steadily fixed upon it, and so—perhaps hardly aware how much they are inventing—they see and hear what the event must have been like.

Admittedly, there is in some of their writing much ornament and even, as may be thought, affectation; especially when they use Latin. But it is, and not in a necessarily pejorative sense, superficial. The author's basic attitude remains free from strain or posturing. He rubricates and aureates to honour a theme which for him, and by common consent, ought to be honoured. He is not at all doing the sort of thing that Donne did when he built a poem (and a good one) out of the thesis—in cold prose it is mere raving—that the death of Elizabeth Drury was a more or less cosmic catastrophe. A medieval poet, wrongly but not unintelligibly, would have thought that silly. When Dunbar heavily gilds his verse it is to celebrate the Nativity or, at least, a royal marriage. He wears ceremonial robes because he is taking part in a ceremony. He is not 'stunting'.

When we meet bad poetry in different traditions, poetry that claims more for itself and its poet, we may say that we can 'see *through* it'. The rubble can be detected through the stucco. But the glory of the best medieval work often consists precisely in the fact that we *see through* it; it is a pure transparency.

One curious characteristic remains to be noticed. Many of the vivid close-ups are original additions to works

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which are not, as a whole, original. It is astonishing how often this occurs. One is tempted to say that almost the typical activity of the medieval author consists in touching up something that was already there; as Chaucer touched up Boccaccio, as Malory touched up French prose romances which themselves touched up earlier romances in verse, as Lazamon works over Wace, who works over Geoffrey, who works over no one knows what. We are inclined to wonder how men could be at once so original that they handled no predecessor without pouring new life into him, and so unoriginal that they seldom did anything completely new. The predecessor is usually much more than a 'source' in the sense in which an Italian novel may be the source of a Shakespearian play. Shakespeare takes a few bones from the novel's plot and flings the rest to well-deserved oblivion. Round those bones he builds a new work whose purport, atmosphere, and language have really nothing in common with his original. Chaucer's *Troilus* stands in a very different relation to the *Filostrato*.

If an artist made alterations in someone else's picture which covered about a third of the canvas, we should deceive ourselves in trying by mere measurements to assess the contribution of each painter to the total effect. For the work done by every mass and colour in the new patches will be affected through and through by the parts of the original which still remain; and in them every mass and colour will similarly be affected by the new patches. We should have to think of the total result chemically rather than arithmetically. It is like that when Chaucer

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works over Boccaccio. No line, however closely translated, will do exactly what it did in the Italian once Chaucer has made his additions. No line in those additions but depends for much of its effect on the translated lines which precede and follow it. The poem as we now have it cannot be attributed to a single author. Still less can the work we call Malory's.

It follows that the book-author unit, basic for modern criticism, must often be abandoned when we are dealing with medieval literature. Some books—if I may use a comparison I have used elsewhere—must be regarded more as we regard those cathedrals where work of many different periods is mixed and produces a total effect, admirable indeed but never foreseen nor intended by any one of the successive builders. Many generations, each in its own spirit and its own style, have contributed to the story of Arthur. It is misleading to think of Malory as an author in our modern sense and throw all the earlier work into the category of 'sources'. He is merely the last builder, doing a few demolitions here and adding a few features there. They cannot make the work his as *Vanity Fair* is Thackeray's.

It would have been impossible for men to work in this way if they had had anything like our conception of literary property. But it would also have been impossible unless their idea of literature had differed from ours on a deeper level. Far from feigning originality, as a modern plagiarist would, they are apt to conceal it. They sometimes profess to be deriving something from their *auctour* at the very moment when they are departing from him.

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It cannot be a joke. What is funny about it? And who but a scholar could see the point if it were? They are behaving more like a historian who misrepresents the documents because he feels sure that things must have happened in a certain way. They are anxious to convince others, perhaps to half-convince themselves, that they are not merely 'making things up'. For the aim is not self-expression or 'creation'; it is to hand on the 'historial' matter worthily; not worthily of your own genius or of the poetic art but of the matter itself.

I doubt if they would have understood our demand for originality or valued those works in their own age which were original any the more on that account. If you had asked Lazamon or Chaucer 'Why do you not make up a brand-new story of your own?' I think they might have replied (in effect) 'Surely we are not yet reduced to that?' Spin something out of one's own head when the world teems with so many noble deeds, wholesome examples, pitiful tragedies, strange adventures, and merry jests which have never yet been set forth quite so well as they deserve? The originality which we regard as a sign of wealth might have seemed to them a confession of poverty. Why make things for oneself like the lonely Robinson Crusoe when there is riches all about you to be had for the taking? The modern artist often does not think the riches is there. He is the alchemist who must turn base metal into gold. It makes a radical difference.

And the paradox is that it is just this abdication of originality which brings out the originality they really

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possess. The more devout and concentrated Chaucer's gaze on the *Filostrato* becomes, or Malory's on the 'French Book', the more real the scenes and people become to them. That reality forces them presently to see and hear, hence to set down, at first a little more, and then a good deal more, than their book has actually told them. They are thus never more indebted to their *auctour* than when they are adding to him. If they had been less rapt by what they read they would have reproduced him more faithfully. We should think it 'cheek', an unpardonable liberty, half to translate and half to re-write another man's work. But Chaucer and Malory were not thinking of their *auctour's* claims. They were thinking—the *auctour's* success lay in making them think—about Troilus or Launcelot.

As we have already seen,¹ the very awareness that their *auctour* wrote fiction and that their additions to him were further fiction seems to have been dim and wavering. Historians, from Herodotus to Milton, handed the responsibility for truth over to their sources; conversely, writers of Troy Books talk as if they were historians who had weighed their authorities. Even Chaucer does not praise Homer for his 'feyninge' but blames him for lying, like the Greek partisan he was (*Hous of Fame*, III, 1477-9), and puts him in the same class with Josephus (1430-81). I do not suppose that Chaucer and, say, Lazamon both had exactly the same attitude to their material. But I doubt if either, like the modern novelist, felt that he was 'creative' or thought that his source had

¹ See above, pp. 178-82.

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been so. And I think the majority¹ of the audience, then as now, could hardly conceive the activity of invention at all. It is said that people pointed out Dante in the street not as the man who made the *Comedy* but as the man who had been in Hell. Even today there are those (some of them critics) who believe every novel and even every lyric to be autobiographical. A man who lacks invention himself does not easily attribute it to others. Perhaps in the Middle Ages those who had it did not easily attribute it to themselves.

The most surprising thing in the *Hous of Fame* is that the poets (with one historian) are present not because they are famous but to support the fame of their subjects. Josephus in that House 'bar upon his shuldres hye' the fame of Jewry (III, 1435-6); Homer, with many such colleagues as Dares and Guido, that of Troy (1455-80); Virgil, that of Aeneas (1485). The medievals were, indeed, fully conscious (Dante especially)² that poets not only gave but also won fame. But in the last resort it is the fame they give—the fame of Aeneas, not of Virgil—that really matters. That Edward King should now be remembered at all only because he gave occasion to *Lycidas* would perhaps have seemed to them a strange inversion. If Milton had been by their standards a successful poet he would now be remembered for 'bearing up' the fame of Edward King.

¹ A notable exception is the King who thought *lygisogur skemtilagastar* (lying sagas the most entertaining) (see *Sturlunga Saga*, ed. O. Brown, 1952, p. 19).

² *De Vulg. Eloquentia*, I, xvii; *Purgatorio*, XXI, 85.

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When Pope re-wrote the *Hous of Fame* as his *Temple of Fame* he quietly altered this passage. The poets are in his Temple because they have won fame. Between Chaucer's time and his the arts had become conscious of what is now regarded as their true status. Since his time they have become even more so. One almost foresees the day when they may be conscious of little else.

Hence we may, with proper precautions, regard a certain humility as the overall characteristic of medieval art. Of the art; not always of the artists. Self-esteem may arise within any occupation at any period. A chef, a surgeon, or a scholar, may be proud, even to arrogance, of his skill; but his skill is confessedly the means to an end beyond itself, and the status of the skill depends wholly on the dignity or necessity of that end. I think it was then like that with all the arts. Literature exists to teach what is useful, to honour what deserves honour, to appreciate what is delightful. The useful, honourable, and delightful things are superior to it: it exists for their sake; its own use, honour, or delightfulness is derivative from theirs. In that sense the art is humble even when the artists are proud; proud of their proficiency in the art, but not making for the art itself the high Renaissance or Romantic claims. Perhaps they might not all have fully agreed with the statement that poetry is *infima inter omnes doctrinas*.¹ But it awoke no such hurricane of protest as it would awake today.

In this great change something has been won and something lost. I take it to be part and parcel of the same

¹ Aquinas I^a, I, Art. 9.

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great process of Internalisation¹ which has turned *genius* from an attendant *daemon* into a quality of the mind. Always, century by century, item after item is transferred from the object's side of the account to the subject's. And now, in some extreme forms of Behaviourism, the subject himself is discounted as merely subjective; we only think that we think. Having eaten up everything else, he eats himself up too. And where we 'go from that' is a dark question.

¹ See above, p. 42.

EPILOGUE

The best in this kind are but shadows.
SHAKESPEARE

I have made no serious effort to hide the fact that the old Model delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors. Few constructions of the imagination seem to me to have combined splendour, sobriety, and coherence in the same degree. It is possible that some readers have long been itching to remind me that it had a serious defect; it was not true.

I agree. It was not true. But I would like to end by saying that this charge can no longer have exactly the same sort of weight for us that it would have had in the nineteenth century. We then claimed, as we still claim, to know much more about the real universe than the medievals did; and hoped, as we still hope, to discover yet more truths about it in the future. But the meaning of the words 'know' and 'truth' in this context has begun to undergo a certain change.

The nineteenth century still held the belief that by inferences from our sense-experience (improved by instruments) we could 'know' the ultimate physical reality more or less as, by maps, pictures, and travel-books, a man can 'know' a country he has not visited; and that in both cases the 'truth' would be a sort of mental replica of the thing itself. Philosophers might have disquieting comments to make on this conception; but scientists and plain men did not much attend to them.

Already, to be sure, mathematics were the idiom in

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which many of the sciences spoke. But I do not think it was doubted that there was a concrete reality *about* which the mathematics held good; distinguishable from the mathematics as a heap of apples is from the process of counting them. We knew indeed that it was in some respects not adequately imaginable; quantities and distances if either very small or very great could not be visualised. But, apart from that, we hoped that ordinary imagination and conception could grasp it. We should then have through mathematics a knowledge not merely mathematical. We should be like the man coming to know about a foreign country without visiting it. He learns about the mountains from carefully studying the contour lines on a map. But his knowledge is not a knowledge *of* contour lines. The real knowledge is achieved when these enable him to say 'That would be an easy ascent', 'This is a dangerous precipice', 'A would not be visible from B', 'These woods and waters must make a pleasant valley'. In going beyond the contour lines to such conclusions he is (if he knows how to read a map) getting nearer to the reality.

It would be very different if someone said to him (and was believed) 'But it is the contour lines themselves that are the fullest reality you can get. In turning away from them to these other statements you are getting further from the reality, not nearer. All those ideas about "real" rocks and slopes and views are merely a metaphor or a parable; a *pis aller*, permissible as a concession to the weakness of those who can't understand contour lines, but misleading if they are taken literally.'

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And this, if I understand the situation, is just what has now happened as regards the physical sciences. The mathematics are now the nearest to the reality we can get. Anything imaginable, even anything that can be manipulated by ordinary (that is, non-mathematical) conceptions, far from being a further truth to which mathematics were the avenue, is a mere analogy, a concession to our weakness. Without a parable modern physics speaks not to the multitudes. Even among themselves, when they attempt to verbalise their findings, the scientists begin to speak of this as making 'models'. It is from them that I have borrowed the word. But these 'models' are not, like model ships, small-scale replicas of the reality. Sometimes they illustrate this or that aspect of it by an analogy. Sometimes, they do not illustrate but merely suggest, like the sayings of the mystics. An expression such as 'the curvature of space' is strictly comparable to the old definition of God as 'a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'. Both succeed in suggesting; each does so by offering what is, on the level of our ordinary thinking, nonsense. By accepting the 'curvature of space' we are not 'knowing' or enjoying 'truth' in the fashion that was once thought to be possible.

It would therefore be subtly misleading to say 'The medievals thought the universe to be like that, but we know it to be like this'. Part of what we now know is that we cannot, in the old sense, 'know what the universe is like' and that no model we can build will be, in that old sense, 'like' it.

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Again, such a statement would suggest that the old Model gave way simply under the pressure of newly discovered phenomena—as a detective's original theory of the crime might yield to the discovery that his first suspect had an unassailable *alibi*. And this certainly happened as regards many particular details in the old Model, just as it happens daily to particular hypotheses in a modern laboratory. Exploration refuted the belief that the tropics are too hot for life; the first *nova* refuted the belief that the translunary realm is immutable. But the change of the Model as a whole was not so simple an affair.

The most spectacular differences between the Medieval Model and our own concern astronomy and biology. In both fields the new Model is supported by a wealth of empirical evidence. But we should misrepresent the historical process if we said that the irruption of new facts was the sole cause of the alteration.

The old astronomy was not, in any exact sense, 'refuted' by the telescope. The scarred surface of the Moon and the satellites of Jupiter can, if one wants, be fitted into a geocentric scheme. Even the enormous, and enormously different, distances of the stars can be accommodated if you are prepared to make their 'sphere', the *stellatum*, of a vast thickness. The old scheme, 'with Centric and Eccentric scrib'd o're', had been tinkered a good deal to keep up with observations. How far, by endless tinkering, it could have kept up with them till even now, I do not know. But the human mind will not long endure such ever-increasing complications if once it has seen that some simpler conception can 'save the

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appearances'. Neither theological prejudice nor vested interests can permanently keep in favour a Model which is seen to be grossly uneconomical. The new astronomy triumphed not because the case for the old became desperate, but because the new was a better tool; once this was grasped, our ingrained conviction that Nature herself is thrifty did the rest. When our Model is in its turn abandoned, this conviction will no doubt be at work again. What models we should build, or whether we could build any, if some great alteration in human psychology withdrew this conviction, is an interesting question.

But the change of Models did not involve astronomy alone. It involved also, in biology, the change—arguably more important—from a devolutionary to an evolutionary scheme; from a cosmology in which it was axiomatic that 'all perfect things precede all imperfect things'¹ to one in which it is axiomatic that 'the starting point (*Entwicklungsgrund*) is always lower than what is developed' (the degree of change can be gauged by the fact that *primitive* is now in most contexts a pejorative term).

This revolution was certainly not brought about by the discovery of new facts. When I was a boy I believed that 'Darwin discovered evolution' and that the far more general, radical, and even cosmic developmentalism which till lately dominated all popular thought was a superstructure raised on the biological theorem. This view has been sufficiently disproved.² The statement which I have just quoted about the *Entwicklungsgrund* was made by

¹ See above, p. 85.

² See Lovejoy, *op. cit.* cap. ix.

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Schelling in 1812. In him, in Keats, in Wagner's tetralogy, in Goethe, in Herder, the change to the new point of view has already taken place. Its growth can be traced far further back in Leibniz, Akenside, Kant, Maupertuis, Diderot. Already in 1786 Robinet believes in an 'active principle' which overcomes brute matter, and *la progression n'est pas finie*. For him, as for Bergson or de Chardin, the 'gates of the future are wide open'. The demand for a developing world—a demand obviously in harmony both with the revolutionary and the romantic temper—grows up first; when it is full grown the scientists go to work and discover the evidence on which our belief in that sort of universe would now be held to rest. There is no question here of the old Model's being shattered by the inrush of new phenomena. The truth would seem to be the reverse; that when changes in the human mind produce a sufficient disrelish of the old Model and a sufficient hankering for some new one, phenomena to support that new one will obediently turn up. I do not at all mean that these new phenomena are illusory. Nature has all sorts of phenomena in stock and can suit many different tastes.

An interesting astronomical change in our Model is going on at present. Fifty years ago, if you asked an astronomer about 'life on other worlds', he was apt to be totally agnostic about it or even to stress its improbability. We are now told that in so vast a universe stars that have planets and planets that have inhabitants must occur times without number. Yet no compulsive evidence is to hand. But is it irrelevant that in between the old

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opinion and the new we have had the vast proliferation of 'science fiction' and the beginnings of space-travel in real life?

I hope no one will think that I am recommending a return to the Medieval Model. I am only suggesting considerations that may induce us to regard all Models in the right way, respecting each and idolising none. We are all, very properly, familiar with the idea that in every age the human mind is deeply influenced by the accepted Model of the universe. But there is a two-way traffic; the Model is also influenced by the prevailing temper of mind. We must recognise that what has been called 'a taste in universes' is not only pardonable but inevitable. We can no longer dismiss the change of Models as a simple progress from error to truth. No Model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is a mere fantasy. Each is a serious attempt to get in all the phenomena known at a given period, and each succeeds in getting in a great many. But also, no less surely, each reflects the prevalent psychology of an age almost as much as it reflects the state of that age's knowledge. Hardly any battery of new facts could have persuaded a Greek that the universe had an attribute so repugnant to him as infinity; hardly any such battery could persuade a modern that it is hierarchical.

It is not impossible that our own Model will die a violent death, ruthlessly smashed by an unprovoked assault of new facts—unprovoked as the *nova* of 1572. But I think it is more likely to change when, and because, far-reaching changes in the mental temper of our descendants demand that it should. The new Model will not

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be set up without evidence, but the evidence will turn up when the inner need for it becomes sufficiently great. It will be true evidence. But nature gives most of her evidence in answer to the questions we ask her. Here, as in the courts, the character of the evidence depends on the shape of the examination, and a good cross-examiner can do wonders. He will not indeed elicit falsehoods from an honest witness. But, in relation to the total truth in the witness's mind, the structure of the examination is like a stencil. It determines how much of that total truth will appear and what pattern it will suggest.

THE FUNERAL OF A GREAT MYTH

There are some mistakes which humanity has made and repented so often that there is now really no excuse for making them again. One of these is the injustice which every age does to its predecessor; for example, the ignorant contempt which the Humanists (even good Humanists like Sir Thomas More) felt for medieval philosophy or Romantics (even good Romantics like Keats) felt for eighteenth-century poetry. Each time all this 'reaction' and resentment has to be punished and unsaid; it is a wasteful performance. It is tempting to try whether we, at least, cannot avoid it. Why should we not give our predecessors a fair and filial dismissal?

Such, at all events, is the attempt I am going to make in this paper. I come to bury the great Myth of the nineteenth and early twentieth Century; but also to praise it. I am going to pronounce a funeral oration.

By this great Myth I mean that picture of reality which resulted during the period under consideration, not logically but imaginatively, from some of the more striking and (so to speak) marketable theories of the real scientists. I have heard this Myth called 'Wellsianity'. The name is a good one in so far as it does justice to the share which a great imaginative writer bore in building it up. But it is not satisfactory. It suggests, as we shall see, an error about the date at which the Myth became dominant; and it also suggests that the Myth affected only the 'middle-brow' mind. In fact it is as much behind Bridges' *Testament of Beauty* as it is behind the work of Wells. It dominates minds as different as those of Professor Alexander and Walt Disney. It is implicit in nearly every modern article on politics, sociology, and ethics.

I call it a Myth because it is, as I have said, the imaginative and not the logical result of what is vaguely called 'modern science'. Strictly speaking, there is, I confess, no such thing as 'modern science'. There are only particular sciences, all in a stage of rapid

change, and sometimes inconsistent with one another. What the Myth uses is a selection from the scientific theories—a selection made at first, and modified afterwards, in obedience to imaginative and emotional needs. It is the work of the folk imagination, moved by its natural appetite for an impressive unity. It therefore treats its *data* with great freedom—selecting, slurring, expurgating, and adding at will.

The central idea of the Myth is what its believers would call 'Evolution' or 'Development' or 'Emergence', just as the central idea in the myth of Adonis is Death and Re-birth. I do not mean that the doctrine of Evolution as held by practising biologists is a Myth. It may be shown, by later biologists, to be a less satisfactory hypothesis than was hoped fifty years ago. But that does not amount to being a Myth. It is a genuine scientific hypothesis. But we must sharply distinguish between Evolution as a biological theorem and popular Evolutionism or Developmentalism which is certainly a Myth. Before proceeding to describe it and (which is my chief business) to pronounce its eulogy, I had better make clear its mythical character.

We have, first of all, the evidence of chronology. If popular Evolutionism were (as it imagines itself to be) not a Myth but the intellectually legitimate result of the scientific theorem on the public mind, it would arise *after* that theorem had become widely known. We should have the theorem known first of all to a few, then adopted by all the scientists, then spreading to all men of general education, then beginning to affect poetry and the arts, and so finally percolating to the mass of the people. In fact, however, we find something quite different. The clearest and finest poetical expressions of the Myth come before the *Origin of Species* was published (1859) and long before it had established itself as scientific orthodoxy. There had, to be sure, been hints and germs of the theory in scientific circles before 1859. But if the mythopoeic poets were at all infected by those germs they must have been very up-to-date indeed, very predisposed to catch the infection. Almost before the scientists spoke, certainly before they spoke clearly, imagination was ripe for it.

The finest expression of the Myth in English does not come from Bridges, nor from Shaw, nor from Wells, nor from Olaf Stapledon. It is this:

As Heaven and Earth are fairer, fairer far
 Than Chaos and blank Darkness, though once chief;
 And as we show beyond that Heaven and Earth
 In form and shape compact and beautiful,
 In will, in action free, companionship,
 And thousand other signs of purer life;
 So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
 A power more strong in beauty, born of us,
 And fated to excel us, as we pass
 In glory that old Darkness.

Thus Oceanus, in Keats's *Hyperion*, nearly forty years before the *Origin of the Species*. And on the continent we have the *Nibelung's Ring*. Coming, as I do, to bury but also to praise the receding age, I will by no means join in the modern depreciation of Wagner. He may, for all I know, have been a bad man. He may (though I shall never believe it) have been a bad musician. But as a mythopoeic poet he is incomparable. The tragedy of the Evolutionary Myth has never been more nobly expressed than in his Wotan: its heady raptures never more irresistibly than in *Siegfried*. That he himself knew quite well what he was writing about can be seen from his letter to August Rockel in 1854. 'The progress of the whole drama shows the necessity of recognizing and submitting to the change, the diversity, the multiplicity, the eternal novelty, of the Real. Wotan rises to the tragic height of willing his own downfall. This is all we have to learn from the history of Man—to will the necessary and ourselves to bring it to pass.'

If Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* were really, as he supposed, the work of a prophet or a pioneer ushering in the reign of a new Myth, its predominantly comic tone and its generally low emotional temperature would be inexplicable. It is admirable fun: but not thus are new epochs brought to birth. The ease with which he plays with the Myth shows that the Myth is fully digested and already senile. Shaw is the Lucian or the Snorri of this mythology: to find its Aeschylus or its Elder Edda you must go back to Keats and Wagner.

That, then, is the first proof that popular Evolution is a Myth. In making it Imagination runs ahead of scientific evidence. 'The prophetic soul of the big world' was already pregnant with the

Myth: if science has not met the imaginative need, science would not have been so popular. But probably every age gets, within certain limits, the science it desires.

In the second place we have internal evidence. Popular Evolutionism or Developmentalism differs in content from the Evolution of the real biologists. To the biologist Evolution is a hypothesis. It covers more of the facts than any other hypothesis at present on the market and is therefore to be accepted unless, or until, some new supposal can be shown to cover still more facts with even fewer assumptions. At least, that is what I think most biologists would say. Professor D. M. S. Watson, it is true, would not go so far. According to him Evolution 'is accepted by zoologists not because it has been observed to occur or . . . can be proved by logically coherent evidence to be true, but because the only alternative, special creation, is clearly incredible'. (Watson, quoted in *Nineteenth Century* (April 1943), 'Science and the B.B.C.') This would mean that the sole ground for believing it is not empirical but metaphysical—the dogma of an amateur metaphysician who finds 'special creation' incredible. But I do not think it has really come to that. Most biologists have a more robust belief in Evolution than Professor Watson. But it is certainly a hypothesis. In the Myth, however, there is nothing hypothetical about it: it is basic fact: or, to speak more strictly, such distinctions do not exist on the mythical level at all. There are more important differences to follow.

In the science, Evolution is a theory about *changes*: in the Myth it is a fact about *improvements*. Thus a real scientist like Professor J. B. S. Haldane is at pains to point out that popular ideas of Evolution lay a wholly unjustified emphasis on those changes which have rendered creatures (by human standards) 'better' or more interesting. He adds: 'We are therefore inclined to regard progress as the rule in evolution. Actually it is the exception, and for every case of it there are ten of degeneration.'¹ But the Myth simply expurgates the ten cases of degeneration. In the popular mind the word 'Evolution' conjures up a picture of things moving 'onwards and upwards', and of nothing else whatsoever. And it might have been predicted that it would do so. Already, before science had spoken, the mythical imagination knew the kind of

¹ 'Darwinism Today', *Possible Worlds*, p. 28.

'Evolution' it wanted. It wanted the Keatian and Wagnerian kind: the gods superseding the Titans, and the young, joyous, careless, amorous Siegfried superseding the care-worn, anxious, treaty-entangled Wotan. If science offers any instances to satisfy that demand, they will be eagerly accepted. If it offers any instances that frustrate it, they will simply be ignored.

Again, for the scientist Evolution is a purely biological theorem. It takes over organic life on this planet as a going concern and tries to explain certain changes within that field. It makes no cosmic statements, no metaphysical statements, no eschatological statements. Granted that we now have minds we can trust, granted that organic life came to exist, it tries to explain, say, how a species that once had wings came to lose them. It explains this by the negative effect of environment operating on small variations. It does not in itself explain the origin of organic life, nor of the variations, nor does it discuss the origin and validity of reason. It may well tell you how the brain, through which reason now operates, arose, but that is a different matter. Still less does it even attempt to tell you how the universe as a whole arose, or what it is, or whither it is tending. But the Myth knows none of these reticences. Having first turned what was a theory of change into a theory of improvement, it then makes this a *cosmic* theory. Not merely terrestrial organisms but *everything* is moving 'upwards and onwards'. Reason has 'evolved' out of instinct, virtue out of complexes, poetry out of erotic howls and grunts, civilization out of savagery, the organic out of inorganic, the solar system out of some sidereal soup or traffic block. And conversely, reason, virtue, art and civilization as we now know them are only the crude or embryonic beginnings of far better things—perhaps Deity itself—in the remote future. For in the Myth, 'Evolution' (as the Myth understands it) is the formula of *all* existence. To exist means to be moving from the status of 'almost zero' to the status of 'almost infinity'. To those brought up on the Myth nothing seems more normal, more natural, more plausible, than that chaos should turn into order, death into life, ignorance into knowledge. And with this we reach the full-blown Myth. It is one of the most moving and satisfying world dramas which have ever been imagined.

The drama proper is preceded (do not forget the Rheingold

here) by the most austere of all preludes; the infinite void and matter endlessly, aimlessly moving to bring forth it knows not what. Then by some millionth, millionth chance—what tragic irony!—the conditions at one point of space and time bubble up into that tiny fermentation which we call organic life. At first everything seems to be against the infant hero of our drama; just as everything always was against the seventh son or ill-used step-daughter in a fairy tale. But life somehow wins through. With incalculable sufferings (the Sorrows of the Volsungs were nothing to it), against all but insuperable obstacles, it spreads, it breeds, it complicates itself; from the amoeba up to the reptile, up to the mammal. Life (here comes our first climax) 'wanton as in her prime'. This is the age of monsters: dragons prowl the earth, devour one another, and die. Then the old irresistible theme of the Younger Son or the Ugly Duckling is repeated. As the weak, tiny spark of life herself began amidst the beasts that are far larger and stronger than he, there comes forth a little, naked, shivering, cowering biped, shuffling, not yet fully erect, promising nothing: the product of another millionth, millionth chance. His name in this Myth is Man: elsewhere he has been the young Beowulf whom men at first thought a dastard, or the stripling David armed only with a sling against mail-clad Goliath, or Jack the Giant-Killer himself, or even Hop-o'-my-Thumb. He thrives. He begins killing his giants. He becomes the Cave Man with his flints and his club, muttering and growling over his enemies' bones, almost a brute yet somehow able to invent art, pottery, language, weapons, cookery and nearly everything else (his name in another story is Robinson Crusoe), dragging his screaming mate by her hair (I do not exactly know why), tearing his children to pieces in fierce jealousy until they are old enough to tear him, and cowering before the terrible gods whom he has invented in his own image.

But these were only growing pains. In the next act he has become true Man. He learns to master Nature. Science arises and dissipates the superstitions of his infancy. More and more he becomes the controller of his own fate. Passing hastily over the historical period (in it the upward and onward movement gets in places a little indistinct, but it is a mere nothing by the time-scale we are using) we follow our hero on into the future. See him in the last act, though not the last scene, of this great mystery. A race

of demi-gods now rule the planet (in some versions, the galaxy). Eugenics have made certain that only demi-gods will now be born: psycho-analysis that none of them shall lose or smirch his divinity: economics that they shall have to hand all that demi-gods require. Man has ascended his throne. Man has become God. All is a blaze of glory. And now, mark well the final stroke of mythopoeic genius. It is only the more debased versions of the Myth that end here. For to end here is a little bathetic, even a little vulgar. If we stopped at this point the story would lack the highest grandeur. Therefore, in the best versions, the last scene reverses all. Arthur died: Siegfried died: Roland died at Roncesvaux. Dusk steals darkly over the gods. All this time we have forgotten Mordred, Hagen, Ganilon. All this time Nature, the old enemy who only seemed to be defeated, has been gnawing away, silently, unceasingly, out of the reach of human power. The Sun will cool—all suns will cool—the whole universe will run down. Life (every form of life) will be banished without hope of return from every cubic inch of infinite space. All ends in nothingness. 'Universal darkness covers all.' True to the shape of Elizabethan tragedy, the hero has swiftly fallen from the glory to which he slowly climbed: we are dismissed 'in the calm of mind, all passion spent'. It is indeed much better than an Elizabethan tragedy, for it has a more complete finality. It brings us to the end not of a story, but of all possible stories: *enden sah ich die welt*.

I grew up believing in this Myth and I have felt—I still feel—its almost perfect grandeur. Let no one say we are an unimaginative age: neither the Greeks nor the Norsemen ever invented a better story. Even to the present day, in certain moods, I could almost find it in my heart to wish that it was not mythical, but true.¹ And yet, how could it be?

What makes it impossible that it should be true is not so much the lack of evidence for this or that scene in the drama or the fatal self-contradiction which runs right through it. The Myth

[¹ In a paper read to the Oxford Socratic Club on 'Is Theology Poetry?', Lewis admits that if Christian Theology were only a myth he would not find even it as attractive as the Myth considered in this paper: 'Christianity offers the attraction neither of optimism nor of pessimism. It represents the life of the universe as being very like the mortal life of men on this planet—"of a mingled yarn, good and ill together."' *The Socratic Digest* (1945).]

cannot even get going without accepting a good deal from the real sciences. And the real sciences cannot be accepted for a moment unless rational inferences are valid: for every science claims to be a series of inferences from observed facts. It is only by such inferences that you can reach your nebulae and protoplasm and dinosaurs and sub-men and cave-men at all. Unless you start by believing that reality in the remotest space and the remotest time rigidly obeys the laws of logic, you can have no ground for believing in any astronomy, any biology, any palaeontology, any archaeology. To reach the positions held by the real scientists—which are then taken over by the Myth—you must—in fact, treat reason as an absolute. But at the same time the Myth asks me to believe that reason is simply the unforeseen and unintended by-product of a mindless process at one stage of its endless and aimless becoming. The content of the Myth thus knocks from under me the only ground on which I could possibly believe the Myth to be true. If my own mind is a product of the irrational—if what seem my clearest reasonings are only the way in which a creature conditioned as I am is bound to feel—how shall I trust my mind when it tells me about Evolution? They say in effect 'I will prove that what you call a proof is only the result of mental habits which result from heredity which results from bio-chemistry which results from physics.' But this is the same as saying: 'I will prove that proofs are irrational': more succinctly, 'I will prove that there are no proofs': The fact that some people of scientific education cannot by any effort be taught to see the difficulty, confirms one's suspicion that we here touch a radical disease in their whole style of thought. But the man who does see it, is compelled to reject as mythical the cosmology in which most of us were brought up. That it has embedded in it many true particulars I do not doubt: but in its entirety, it simply will not do. Whatever the real universe may turn out to be like, it can't be like that.

I have been speaking hitherto of this Myth as of a thing to be buried because I believe that its dominance is already over; in the sense that what seem to me to be the most vigorous movements of contemporary thought point away from it. Physics (a discipline less easily mythological) is replacing biology as the science *par excellence* in the mind of the plain man. The whole philosophy of Becoming has been vigorously challenged by the American

'Humanists'. The revival of theology has attained proportions that have to be reckoned with. The Romantic poetry and music in which popular Evolutionism found their natural counterpart are going out of fashion. But of course a Myth does not die in a day. We may expect that this Myth, when driven from cultured circles, will long retain its hold on the masses, and even when abandoned by them will continue for centuries to haunt our language. Those who wish to attack it must beware of despising it. There are deep reasons for its popularity.

The basic idea of the Myth—that small or chaotic or feeble things perpetually turn themselves into large, strong, ordered things—may, at first sight, seem a very odd one. We have never actually seen a pile of rubble turning itself into a house. But this odd idea commends itself to the imagination by the help of what seem to be two instances of it within everyone's knowledge. Everyone has seen individual organisms doing it. Acorns become oaks, grubs become insects, eggs become birds, every man was once an embryo. And secondly—which weighs very much in the popular mind during a machine age—everyone has seen Evolution really happening in the history of machines. We all remember when locomotives were smaller and less efficient than they are now. These two apparent instances are quite enough to convince the imagination that Evolution in a cosmic sense is the most natural thing in the world. It is true that reason cannot here agree with imagination. These apparent instances are not really instances of Evolution at all. The oak comes indeed from the acorn, but then the acorn was dropped by an earlier oak. Every man began with the union of an ovum and a spermatozoon, but the ovum and the spermatozoon came from two fully developed human beings. The modern express engine came from the *Rocket*: but the *Rocket* came, not from something under and more elementary than itself but from something much more developed and highly organized—the mind of a man, and a man of genius. Modern art may have 'developed' from savage art. But then the very first picture of all did not 'evolve' itself: it came from something overwhelmingly greater than itself, from the mind of that man who by seeing for the first time that marks on a flat surface could be made to look like animals and men, proved himself to excel in sheer blinding genius any of the artists who have succeeded him. It may be true

that if we trace back any existing civilization to its beginnings we shall find those beginnings crude and savage: but then when you look closer you usually find that these beginnings themselves come from a wreck of some earlier civilization. In other words, the apparent instances of, or analogies to, Evolution which impress the folk imagination, operate by fixing our attention on one half of the process. What we actually see all round us is a double process—the perfect 'dropping' an imperfect seed which in its turn develops to perfection. By concentrating exclusively on the record or upward movement in this cycle we seem to see 'evolution'. I am not in the least denying that organisms on this planet may have 'evolved'. But if we are to be guided by the analogy of Nature as we now know her, it would be reasonable to suppose that this evolutionary process was the second half of a long pattern—that the crude beginnings of life on this planet have themselves been 'dropped' there by a full and perfect life. The analogy may be mistaken. Perhaps Nature was once different. Perhaps the universe as a whole is quite different from those parts of it which fall under our observation. But if that is so, if there was once a dead universe which somehow made itself alive, if there was absolutely original savagery which raised itself by its own shoulder strap into civilization, then we ought to recognize that things of this sort happen no longer, that the world we are being asked to believe in is radically unlike the world we experience. In other words, all the immediate *plausibility* of the Myth has vanished. But it has vanished only because we have been thinking it will remain plausible to the imagination, and it is imagination which makes the Myth: it takes over from rational thought only what it finds convenient.

Another source of strength in the Myth is what the psychologists would call its 'ambivalence'. It gratifies equally two opposite tendencies of the mind, the tendency to denigration and the tendency to flattery. In the Myth everything is becoming everything else: in fact everything is everything else at an earlier or later stage of development—the later stages being always the better. This means that if you are feeling like Mencken you can 'debunk' all the respectable things by pointing out that they are 'merely' elaborations of the disreputable things. Love is 'merely' an elaboration of lust, virtue merely an elaboration of instinct,

and so forth. On the one hand it also means that if you are feeling what the people call 'idealistic' you can regard all the nasty things (in yourself or your party or your nation) as being 'merely' the undeveloped forms of all the nice things: vice is only undeveloped virtue, egoism only undeveloped altruism, a little more education will set everything right.

The Myth also soothes the old wounds of our childhood. Without going as far as Freud we may yet well admit that every man has an old grudge against his father and his first teacher. The process of being brought up, however well it is done, cannot fail to offend. How pleasing, therefore, to abandon the old idea of 'descent' from our concocters in favour of the new idea of 'evolution' or 'emergence': to feel that we have risen from them as a flower from the earth, that we transcend them as Keats' gods transcended the Titans. One then gets a kind of cosmic excuse for regarding one's father as a muddling old Mima and his claims upon our gratitude or respect as an insufferable *stamenlied*. 'Out of the way, old fool: it is we who know to forge Nothing!'

The Myth also pleases those who want to sell things to us. In the old days, a man had a family carriage built for him when he got married and expected it to last all his life. Such a frame of mind would hardly suit modern manufacturers. But popular Evolutionism suits them exactly. Nothing *ought* to last. They want you to have a new car, a new radio set, a new everything every year. The new model must always be superseding the old. Madam would like the *latest* fashion. For this is evolution, this is development, this the way the universe itself is going: and 'sales-resistance' is the sin against the Holy Ghost, the *élan vital*.

Finally, modern politics would be impossible without the Myth. It arose in the Revolutionary period. But for the political ideals of that period it would never have been accepted. That explains why the Myth concentrates on Haldane's one case of biological 'progress' and ignores his ten cases of 'degeneration'. If the cases of degeneration were kept in mind it would be impossible not to see that any given change in society is at least as likely to destroy the liberties and amenities we already have as to add new ones: that the danger of slipping back is at least as great as the chance of getting on: that a prudent society must spend at least as much energy on conserving what it has as on improve-

ment. A clear knowledge of these truisms would be fatal both to the political Left and to the political Right of modern times. The Myth obscures that knowledge. Great parties have a vested interest in maintaining the Myth. We must therefore expect that it will survive in the popular press (including the ostensibly *comic* press) long after it has been expelled from educated circles. In Russia, where it has been built into the state religion, it may survive for centuries: for

It has great allies,
Its friends are propaganda, party cries,
And bilge, and Man's incorrigible mind.

But that is not the note on which I would wish to end. The Myth has all these discreditable allies: but we should be far astray if we thought it had no others. As I have tried to show it has better allies too. It appeals to the same innocent and permanent needs in us which welcome Jack the Giant Killer. It gives us almost everything the imagination craves—irony, heroism, vastness, unity in multiplicity, and a tragic close. It appeals to every part of me except my reason. That is why those of us who feel that the Myth is already dead for us must not make the mistake of trying to 'debunk' it in the wrong way. We must not fancy that we are securing the modern world from something grim and dry, something that starves the soul. The contrary is the truth. It is our painful duty to wake the world from an enchantment. The real universe is probably in many respects less poetical, certainly less tidy and unified, than they had supposed. Man's rôle in it is less heroic. The danger that really hangs over him is perhaps entirely lacking in true tragic dignity. It is only in the last resort, and after all lesser poetries have been renounced and imagination sternly subjected to intellect, that we shall be able to offer them any compensation for what we intend to take away from them. That is why in the meantime we must treat the Myth with respect. It was all (on a certain level) nonsense: but a man would be a dull dog if he could not feel the thrill and charm of it. For my own part, though I believe it no longer, I shall always enjoy it as I enjoy other myths. I shall keep my Cave-Man where I keep Balder and Helen and the Argonauts: and there often re-visit him.

7

RELIGION AND SCIENCE

MIRACLES', SAID MY FRIEND. 'OH, COME. SCIENCE HAS knocked the bottom out of all that. We know that Nature is governed by fixed laws.'

'Didn't people always know that?' said I.

'Good Lord, no,' said he. 'For instance, take a story like the Virgin Birth. We know now that such a thing couldn't happen. We know there *must* be a male spermatozoon.'

'But look here', said I, 'St Joseph —'

'Who's he?' asked my friend.

'He was the husband of the Virgin Mary. If you'll read the story in the Bible you'll find that when he saw his fiancée was going to have a baby he decided to cry off the marriage. Why did he do that?'

'Wouldn't most men?'

'Any man would', said I, 'provided he knew the laws of Nature — in other words, provided he knew that a girl doesn't ordinarily have a baby unless she's been sleeping with a man. But according to your theory people in the old days didn't know that Nature was governed by fixed laws. I'm pointing out that the story shows that St Joseph knew *that* law just as well as you do.'

'But he came to believe in the Virgin Birth afterwards, didn't he?'

'Quite. But he didn't do so because he was under any illusion as to where babies came from in the ordinary course of Nature. He believed in the Virgin Birth as something super-natural. He knew Nature works in fixed, regular ways: but

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he also believed that there existed something *beyond* Nature which could interfere with her workings — from outside, so to speak.'

'But modern science has shown there's no such thing.'

'Really,' said I. 'Which of the sciences?'

'Oh, well, that's a matter of detail,' said my friend. 'I can't give you chapter and verse from memory.'

'But, don't you see', said I, 'that science never could show anything of the sort?'

'Why on earth not?'

'Because science studies Nature. And the question is whether anything *besides* Nature exists — anything "outside". How could you find that out by studying simply Nature?'

'But don't we find out that Nature *must* work in an absolutely fixed way? I mean, the laws of Nature tell us not merely how things *do* happen, but how they *must* happen. No power could possibly alter them.'

'How do you mean?' said I.

'Look here,' said he. 'Could this "something outside" that you talk about make two and two five?'

'Well, no,' said I.

'All right,' said he. 'Well, I think the laws of Nature are really like two and two making four. The idea of their being altered is as absurd as the idea of altering the laws of arithmetic.'

'Half a moment,' said I. 'Suppose you put sixpence into a drawer today, and sixpence into the same drawer tomorrow. Do the laws of arithmetic make it certain you'll find a shilling's worth there the day after?'

'Of course', said he, 'provided no one's been tampering with your drawer.'

* 'Ah, but that's the whole point,' said I. 'The laws of arithmetic can tell you what you'll find, with absolute certainty, provided that there's no interference. If a thief has been at the drawer of course you'll get a different result. But the thief won't have broken the laws of arithmetic — only the laws of England. Now, aren't the laws of Nature much in the same boat? Don't they all tell you what will happen *provided* there's no interference?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, the laws will tell you how a billiard ball will travel on a smooth surface if you hit it in a particular way — but

only provided no one interferes. If, after it's already in motion, someone snatches up a cue and gives it a biff on one side — why, then, you won't get what the scientist predicted.'

'No, of course not. He can't allow for monkey-tricks like that.'

'Quite, and in the same way, if there was anything outside Nature, and if it interfered — then the events which the scientist expected wouldn't follow. That would be what we call a miracle. In one sense it wouldn't break the laws of Nature. The laws tell you what will happen if nothing interferes. They can't tell you whether something is going to interfere. I mean, it's not the expert at arithmetic who can tell you how likely someone is to interfere with the pennies in my drawer; a detective would be more use. It isn't the physicist who can tell you how likely I am to catch up a cue and spoil his experiment with the billiard ball; you'd better ask a psychologist. And it isn't the scientist who can tell you how likely Nature is to be interfered with from outside. You must go to the metaphysician.'

'These are rather niggling points,' said my friend. 'You see, the real objection goes far deeper. The whole picture of the universe which science has given us makes it such rot to believe that the Power at the back of it all could be interested in us tiny little creatures crawling about on an unimportant planet! It was all so obviously invented by people who believed in a flat earth with the stars only a mile or two away.'

'When did people believe that?'

'Why, all those old Christian chaps you're always telling about did. I mean Boethius and Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Dante.'

'Sorry', said I, 'but this is one of the few subjects I do know something about.'

I reached out my hand to a bookshelf. 'You see this book', I said, 'Ptolemy's *Almagest*. You know what it is?'

'Yes,' said he. 'It's the standard astronomical handbook used all through the Middle Ages.'

'Well, just read that,' I said, pointing to Book I, chapter 5.

'The earth,' read out my friend, hesitating a bit as he translated the Latin, 'the earth, in relation to the distance of the fixed stars, has no appreciable size and must be treated as a mathematical point!'

There was a moment's silence.

'Did they really know that *then*?' said my friend. 'But — but none of the histories of science — none of the modern encyclopedias — ever mention the fact.'

'Exactly,' said I. 'I'll leave you to think out the reason. It almost looks as if someone was anxious to hush it up, doesn't it? I wonder why.'

There was another short silence.

'At any rate', said I, 'we can now state the problem accurately. People usually think the problem is how to reconcile what we now know about the size of the universe with our traditional ideas of religion. That turns out not to be the problem at all. The real problem is this. The enormous size of the universe and the insignificance of the earth were known for centuries, and no one ever dreamed that they had any bearing on the religious question. Then, less than a hundred years ago, they are suddenly trotted out as an argument against Christianity. And the people who trot them out carefully hush up the fact that they were known long ago. Don't you think that all you atheists are strangely unsuspicious people?'