

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE
1999

MYTHS & STORIES, LIES & TRUTH

by *NORMAN TALBOT*



The James Backhouse Lectures

This is one of a series of lectures instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends on the occasion of the establishment of that Yearly Meeting in 1964. This particular lecture was delivered in Canberra during the 1999 Yearly Meeting.

James Backhouse was an English Friend who visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. He and his companion, George Washington Walker, travelled widely but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through their visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia.

The two men had access to individual people with authority in the young colonies, and with influence in the British Parliament and social reform movement. In painstaking reports and personal letters to such people, they made practical suggestions and urged legislative action on penal reform, on land rights and the treatment of Aborigines, and on the rum trade. James Backhouse was a botanist and naturalist. He made careful observations and published full accounts of what he saw, in addition to encouraging Friends and following the deep concern for the convicts and the Aborigines that had brought him to Australia.

Australian Friends hope that this series of lectures will bring fresh insights into truth, often with reference to the needs and the aspirations of Australian Quakerism

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1999

***MYTHS & STORIES,
LIES & TRUTH***

'THE TRUEST POETRY IS THE MOST FEIGNING' (Touchstone, As You Like It)

v

*'IN THIS THEATRE OF MAN'S LIFE IT IS RESERVED ONLY FOR GOD
AND HIS ANGELS TO BE LOOKERS-ON'* (Francis Bacon)

[As usual, Shakespeare's folly is wiser than Bacon's profundity;
this essay is lovingly dedicated to those Friends who in the silence of meeting
look faithfully, if not angelically, upon the world]

NORMAN TALBOT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norman Talbot was born in 1936, a farm-labourer's son from Suffolk, England, where he was an early atheist and later a confused seeker. At Durham University, where he took a 'first' in English and University Prize, his future wife, Jean Perkins, was a fellow student, but neither felt they had a coherent faith. Only after their marriage in 1960 did they first worship with Friends, at the Carlton Hill Meeting in Leeds, where Norman was writing a Ph.D. on American Literature. Both were admitted to membership there, at about the time their first child was born, but they left for Australia in 1962 when Norman was appointed to a Lectureship in English at Newcastle University, New South Wales.

In Australia, feeling themselves ill-equipped for the task, Norman and Jean did not start a Hunter Valley Meeting until 1968, after a sabbatical year in Yale where they had worshipped with Friends deeply committed to the U.S. peace movement and race-relations work. The Sydney Friend Margaret Watts, who had visited them at intervals for some years, and their first experience of Australia Yearly Meeting, were also invaluable encouragement. The Meeting is now very active, though still small, and will soon have its own meeting-place; their three children are none of them members, but all highly sympathetic to Friends' values.

Norman has gained a national reputation as a poet; he has published ten titles, ranging from substantial volumes like Four Zoas of Australia to small pamphlets like Australian Quaker Christmases, sold to help the local Meeting-House Fund. As a scholar and teacher he was promoted to professorial level, with special interests and major publications in Romantic and contemporary poetry, in fantasy and SF fiction, and in narratology (story theory). He took early retirement in 1993 to become a full-time writer of fantasy, SF and poetry, but remains a freelance scholar, respected especially for his work on William Morris' fantasy and the tradition it began.

ABOUT THIS LECTURE

MYTHS & STORIES, LIES & TRUTH

Traditionally, Quakers have expressed suspicion of the arts, and especially of fiction. Yet stories are good for us, and myth, legend, folktale and fantasy especially good. We all need to be able to see life and behaviour from the outside, to shake ourselves loose from routine, and the best way is to learn to *be present where we aren't!* Some of us have, in the silence of Meeting for Worship -- perhaps even because of ministry -- looked at our lives and those around us as if for the first time. It is hard to kick the drug of habit, so let us be grateful that great writers offer us analogous worlds as alternatives: a change of story is much better than a rest.

This lecture distinguishes between truth, lies, and various kinds of story. In particular certain stories (myths and legends, folktale and parable) are discussed as truths without fact, and fantasy defended against the charge of 'escapism'. In the second section the Quaker aesthetic is discussed historically and compared with the Organic Form movement within Romanticism and its aftermath. The third section examines some problems posed by the Bible narratives of the Creation and the Fall, and the value of approaching both as stories, interpretable and restructurable. The fourth section shows how the most significant fantasy of our century, The Lord of the Rings, challenges the conventions within which it is written. Finally, the use of Edenic themes by two major Quaker Science Fiction writers, Joan Slonczewski and Judith Moffett, is placed beside a theory of non-violent cultural origins loosely called the Carrier Bag theory.

The painting reproduced on the front cover is PAN, by Sydney Long, a brilliant translocation of the nature-revels of Ancient Greek tradition to an Australian context, at a time when most Australians seemed to regard the Nature around them with resentment, fear or contempt -- as 'bush' or 'scrub'.

Sydney Long, Pan, 1898: oil on canvas, 104-9 x 177 cm.

Gift of J R. McGregor 1943; the ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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PREAMBLE

This Backhouse Lecture text is distinct from the verbal presentation at Dickson College, Canberra, in the course of Australia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends in January 1999 in three ways. It contains material about (for instance) the Bible's Creation and Fall stories, and about the great fantasy The Lord of the Rings which would have made the live presentation too long. It lacks the contrast of tone and texture given to the performance by Jean Talbot's reading of the quotations. And explicatory comment here is more extensive than was necessary for a lecture which was followed by an opportunity to meet with members of the audience, in shared pursuit of the issues raised in it. I shall of course also be delighted to hear from Friends and friends who read the Backhouse Lecture in book form and feel moved to respond to it.

INTRODUCTION

The Lord of the Rings is truer than Home and Away. That sentence sets side by side the greatest and most reprinted fantasy of this century and a TV 'soap opera' that I have never been able to endure for a whole episode. Yet the one is commonly marginalised by literary critics as 'escapist' and the other honoured with the accolade 'popular'.

But we all know 'popular' is not really an honorific. It has come to apply only to art designed for audiences with insufficient 'cultural capital' to respond to more demanding and rewarding cultural codes. In real terms, no episode of Home and Away exists as a separate work of art, and the serial itself is designed to be forgotten by its audience; its episodes are unrecoverable, and it has no entire shape. And *LOR* is in real terms definitively popular: surveys of book-readers in six major English-speaking countries show that it is everywhere nominated far ahead of any other as the most valued and influential book of this century.

Why does this matter to the Religious Society of Friends? It matters because there is an intimate relationship between storytelling and truth. It matters to the Quakers because we are still Seekers after Truth, but are prone to neglect or undervalue unfactual Truth, and specifically fantasy fiction and science fiction, modes that, as philosophical and spiritual play, nourish our kinds of seeking.

The thing about seeking Truth is that we shall never exhaust it. The universe may mean greatly, and mean good, but its meaning is too complex, and too vast, for humans. Take sight: to say 'I see' implies understanding, but we don't see far within the atom, nor far out into the galaxies. There is light beyond the ultraviolet, and light beyond the infrared, but it is not for our eyes. The little we can see, through the chinks in the walls of our cavern, is described by what we now call 'chaos theory'. Shelley sees the pathos of mortals aware of time:

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought

Only our stories give us a world proportioned to what we believe, understand, imagine. Our storytellers imitate God, but a little, limited, cause-&-effect God -- a falsehood, an illusion, thanks be to God. As Robert Frost says of our species,

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

The Lord of the Rings is truer than Home and Away because it does not pretend to be real life, and its telling does not pretend to be an objective camera eye. Its hobbits, for example, are clear-edged fictional creations that represent more about humanity than the stereotyped roles played by actors and actresses (chosen for their fashionable middle-class, majority-race prettiness and chic) in a TV serial. Beginningless, endless soaps, like 'slice-of-life' naturalistic films and books, imitate the flux of other people's lives as we see them from the outside, trying to interpret, pretending to understand, failing to empathise. Yes, we live in the flux of history, but that does not mean our imaginations have to feed only upon it; we can digest nourishment more solid - and more exotically spiced!

Stories are a form of human sharing, and good for us; myth, legend, folktale and fantasy are especially good. We all need to be able to see life and behaviour from the outside, to shake ourselves loose from routine, just as a bird's-eye view of our house gives us a refreshing perspective on where we live. Many of us have been offered an illuminating alternative view of our priorities by, say, a wild-life program about creatures that aren't, on the surface, like us at all. Some of us have, in the silence of meeting for worship -- perhaps because of ministry - looked at our lives and those around us as if for the first time. It is hard to kick the drug of habit; let us be grateful that storytellers offer us analogue lives, alternatives- a change of story is much better than a rest.

Fantasy worlds may be dream-versions of, or nightmares about, the ones their authors -- and maybe their audiences - live in, but increasingly they are likely to be alternative worlds. Worlds that fulfil some specific and common wish, such as to talk with other creatures, to fly unaided, or to live a longer lifespan, are among the most illuminating. There is a Greek saying,

Those whom the Gods would drive mad,
first they grant their requests

Perhaps Judith Moffett's Pennterra started from wishes that Meeting for Worship could be more intense, and human sexuality less guilty and self-conscious; Joan Slonczewski's The Wall Around Eden may have begun with natural longings for an end to war and an ecumenical widening of Meeting. Whatever your wish, it reveals solid truths about you and where you are now!

Ursula K. Le Guin, one of our century's greatest storytellers, points out that 'objectively true' stories, pseudo-histories, are themselves an illusion:

A totally factual narrative, were there such a thing, would be passive: a mirror reflecting all without distortion. Stendhal sentimentalized about the novel as such a mirror, but fiction does not reflect, nor is the narrator's eye that of a camera. The historian manipulates, arranges and connects, and the storyteller does all that as well as intervening and inventing. Fiction connects possibilities... If we cannot see our acts as being under the aspect of fiction, as "making sense", we cannot act as if we were free.

In a story, properly patterned rather than reflecting the infinite plethora of action and inaction called 'real life', events can be expected to make sense. In the conventions of story-telling, which include a storyteller's voice and point of view, a beginning that starts the story rolling, and an ending that draws into a satisfying pattern its energies and possibilities, 'life' does not simply churn around but moves in a more or less stately dance. If we talk about space, story has pattern; if we talk about time, story has rhythm.

Stories are temporal: they assert or assume that characters move and act through time, indeed, their space is time. Le Guin elucidates:

So when the storyteller by the hearth starts out, "Once upon a time, a long way from here, lived a king who had three sons," that story will be telling us that things change; that events have consequences; that choices have to be made; that the king does not live forever.

If an opening tells us what to expect, what do we expect when we read this?

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

This signals an ironic comedy in which a detached narrator both tolerates and mocks this 'universal' non-truth, and in which the potential wives and in-laws of some single men (and possibly the single men themselves) are tested quite

severely and amusingly. It is the first sentence of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, as many of you will know.

Once upon a time there will be a little girl called Uncumber.

Another ironic voice, sophisticated, adroit and unpredictable, offering a Utopian or dystopian future world to be tested out by the unencumbered innocence of a little girl. It's the first sentence of A Very Private Life, by Michael Frayn.

There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall.

We expect to read of those who cross that wall, that line, that idea, and help to set free the people of that 'world' that the wall has dominated -- and maybe make a difference to what is beyond the wall too. These are the first, very circumstantial, short sentences of The Dispossessed, by Ursula K. Le Guin.

I went out to the hazel wood
Because a fire was in my head
And cut and peeled a hazel wand
And hooked a berry on a thread...

Here is a subjective, obsessive narrator, remembering the day he first felt the supernal glamour, the call to magical quest, that has ever since dominated his life. It begins W.B. Yeats' fine early poem 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'.

Once there was and once there wasn't, long ago, when the camel was a barber and the flea a porter - well, in those times, there was a padishah who had twelve daughters, each one more beautiful than the one before her.

This opens a Turkish folktale, a version of 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses', detached, and comically at home with its conventions and audience expectations.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

This is about Cosmos being created by a Word, and how that Word put its Speaker into its own Cosmos. Confronted by irreducible paradox, the evangelist is serene: the world makes sense! Like the other openings this is about truth, but all are unfalse unfacts. Just right for Seekers after Truth.

1 Fact, Fib and Fable

According to a wise man who much mistrusted art, information can be either *serious*, which involves truth, *trivial*, which offers lies, or *plastic*, which is neither trivial nor serious. If that word for the content of a work of art puts you off, try 'plasmatic', 'imaginative' or 'artistic'. Plato, or the Socrates he presents, knew that plastic communication was neither factual nor untrue, and he had no trouble with most arts and crafts, but he was puzzled about the verbal arts, because their material, language, seems identical with the components of truth or lies. He worried especially about art that presents very serious material, such as myths, as if it were true. Can it be that the poet, seeking only beauty, reduces truth to a mere plaything? The best of his range of answers (as I interpret him) is that works of art reward the audience with the pleasure of recognising how beautifully they counterfeit the world of truth. If so, he decides, this is not a high, or sufficiently good, pleasure. In Socrates' ideal state, the Republic, poets would be honoured with admiration, but then led to the border and told not to come back. Yet people claim to learn from art, and in other dialogues Plato accepts this, reluctantly. Perhaps he conceives of finding truth in non-truth as a special case in communication, rather as a good catholic biologist might admit that the transubstantiation of the flesh, the virgin birth, or bodily resurrection, is factually untrue, but carries or implies another kind of truth -- a truth, as it were, of stance, whose believers share a nobler perspective on or approach to being alive.

A history text assembling verifiable facts about the British settlement of Australia sets out to be true; an advertisement promising to make you feel younger is probably intended to deceive; a story in which the wearer of a magic ring is aided by elves, a dwarf, a disguised prince and a wizard who has come back from the dead is neither true nor false, in the sense of deceptive. One communicates facts, one falsehoods, and one fiction.

But things are not as simple as that. A history may be intentionally or unintentionally biased, incorporate invented material or be otherwise unreliable; an advertisement may be based on genuine scientific evidence or consumer experience; a story may offer or suggest values and perspectives on decisions and deeds which are directly related to what we call 'truth'.

Fiction is more complex still. Many stories imitate histories: they offer what seems like 'real life', and conceal the conventions of their story-telling under a surface of verisimilitude. Other stories resemble advertising: their events and characters represent events, characters or abstract ideas in an allegorical pattern

designed to 'sell' the audience the opinions and beliefs that the author has shaped the story to celebrate. New media developed in the twentieth century, especially film and the internet, have abetted both surface realism and elaborate 'infotainment' more than the non-realistic forms of fiction. Narrative poetry and fantasy, the less deceptive forms of story, survive, but the big money has been against them.

History is only a part of our lives, the empirical part, and in itself, in its sheer plethora, is uncongenial to our imaginations. That is why we construct stories from history, especially the artificially personalised history called biography. Our understanding organises history by identifying and enlarging the potentially narrative realities in it, such as mystery and quest, heroes and villains, comedy and tragedy, irony and sentiment, impossibilities and dreams, symbols and fables, parallel and contrast, order and resolution. These are the structuring forces of story, by which imagination re-shapes experience and empirical observation. Without them reality makes no sense.

Here is a famous, often-quoted complaint against the imagination.

Hippolyta	Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.
Theseus	More strange than true. I never may believe These antique fables, nor these fairy toys. Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend More than cool reason ever comprehends. The lunatic, the lover, and the poet Are of imagination all compact. One sees more devils than vast hell can hold, That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic, Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt. The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven; And as Imagination bodies forth The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing A local habitation and a name. Such tricks hath strong imagination That, if it would but apprehend some joy, It comprehends some bringer of that joy; Or in the night, imagining some fear, How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

But this speech is ironic comedy of a typical Shakespearean kind. There is bitter laughter in Hamlet when Polonius, a viciously hypocritical old turncoat of a courtier, pretends to give his son moral advice:

This above all, to thine own self be true;
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

There is high comedy in As You Like It when the most perversely antisocial fool in the play claims to understand every stage of human development:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances
And each man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages...

In both cases the play denies this pseudo-wisdom, in Jaques' case instantly, because the hero staggers in with an example of Jaques' last, most useless category,

second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

The hero, unlike the melancholic fool, values his servant, old Adam, enough to steal, fight, and even die for him.

But Theseus the 'realist' critic is not only wrong, he is a rebuttal of his own case. He is himself a legendary character from what he'd call an 'antique fable', a classic quest-hero, a minotaur-killer, airily asserting his nothingness to his equally legendary Amazon queen. A fine one to talk about disbelieving products of the imagination! And the play where he rules is a fantasy of dreams and magic love-potions, within which his disbelief is inadequate. What the lovers tell him is factual, and includes nothing about the equally factual 'fairy toys'. The true powers of the magic wood are stranger and more fantastical than anything he has been told. In modern productions this point is often made by casting the same actors to play him and Hippolyta as play the rulers of Faery, Oberon and Titania.

Shakespeare is writing before the growth of the grotesque pretence that fantasy is a lesser art-form than one that imitates history or journalism, so he can afford to tease the commonsensical reductionists. Some of his greatest plays are fantasies (Macbeth, Hamlet, As You Like It, The Tempest) but others claim to be

'histories'. The faery powers make this play's happy ending as they bless the night-time palace and its three honeymoons -- blessings needed by Theseus' marriage even more than the others. There are real rewards for the faith of poets and lovers!

Clearly, there was for Shakespeare no case for saying that honest storytelling is inferior to pseudo-history's supposed 'realism'. In the other arts there is no problem. We don't think of a building in the shape of a big banana or a giant merino as great architecture, and have limited respect for tricky trompe d'oeil paintings, or 'program music' that imitates thunderstorms or birdsong. Just because art imitates life, there is no reason to restrict it to imitating the apparent surfaces of life. Why do those who despise 'popular culture' also regard fantasy as 'marginal'?

A brilliant American poet e e cummings (no capitals, please) makes a brisk, aggressive claim for surrealism, which is one form of fantasy:

The poems to come are for you and for me and not for mostpeople ...

You and I are human beings; mostpeople are snobs.

Take the matter of being born. What does being born mean to mostpeople? Catastrophe unmitigated. Socialrevolution. The cultured aristocrat yanked out of his hyperexclusively ultravoluptuous superpalazzo, and dumped into an incredibly vulgar detentioncamp swarming with every conceivable species of undesirable organism... If mostpeople were to be born twice they'd improbably call it dying - you and I are not snobs. We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing; the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves. You and I wear the dangerous looseness of doom and find it becoming.

There are snob reviewers, critics and teachers of literature who actually boast of their inability to read fantasy (a little like being vain that one lacks a sense of smell, or claiming a special status for colourblindness). Why can't they read fantasy? Do they dislike its content, often magical, or its form, a tale that is likely to end in reconciliation? Though they have disqualified themselves from judgment by proclaiming their incompetence, I'll try to take them seriously for a moment.

Most use words like 'escapist' or 'whimsy'. Well 'whimsy' seems to mean an insufficiently serious imagination, and the only measure of this is probably the audience's response, on a gravitational scale from lightness of heart (or head) to ponderous self-importance. Obviously some fantasy is weakly imagined, or

nervously giggly, or just insufficiently challenging -- there is bad art in all conventions -- but such faults are not characteristic even of comic fantasy.

'Escapism' is obviously a moral term, about running away from the real business, the grim facts, of life. But as Tolkien wrote in the thirties (thinking of the increase of tyranny in Europe) the only people who seriously disapprove of imaginative escape from injustice and misery are jailers:

In using Escape in this way the critics... are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. Just so a Party-spokesman might have labelled departure from the misery of the Fuhrer's or any other Reich and even criticism of it as treachery. In the same way these critics, to make confusion worse, and so bring scorn on their opponents, stick their label of scorn not only on to Desertion, but on to real Escape, and what are often its companions, Disgust, Anger, Condemnation, and Revolt.

Two examples from Ursula K. le Guin may clarify the issue. In A Wizard of Earthsea, Ged flees from the deadly Shadow that hunts him until he reaches his home island of Gont. Thence, strengthened and with a clearer understanding of what the thing might do to others, he turns the tables and hunts it, literally, to the end of the world, and there calls it to him, by his own name. He escaped, then countered. In the second volume, though, the Old Gods of The Tombs of Atuan cannot be pursued or reconciled: they cannot leave the Tombs and their only response to living things is hate. The only useful thing Arha, their 'Eaten One', can do is flee from them, to escape and begin her real life, reclaiming her given name, Tenar:

'Come!' he said smiling, and she rose and came. Gravely she walked beside him up the white streets of Havnor, holding his hand like a child coming home.

Nowadays even a jailer knows he needs to entertain the convicts, but he prefers trivial, packaged entertainments. Above all he avoids two things major fantasy offers: such wild imaginative trips as might give slaves 'ideas', disturbing their resigned normality, and such richly consolatory stories as could suggest sympathies beyond prejudice, blinkered fear, and xenophobic self-love.

What forms of escapism do the jailers find most effective in soothing the prisoners? Formulaic daydream stories, mostly; nothing that might jog the imagination awake! In 1999 Mills-&-Boon love-stories - miscalled Romances -- will grow closer to sex-and-shopping novels. Hero-of-the-school stories, which long ago incorporated the boy or girl detective conventions, will link on one side

with teenager love-stories, on the other with serio-comic bubblegum horror like the Goosebumps series. Ghost-stories and 'Weird Horror' will be swept into closer sado-masochistic alliance with slasher, stalker, diabolist and other pathological violence yarns. Gunslinger and disaster yarns will re-tool with more paranoid weapons to make tougher tough-guy shoot-em-ups and catastrophe novels. In these cases the change is largely influenced by the superior surface realism of film.

In summary, 'escapism' has to pretend lifelikeness. In the language of criticism, its verisimilitude is over-determined: O what a thrill - and yet O how easy - to imagine yourself that brave, beautiful and blameless victim-heroine, or that upright, unhesitating and irresistible hero! If audiences want to live vicariously, then a daydream set in recognisable and familiar 'realities', not fantasy of even the most formulaic kind, is the way to go. Increasingly, strong story conventions, such as beginning, middle and end, puzzle the brain too much. The customers prefer the constant shuffling burble of fast-forward, fast-food events that form the climaxes to soap and sit-com episodes.

More positively, because films have lots of visual attractions but not much story, film has also increased both the range and the audience of space-opera in book form, through from low-budget Dr Who and Lost in Space stories to the increasingly well-equipped Star Trek, Star Wars and their successors, and the elegant Babylon 5. Good writers like Barbara Hambly have written novelisations that make sense of TV series like Beauty and the Beast. The vast new market for women's erotica, now divorced from Mills-&-Boon but linked up with semi-horror as 'Dark Fantasy' (especially vampire stories) outclasses traditional male-daydream pornography, which has a decreasing influence on book publishing. Yes, I'm sure there are still plenty of potential customers, but film and the internet suit pornographic priorities much better, without the inhibiting requirement of literacy.

Disapprovers of 'escapism' write in an odd, shocked tone about, say, Wind in the Willows or The House at Pooh Corner; they seem neurotically anxious not to be suspected of taking pleasure in a child's book, as if this were a shaming secret indulgence, like masturbation, or eating a whole box of chocolates by oneself. They daren't do that with the Alice books, because they sense that the author is far too clever for them, but they compensate by prurient hints about his supposedly paedophilic fantasy-life! I would quote them C.S. Lewis, that most erudite and morally upright of scholars:

The neat sorting out of books into age groups, so dear to publishers, has only a very sketchy relation with the habits of real readers. Those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us... When I was ten I read fairytales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.

My own perspective is similar. Snob critics forget that a good children's book is a good book, by definition. And if they confuse childlike with childish, they'd probably be quite embarrassed by the Kingdom of Heaven too.

But what is advocated by those who disapprove of fantasy? That all art should pretend to represent 'real life'? That the best art is the most lifelike? But no novel or painting could, by definition, present the surface of life as well as a film, which would mean that that art-form is intrinsically superior to all others, which seems a silly thing to argue.

Perhaps the *ars-celare-artem* theory is behind the disapproval? That is, the critics take a special pleasure in art that hides its artistry. Well, I have nothing against subtlety, but to pretend a work of art is a simple presentation of life seems somewhat ridiculous. Are hungry people cheated by a painting of two pears, when they want physical sense-engagement with two real pears? A good painter's 'Study of Two Pears' is a quite different experience from looking at, let alone eating, pears. Lasts longer too!

Viktor Shklovski, the greatest of the Russian Formalist critics, often offended, but fortunately also bewildered, the Social Realist brigades that ruled the channels of public opinion under Stalin. He denied the false logic that confused recognition of a 'real' object with experiencing a work of art.

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself, and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.

If 'the object is not important' in visual art, there can be no reasonable objection to fiction about fabulous heroism, for example. It is the treatment which makes the work of art admirable, contemptible or (the largest category) unremarkable. Similarly, no writer can be condemned for using an old story from a mythology,

or inventing an entirely unheard-of place inhabited by creatures that are, as far as possible, complete inventions.

We could not write or read a story that was wholly fantastic, in the sense that it resembled nothing in human experience. Nor could a story ever take shape if it was really 'a slice of life', a random cross-section, without time-signals, of all the multiplicity and unfocussed non-signifying processes that we actually experience before our imagination starts the sorting process that keeps us sane. As a corollary to Chaos Theory, I conceive of God as the Great Audience, who responds to the developing experience of everything (cosmoi, quarks and all), and keeps everything balanced between constant change and serene acceptance. And there is that of God the Audience in you, my audience, as I try to invoke the three great experiences of story in you, even though this discussion is not narrative. These are, first, the bracing

SENSE OF UNFAMILIARITY

of curiosity teamed with trusting surprise; second, the reconciliatory

SENSE OF RECOGNITION

of loving acceptance, and third, the exploratory

SENSE OF EXPECTATION

of hope that something decisive and meaningful is about to happen.

One of our few great literary critics, Northrop Frye, grades stories according to the power or liberty of the protagonists (central characters, even heroes) in their story-world. The lowest number is the most constrained:

10	20	40	60	80	90
Absurd	Ironic	Low Mimetic	High Mimetic	Romance	Mythic

A **10** 'hero' ; a puppet or a prisoner; a **20** 'hero' founders, or maybe floats, in a universe whose logics remain unfathomable; **40** heroes are mimetic in that their circumstances and abilities are much like our own and **60** heroes, while not vastly different, have skills, presence and privileges that can dominate those around

them; an **80** hero is truly heroic, with power, luck or wisdom far beyond the usual human range; a **90** hero is godlike, only limited by the presence of any other godlike being or influence in the story.

There is no particular merit in showing a more constrained central character, in physical, psychological, social, intellectual or spiritual terms. That is a choice a storyteller makes - and why constrain your storyteller? Constraint can take many forms, though: your hero shackled in a prison cell is no more limited in choice than if she were 'free' and alone, lost in a featureless desert.

The Frye scale can be a description of fantasy (or improbability) as well as character. The nearer the middle of the scale a story is, the fewer the improbabilities you would expect in its action, but at either extreme very strange things can and should happen. You may find it interesting that extremely absurd stories seem to bend the scale; they resemble an inverted myth: the Black Knight, in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, has something of the unstoppable (up to the point of self-destruction) of a mythic hero, and the helplessness of Charlie Chaplin or Harpo Marx becomes something like a holy state: there are holy innocents, holy goofs, even holy tricksters, if you read the romances, folktales and myths properly. The last days of Jesus' ministry remind us how chance and context -- or is it patterns of destiny? -- can blur power into helplessness in a very confusing manner.

It is clear from Frye's scale that normality-based fiction is less likely to amaze or intrigue us, and far more likely to be limited by the context in which it was written than more improbable, more blatantly unfactual, stories. Some stories have a society-challenging impact from their sheer authenticity, as with both the book and the film of Once Were Warriors, and they may change lives and perspectives through this immediacy.

But of course such works have problems. Are they intrusive on the people whose lives they evoke so convincingly? Has the author or director appropriated the experience of that race or class, whose members have not the cultural capital, influence and power to represent themselves? Still, even though such stories take amazing risks to pierce the narrative frame and speak to us like facts, they only work as stories if they are also, in Plato's sense, plastic: not falsification but certainly not unadapted, unedited, undesigned 'life'. Documentary fiction has to be especially well framed, or a million things will crowd in on every take of every scene. That is what the word fiction means: fictus, 'made'. Fiction is unifact.

2 Unfact: Parables, Patterns and Supreme Fictions

An Irish bishop, reading the second book of Gulliver's Travels, about the giants of Brobdingnag, declared that he didn't believe a word of it. Fables and parables are non-factual stories that overtly claim to teach truths by analogy between their events and the life-choices of the audience. In Persian and Arab traditions, parabolic stories and fables are the most popular and dramatic verbal art, influencing even the structure of their greatest poetic form, the ghazals, and their mighty compendium of non-teaching stories Alf Layla Wa-Layla.

The Jewish tradition is in essence like its neighbours, in that there too the parable or *masal* is non-fact that explicitly offers truth. Though only at most nine *masalim* occur in the Old Testament, there are almost 2000 in the Rabbinical literature that spins off from that compilation. Jesus works in the Rabbinical style; in his brief ministry he offers at least 31 *masalim* - some say 72, but many are not full storits, just emphatic metaphors or similes.

All Jesus' parables are teaching devices, offering wisdom from a new angle. Most make a point, by analogy from story-world to auditor-world, that the auditor would not accept if it were merely argued. Many are answers to moral, spiritual or doctrinal questions, and most present familiar people and settings slightly estranged, both to be memorable for non-literate listeners and to whet curiosity -- to make them wonder what's coming next. There are unexpected or exaggerated elements, but nothing genuinely fantastical. Jesus compares a teacher to a good shepherd, but the sheep don't behave like humans; he says he is a vine, but he tells no stories about talking vines. His parables broaden the scope of a simple question or assumption, to indicate the nature and values of the Kingdom of Heaven without sounding seditious to either Roman or priestly informers... The effective parable invites the hearer to foresee its closure, but not to take for granted its purpose. Less successful parables are light anecdotes dominated by too heavy a final instruction on how to interpret or apply them.

The parable tradition in Japan and China is slightly different. These stories usually have something like a surprise ending or punchline, to shake the rigid mindsets of those who have not maintained their spiritual openness.

The holy monk Tanzan and his disciple Nubo, travelling through the forests in heavy rain, came upon a beautiful woman beside a flooded ford, unable to reach her home across the river. Tanzan at once took the woman on his shoulders and carried her across like a river-porter. As the pilgrims walked on, nothing was said.

At dusk they reached a hut where they could shelter for the night, and Tanzan gestured for Nubo to sit beside him.

'Something is worrying you, my son.'

'Venerable father. I was shocked that a saint should so casually transgress his vows. You are forbidden to even touch a garment that has belonged to a woman, and yet you place a woman astride your neck and hold her by her bare legs.'

'What, that woman at the ford? Are you still carrying her?'

In Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass a dramatic parable presents our human ego with a salutary shock. Alice enters the Wood of No Names, where she doesn't know what anything is called. She meets a Fawn, who says that here it can't remember what it is called, but will tell her when they are a little further on.

So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight. "And, dear me! you're a human child!" A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed.

Anyone who has studied the effects of sophisticated human societies on natural beauty can produce a commentary on this episode, but the energy of the whole story tugs us past it, ignoring the temptation to meditate and 'be wise' about it. So it stays in the mind -- indeed it haunts mine -- and furnishes the stimuli for many perspectives and choices without ever spawning an Improving Moral. In fact, Improving Morals and hortatory poems are among the crucial targets of mockery in the Alice books. It is boring to be told what to think, but richly stimulating to be shown responses in action, including the well-based response of our fellow-citizens on this planet to human beings.

There are genuinely separate races of articulate beings in The Lord of the Rings too, and sometimes a parabolic episode illuminates racism, quite incidentally. Elves and dwarves don't get on. Here is a brief scene as the fellowship try to get into the ancient under-mountain Dwarvish realm of Moria:

'Those were happier days, when there was still close friendship at times between folk of different race, even between Dwarves and Elves.'

'It was not the fault of the Dwarves that the friendship waned,' said Gimli.

'I have not heard that it was the fault of the Elves,' said Legolas.

'I have heard both,' said Gandalf; 'and I will not give judgment now. But I beg you two, Legolas and Gimli, at least to be friends, and to help me. I need you both. The doors are shut and hidden, and the sooner we find them the better. Night is at hand.'

Night is indeed at hand, with wolves on their scent, and something huge and menacing lurks in the pool before the cliff. And the doors are not at first visible, let alone open. Gandalf manages to make the doors visible, and the inscription says **THE DOORS OF DURIN, LORD OF MORIA. SPEAK FRIEND AND ENTER.** But none of the opening spells and other commands Gandalf uses can stir the doors, until he realises that 'PEDO MELLON & MINNO' is better translated, 'SAY "FRIEND" AND ENTER.'

I had only to speak the Elvish word for friend and the doors opened.
Quite simple. Too simple for a learned lore-master in these suspicious days.
Those were happier times...

A tiny episode, but eloquent especially for Friends, and also the beginning of an intimate friendship between these members of the opposed races, Legolas the wood-elf and Gimli son of Gloin, the dwarf from the Lonely Mountain.

The story-telling charm of the two Alice Books and The Lord of the Rings, shows that our rational mind processes fantasy logic as precisely as the events of our waking lives, and with more entertaining and intriguing results. Life is not like stories and, unless seen with a constructive energy that genuinely imitates God's love for creation, does not have meanings. Life has no beginnings or ends, only a vast welter of undifferentiated middle. Neither the chicken nor the egg came first. In a direct story the beginning comes first, with some helpful frame like ONCE UPON A TIME. After a satisfying collision of characters, their story comes to an end, with a frame-phrase like AND THEY ALL LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER, or my favourite, the last line of a Morris romance, AND THEY LIVED WITHOUT SHAME AND DIED WITHOUT FEAR.

Tolkien's life-long invention and Carroll's impulsive serio-comic dream-weaving both came out of Oxford's privileged world, where a few of the dons had time to think, and to imagine. The Middle-earth that Tolkien creates is not 'here', but has its own ecology, geography and history; alternative-world story-telling is, for those millions who explore it, an enchantment in action. The magic of Carroll's surreal dream-world is in-house, so to speak. It is found in the polite ingredients of Victorian domesticity. Tea-parties and gardens, toys and games,

metamorphose into strangeness, and sometimes to menace. A playing-card or chess-piece takes on the snarling malevolence of a governess or the sharp-tongued sarcasm of an impatient teacher; secure, 'normal' poems and nursery-rhymes change into a script for chaotic violence. In Carroll's surreal tradition we recognise the magnificent weirdness of the everyday -- including human detritus from the failure categories of the modern city, as in John Crowley's Little, Big, Megan Lindholm's The Wizard of the Pigeons, or Charles de Lint's Trader.

Subcreation, as Tolkien calls it, resembles myth, folktale or legend; it is not derived directly from observation of the world around us but creates a world that belongs to and is fulfillingly responsive to the story. This world is composed of the imagined elements of the living world, earth, air, water, fire and spirit, self-sustaining facts, worthwhile and memorable, potentially sacred, not a factual periodic table of elements for analytic, scientific wills to act upon. Even in The Hobbit, a children's book which has none of the breadth, depth or scope of *LOR*, Bilbo goes from his everyday normality to an ordeal by riddles in the heart of a mountain, to being burned alive by goblins, to wild flights on giant eagles, to isolation in a trackless forest, to a chaotic rescue by river, and to a series of climactic spiritual collisions, with a dragon -- and five armies. The whole of his story, once he escapes from the routine meaninglessness of his respectable bourgeois life, is charged with meaning. Such heightened alternative-world fantasy is an enchantment of highly realised places and times; it creates a world where any activity can be close to ritual, any words or stories close to mythic.

What I am calling in-house fantasy is different. Just as the early Quakers, our Society's ancestors, did not abolish the clergy but the laity, so that we are all ministers, so they turned from steeple-house and consecrated ground to affirm that all God's creation, any fell or barn where worshippers might meet, is holy ground, whether it is ever so used or not. They also ignored red-letter days, such as Easter, because in God's vision every day is blessed, is literally a holy day. This is the fantasy principle that G.K. Chesterton called **MOOREEFFOC** (reading the 'wrong' side of a glass door), a wonderful something Other, a daft glory revealed in our world. These versions of the holiness of space and time are at the core of the Romantic Movement, and still as true as ever they were.

Because my lecture emphasises alternative-world fantasy, here, briefly, are three fine in-house fantasy tactics. In Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, the narrator learns the artistic perspectives of passion, imagination and organicism from fiercely responsive devils, not from smooth, obedient, passive angels, most of whom are rapidly turning into hypocrites :

As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity... on the abyss of the five senses where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived by the minds of men, & read by them on earth.

How do you know but ev'ry bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an Immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?

The time of enchantment may be equinox or solstice, or fit the phases of the moon -- or it may not. Enchantment is when characters and audience pay full attention. The place may be occult or mystical, like a sacred grove, or just a place responded to intensely by an imagination wholly present in it. As Wordsworth asks in The Recluse,

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields -- like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main -- why should they be
A history only of forgotten things
Or a mere fiction of that never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man.
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day...

This tames alternative worlds, or rather hobbles them with in-house expectations. Thoreau's perspective on nature is more like haiku vision than story:

All the phenomena of nature need to be seen from the point of view of wonder and awe, like lightning; and on the other hand, the lightning itself needs to be regarded with serenity, as the most familiar and innocent phenomena are.

The essential principle is fluidity of recognition, like Oscar Wilde's resolution to treat all serious matters trivially and all trivial matters seriously.

Alternative-world fantasy strips the 'normal' world from us; in-house fantasy transforms it and makes it new. In both, the seeds of surprise, sympathy and curiosity, the God-imitating imagination, is no longer inert in the husk of an assumed self and its normality. It quickens as you respond to the Other, the story's character. You, the audience, are like God the Audience. Compared to the intensity of the new-created world, the normality we take for granted is trivial, arbitrary, confining. Here we explore, vicariously, by identifying with a

protagonist, issues and choices that really count for something. Both author and responsive audience enter a story which has the dimensions of the imagination. In this world it is hard to get to speak to the mere bureaucrat in charge of the tax office, and it takes the genius of Kafka to make such a chain of frustrations fascinating; in fantasy we may speak to emperors, even to Creators!

A passage in which John Keats radicalises Greek mythology may make this clearer. 'Ode to Psyche' addresses a Goddess new to Olympus, never worshipped by the Greeks. Psyche, a mortal girl loved by the god of Love, failed a crucial test of her faith, and so had to endure many ordeals before her eventual apotheosis. Psyche stands for the human soul, and Keats vows to build her a meeting-house in the landscape in his own head:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
 In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain
 Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
 Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds and bees,
 The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
 With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy ere could feign,
 Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
 That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
 To let the warm Love in!

The story of Psyche's dishonour, ordeal and happy ending comes from where myth meets quest-romance. It is in one of the first major novels, The Golden Ass of Apuleius, a work written in Latin that celebrates not the Graeco-Roman pantheon but the Egyptian mother-goddess Isis! This story is internalised into the vision of Keats, an English poet in Regency Hampstead: he sees her as a goddess, after her happy ending, and offers her in his ministry not the darkness of mystery in which her marriage to Eros was consummated -- and where she failed him -- but a temple which is also her bedchamber, with a signal torch and an open window to call, or decoy to her, her lover, the God of Love.

I can't claim Keats as a Quaker, but his version of allegory will strike a chord with some of you. The poem makes a space within the 'wide quietness' of his mind, wherein he worships the human soul as a mortal consciousness developed by its repentance and sufferings into God. The internalisation of heroic and mythic action is one of the key impulses of fantasy fiction, whether in prose or in verse.

Keats said in the total honesty of the last months of his writing life,

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections,
and of the truth of the imagination.

He didn't mean only his own imagination, but all those imaginations who might be stirred to recognise their own story by his poems. He sets his narrative poems in classical or medieval periods, and their distance from urban normality is both a device to make us imagine them more clearly and a protection, so that the poet can seek the truths of the imagination more keenly, rather than be stunned by the misery of mortality.

Misery? He had just buried his younger brother, and he knew his own death was not far off; he would probably never see again his brother and sister-in-law (struggling to survive as immigrants in the USA), or his beloved young sister Fanny, still in care, in her teens. Above all, his mortal illness had made him break off his engagement (his fiancée was also called Fanny). His poems aren't 'escapist' about death, but their wonder and glamour is undimmed by self-pity.

His ballad 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' relates to my later discussion of Eden and the interpretations that blame Eve, and thus womanhood, for the Fall. It is presented as a brief fantasy that sharpens our questioning minds even as it satisfies our shaping spirit of imagination.

Eden is either painful or exhilarating: it's all in how you look at it, which depends on how you feel about yourself. In 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' a young man is found lying, apparently near death, in a wintry landscape. He tells his story of falling in love with a very cooperative young lady in an Edenic spring-to-summer landscape. After they have made love - the Lady is never *sans merci*, whether you think the word means mercy or gratitude - they sleep in each other's arms in her elven grot. There he has a nightmare in which loathsome male

talking-heads chorus their warning that she is the eternal fatal woman, the deceiving lamia-fiend of misogyny:

I saw pale kings and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried -- 'La Belle Dame sans Merci
 Hath thee in thrall!'

I saw their pale lips in the gloam,
 with horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
 On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge has wither'd from the lake
 And no birds sing.

He believes his bad dream, and believing makes it so: he has banished himself from Eden. Now, it is possible to evoke the male ego's temptation towards misogynistic and self-pitying resentment in a naturalistic love-story (Jane Austen hints at this in Anne Elliott's shifting interpretations of Captain Wentworth in Persuasion, published only months before this poem) but Keats' poems distance and stylise into enlightening enigmas about erotic faith. One hero celebrates Psyche's redemption from betrayal, the other denies and fails La Belle Dame; both poems beautifully trace the inward courses of the erotic imagination.

That small part of Keats' biographical story has contributed to many millions of stories by now. Any story that becomes contributory to your story offers one or more of three things: a defamiliarising challenge to your self-knowledge, a stimulus to your sympathy and respect for other people's experience, a grateful liberation into wider spirit. Other people's stories, if you can respond to them as and when they are presented, without too 'irritable a reaching after fact and reason', can enable you to walk briefly in that hero's -- or that storyteller's --moccasins, which is a far more healthy activity than jogging.

Here is a summary by the admirable Joseph Campbell of what he calls the monomyth, the template that hero-tales seem to follow and contribute to:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the

hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

That is a schema derived from deeds of heroes, such as Theseus entering the Labyrinth to defeat the minotaur, or Odysseus, Aeneas and Dante, who all descend into the Underworld, bringing back wisdom. But it also applies to tragedy, such as when Hamlet re-enters the bloody corruption of the Danish court to cleanse it, or Orpheus just fails to bring back Eurydice from the Underworld.

The same schema applies to self-knowledge, and for that matter to beginning, working on, completing, revising and finally sending out (or telling to an audience) a story. You might apply it to the more successful of your experiences of Meeting for Worship: entering meeting, centring down, and eventually rising to minister, then re-entering the silence, changed. Notice that no version of this monomyth has any guarantee of a happy ending. Take the experience of self-knowledge. You may become captive or victim to the monsters of the Id: on the left side as you descend lurk the khaki-clad commandoes led by the demon Self-hatred, to the right are drawn up the armoured cohorts commanded by that gleaming devil Self-satisfaction! But if your spiritual life is to be lived adventurously, the descent must be attempted.

A selection of these heroic descents and other quest-journeys remains valuable to each of us, outward and memorable versions of many processes of self-knowledge, relationship change and social activity for all of us. That is, they are versions of what one of this century's great poets, Wallace Stevens, called 'The Supreme Fiction':

The prologues are over. It is a question, now.
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction It is time to choose

We must choose our own imaginative story, without which, for Stevens, the world we experience has no health. This fiction must have three attributes:

IT MUST BE ABSTRACT

IT MUST CHANGE

IT MUST GIVE PLEASURE

It must be abstract, to be available to all of us rather than a few special cases -- bad fictions offer privilege to the culturally powerful instead of keeping faith with all, and respecting the faith of all. It must change, or lose most of its 'life' in rigid monumentalism -- bad fictions offer mere archeology instead of a rebirth of hope. It must give pleasure, to stimulate our spirit's capacity for vision, for responsive joy -- bad fictions offer tedious respectability instead of love.

But of course there is self-parade in all self-consciousness. I know. My childhood was dominated by my mother's dreadful gentle tyrant 'shyness'. To keep repeating your own story is habit-forming and risks monomania. In the same way, in your outward life, to listen only to those who seem to tell you your own story is to feed on propaganda, to cancel the privilege and duty of respecting other people's stories. This is what the demagogues and the mass-market evangelical fundamentalists offer: a series of variant repeats of the story their client audience is used to swallowing whole. Such convenient stories wipe out actual awareness of others.

To respond to, to value, to make your own some story quite unlike your autobiography is liberation of spirit. Indeed, we all have our favourite and central stories, from folktale, myth, legend, the Bible, childhood reading and listening, and sometimes from orthodox art-forms such as poetry, romances and novels, the plastic arts, films or music. And we are drawn to them not because they are useful conversation-pieces, or fashionable this season, or required in the curriculum, or guaranteed to impress the boss, or even useful in courtship or to entertain parents, partners or children. No, we develop our own unique collection of stories because we are human, and stories are used in the relationship between individual and communal imaginations. We all furnish our minds with our adaptations of stories, and expect others to do so.

I quoted Stevens' announcement,

So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

Let us consider a specific 'final belief, fictions about life after death. In every graveyard, on every *Obituaries* and *In Memoriam* page, there are emphatic assertions about the unfinality of death, about meeting the dear departed again in Heaven. In Spike Milligan's Puckoon the sexton of a small Irish village blunts his scythe on a gravestone hidden in the long grass, and reads aloud the sentiment carved on it,

NOT DEAD BUT SLEEPING

He comments crossly, 'He aint foolin' nobody but hisself.'

I find it impossible to doubt that the sentiment was understood literally in that small Irish village in the seventeenth century, and easy to believe it is a pious falsehood for many people in that small village today. But between the past faith and the sexton's conscious unfaith there are many kinds of story about death that people tell themselves and each other, more or less without self-challenge, but certainly without any conscious hypocrisy. Some are non-literal (analogical or metaphorical), some are spiritualist, reincarnationist, union-with-the-Great-Spirit or heaven-as-dream stories. When we hear one of these we do not attack it as sentimentalism or cowardly escapism, but respect it as a utile fiction for that believer, a blessed release for feelings of grief, fear, loneliness, alienation, even guilt. Those of us who do treasure some certainties about life after death cannot, from our frail mortal perspective, prove those certitudes or impose them on others. Where we cannot share our own, we respect theirs.

But the storyteller -- not the glorified journalist of 'real life', the sleek novelist selling us his fiction as if it were history, but the honest maker -- can see what story is needed, and can persuade us to share the world of the story, willingly suspending our disbelief. This is how, in Wuthering Heights, Nelly Dean describes herself listening to the children Cathy and Heathcliff as they cope with Cathy's father's death:

their door was ajar, I saw they had never lain down, though it was past midnight; but they were calmer, and did not need me to console them. The little souls were comforting each other with better thoughts than I could have hit on; no parson in the world ever pictured heaven so beautifully as they did, in their innocent talk; and, while I sobbed, and listened, I could not help wishing that we were all there safe together.

Nelly, going on with her narration, soon forgets how she felt for these loving, heaven-imagining children, but that's normal. The storyteller does not require that we -- or even she herself -- believe the story for any length of time after it is told, only that we do not taint it or ourselves with disbelief while we should be walking cheerfully within it. Stevens' poem that I just quoted, 'Asides on the Oboe', calls its storyteller 'the glass man', because we can gaze into his story and reflect:

The philosopher's man alone still walks in dew,
Still by the sea-side mutters milky lines
Concerning an immaculate imagery.
If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,
Can never stand as god, is ever wrong
In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
The impossible possible philosopher's man,
The man who has had time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

3 The Quaker-Puritan Assumption

Let us reflect, then on the story of our Society's ancestors. At the turn of the twenty-first century, we commonly assume that immense gulfs exist between our undogmatic, pluralistic world-views and the values of the founders of the Society of Friends in the middle and late seventeenth century, so much less responsive to the pleasure principle than we. In many ways this is inevitably true, but in the relationship between art, life and faith we have kinships with those prayerful founders.

The Society came into being in England at a period of which the most important historical fact was the overthrow of a hereditary monarch and his attendant aristocracy by force of arms. Although the victorious side was called the Parliamentarians, they were unified by the religious convictions of righteous and often self-righteous Puritans rather than by what we would regard as a political agenda. Very few 'commoners' even attempted to become members of the so-called House of Commons. Since early Quakers were creatures of their time as well as children of eternity, they undeniably share certain external characteristics with the Puritans.

Hence the apparent justification for the Quaker-Puritan assumption, summarised in this assertion:

THAT THE EARLY QUAKERS HAD SPECIFIC TESTIMONIES
AGAINST MUSIC AND DRAMA, AND FELT INTENSELY
ALIENATED FROM ALL ART.

I have looked at every Yearly Meeting Epistle from 1673 to 1817, and no seventeenth century Epistle refers to this issue. By 1700 there had been several admonitions -- virtually testimonies -- against vanity in clothing and language, the use of heathen names for days and months, and the like. There was also indignation at 'ill words', but this term means anti-Quaker pamphlets, not works of literature.

Specific counselling against one form of art appears: the classics. Quakers usually called the culture and literature of ancient Rome, and to a lesser extent ancient Greece, 'the heathen and their authors'. The classics were rejected for two reasons. First, they were used by the upper classes as an instrument of tyranny: it was 'Greats', a university exam mainly in Latin, that established magistrates, priests and other members of the ruling class as superior to the common people,

whose bodies, souls, and membership of God's one family were as sacred as those of any king. Such supposed authorities were oppressors who treated their fellow mortals - especially Quakers - in ways vehemently and frequently denounced in George Fox's Journals, and rebuked in the rather more staid language of the YM Epistles.

The second reason for Quaker disapproval of the classics was the immense amount of immoral and scurrilous language and conduct in the texts, by gods and goddesses even more than human beings. Classical literature was mere *forza e froda*, as Dante put it: tragedy and epic, for example, are all about force, comedy and love-poetry all about fraud. Quakers did not accuse their University-educated contemporaries, parsons, magistrates and lawyers, of belief in the false gods of Rome; they witnessed and lamented the trivialising of moral and spiritual lives by educated men who seemed to believe in nothing -- except worldly power and privilege.

But the earliest Quaker seekers after truth went much further. Scripture too was a trap. The hypocritical Puritan 'professors' who laid profitable claim to holiness were as bad as the the Ranter rabble-rousers, or even the hireling priests, the official experts on Divinity. Puritan preachers' misuse of the Bible was usually self-interested and spiritually blind. All Quakers could bear witness to the actual misconduct of Puritan 'Bible Christians' in power, and held to the axiom that 'by their fruits shall ye know them'. So the Bible was not a sufficient outward authority in itself, any more than any other knowledge-based wisdom. Indeed, to exploit the Bible was morally worse than to get a kick out of Juvenal or Horace. What did it matter whether the powerful professed the Bible or any other high literature, or indeed some other Holy Book, like the Quran? It was their response to their own inward guide that counted, and their respect for the Seed in others. Scriptural literacy was worthless, unless it stirred the Seed into growth.

There is in the early YM epistles no special reference to literature in English, but it is rejected by implication in their recurrent concern to educate children against the corruptions and extravagances of the world, to preserve them 'in the spirit'. They repeatedly evoke a determination to fortify future generations of Friends in simplicity, as 'a peculiar people', 'a city on a hill', and this led, undeniably, to an education with puritanic excesses of pietism and scrupulousness. The YM epistle of 1704 is not untypical:

And let not any lust after the vain fashions and glittering gaiety of this fading world: for it will suddenly wither, as the mown grass before the sun. And if ye

intend to be happy in this life and that to come, thirst after righteousness, and let holiness be your habitation while on earth; so shall eternal glory be your crown in heaven hereafter.

I feel the same queasiness at the metaphor of firm-minded Quakers seeking *glory*, and wanting to wear *crowns*, as I do at holy men of Islam being bribed into chastity by being promised houris to sport with in paradise after death. But clearly the arts are nothing special, just vanity-of-vanities trivia that get in the way of holiness. Early Friends took no pleasure in this 'vain' pleasure.

When the Pauline and quietist aspect of the Society was at its height in the eighteenth century, and both prison sufferings and the spread of new meetings had slowed or stopped, Quaker concerns for bringing up children 'in the fear of God' did not relate to the arts but to the prevention of 'marriages out', and attachments between young Friends that had not been arranged by their parents or guardians. The 1720 Epistle, almost fifty years after the first Yearly Meeting, was the first to give advice against fiction:

It is also seriously advised that no Friends suffer romances, play-books, or other vain and idle pamphlets in their houses or families, which tend to corrupt the minds of youth; but instead thereof, that they excite them to the reading of the Holy Scriptures and religious books.

In the individual and collective imaginations of eighteenth-century Quakers, though, came a dreadful divorce between literal and spiritual faith. To make a virtue of one's virtues is to make a vice of them, and the 'peculiar people' lived the letter of their law, precisely as the Pharisees, at least as the gospels interpret them, had done in the days of Jesus.

Jesus told the Pharisees they were already in possession of all the law and the teachings of all the prophets; they did not need his story as the publicans and sinners did. Of course such active souls as Nicodemus recognised the irony of that, but few Quakers of the quietist period, in England at any rate, could do so. Just as they stiffened their spines to carry the weight of their public rectitude, they stiffened their necks against all organic change in their own families and meetings.

In the rumbustious and generous-minded novel Tom Jones, the hero meets a consciously virtuous Quaker whose daughter had eloped (she was not even guilty of 'marrying out'). For this rigid, repressive authoritarian the control of

inheritance, family and Society was the only priority. Tom already knows how deceptive and cruel respectability can be, so he recommends Christian forgiveness. Shocked to the core by this ethical and commonsense view, the Quaker decides the young man is mad. Fielding at the mid-century saw our Society as opposed to his favourite virtue, benevolence, 'the sincere delight in the happiness of others'; 'Quaker' had come to stand for a pharisaic prosperity that denied sexual love and other emotional realities.

That was 1749, and the Quaker story might have stopped there. But it did not. In a revival of activism, Friends were brought to re-acknowledge the need for reform of social institutions (slavery, prisons, asylums), and set once more against the status quo. But how could smug pharisees respond in this way? Mainly through the silent organic aesthetic that, within Quaker meetings and conventions, had always implied a readiness for rebirth.

4 The Arts of the Early Quakers

Most of the Valiant Sixty had been people of limited education, from town and country working classes rather than the professions. Lettered Friends were valued, but chiefly because they were eager to teach and encourage literacy in the majority. There can hardly have been a better example of the seedtime of devotion and spiritual conviction than the astonishing activities of these early heroes, and the cruel and extreme punishments they stoically, or rather faithfully, endured. It is hardly surprising that 'the arts' as such were rarely in the forefront of their minds.

Let me summarise, in five points, the Quaker perspective on the arts in the first fifty years of the Society, as I understand it. The first two points are strongly negative.

1. **Painting, sculpture, and even music and architecture belonged to "the church" (whether Roman or Anglican). These arts were the lackeys and media of a detestable and trivialising idolatry that intervened between Christian worshippers and their God. Quakers were non-violent rather than actively iconoclastic, but they well understood that 'simplifying' impulse of image-breaking.**
2. **Drama, especially high tragedy, opera and sex-comedy, belonged to the court and a decadent aristocracy. Theatrical arts were corrupt, in their presentation of such deadly sins as lust, vainglory, ostentation, wrath, malice, mockery, hypocrisy, envy and deception; but they corrupted from their first principles, those of false-speaking, disguise and pretence.**
3. **Narrative poetry and prose romance were (more problematically) rejected because they embodied and embroidered fantastic lies, glorified violence and superstition, and derived from cruel pagan cultures. They also tempted the mind away from holiness by making trivial things such as worldly triumph and sexual love attractive. However, spiritual allegories were often respected, and in particular Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress was a treasured book.**
4. **"Serious" poetry was in general respected (but not love-songs, drinking-songs and bawdy ditties, court flatteries, or cynical worldly satires). Meditations in the metaphysical manner, sonnets of a thoughtful cast, and all devotional verse, even epics - as long as they were religious epics - were valued by early Quakers. For example, the Quaker Thomas Ellwood seems to have**

inspired Milton's Paradise Regained; certainly the poem was bought by members of the Jordans Meeting, and by almost no one else. James Nayler and Isaac Penington were the most striking, but not the only, poetic voices among the early Friends.

5. But there is a wholly separate area of artistic endeavour that these 'high arts' should not obscure. In the adaptation and furnishing of early Meeting Houses - and soon in their building and design - certain crafts were contributed by both sexes, eagerly and with proper pride: carpentry and joinery, quilting and embroidery. The testament of simplicity was consistently applied.

It is necessary to add a comment on 'Simplicity'. This term describes a focus of Quaker aesthetic, it is far from being 'anaesthetic'. It does not initially mean 'the barer the better', as its common equation with 'plainness' might seem to imply, but prefers the austere to the ornate, the human scale to the grandiose. The best art for worship is that most fitting for the company of one's fellow souls and the God to which all turn. Such art brings out the best skill and devotion of the practitioners, because all is done for God's sake, and for our Friends.

The coherence of this approach to the arts is much more obvious to us than it was to contemporaries of the early Quakers, whether their preference was for the idioms of the Baroque, the Rococo, or the Palladian (or neo-Classical). We come after William Morris' revolutionary revaluations that inspired the Arts and Crafts Movement. I quote from his essay 'The Lesser Arts', describing the art that might be done by human beings 'amidst renewed simplicity of life':

That art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town; every man's house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work: all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful: yet all will be simple and inspiring, not childish nor enervating... in no private dwelling will there be any signs of waste, pomp, or insolence, and every man will have his share of the *best*.

Morris was talking about what he called 'the decorative Arts', and welcomed the rich ornamentation of public buildings, yet no Quaker could have a stronger concern that Home and Meeting-House be 'fair and decent, soothing to [the] mind and helpful to [the] work'. He often maintained that his favourite building was not Chartres Cathedral or Westminster Abbey, but the village Tithe Barn at Great

Coxwell, in Oxfordshire. The Society of Friends, by turning towards a 'renewed simplicity of life', anticipated by over two centuries both the identification of art with its artisan and the aesthetic of the clean, functional line, two of Morris' revolutionary insights.

It will be obvious that the 'serious' verbal arts of my fourth point are directly related to spoken ministry and written devotional material, epistles, memorials and testimonies. Quakers strove to make these verbal arts useful, like carpentry and quilting. Indeed, prose meditations, inspiring letters and conscientious journals, especially those by Friends from the years of the Valiant Sixty collected in The First Publishers of Truth, were much valued and quoted by their successors. They relate to the vital duties of bearing witness to one's faith and inspiring others to do likewise, the twin cores of Quaker ministry. It ought to be possible to say that these are the verbal equivalents of such crafts as embroidery and carpentry, but it is significant that the word 'crafty', like 'artful' is pejorative when applied to verbal work. Curious, isn't it, how we give such honour to dexterity in the Useful Arts, but so mistrust it in speech. Sincerity, we somehow feel, is more likely to be rough-hewn and incoherent than subtly or powerfully expressed. Let us, by revaluing -- no, revalidating - story free ourselves from our mistrust of the verbal artist as a smooth talker, an ad-man, a politic office-seeker.

The useful crafts mentioned in my fifth point are connected with the testament of Christian service that dominated and defined the outward lives of Quakers. In particular, needle-and-thread was one of the first instruments of the Meeting for Sufferings: it occupied the hands, repaired the garments and soothed the damaged self-respect of Quaker women in prison, and was very soon used in their education of other, often more benighted prisoners, whose clothes and self-respect needed all the help they could get!

The word and craft aspects of early Quaker commitments, arts useful to the spirit, encapsulate the two poles of Quaker commitment, worship and service. And they have other things in common. They were the simplest to acquire and pursue for working-class people in the seventeenth century. All Quakers and seekers struggled to become literate: they wanted to read the Bible for themselves, and it had first been made officially available in their native language only a few years back, in their parents' lifetimes. Similarly, the poor have always had to repair, and often make, their home and furniture, their clothes and soft furnishings. The materials of the writers' art were - and still are - cheaper and more portable than those of other arts. If they didn't have quills, ink and

parchment, they had cheaper equivalents, slates and pencils, or walls and chalk, to practise with until circumstances improved. Similarly, needles, thread and thimble weigh little, and can be smuggled into jail in a petticoat-hem.

Craft of the practical or service kind that I have mentioned was and is accessible to working-class people, though then more or less a mystery to the professional and prosperous classes. It also offered and offers, when devotedly and successfully pursued, direct satisfaction to the artificer. The carpenter or joiner may love his tools and materials as completely and unselfconsciously as a sculptor or painter; the sempstress can transform herself into embroiderer, quilter or possibly even tapestry-weaver in a natural progress. In fact, one of my favourite metaphors from Quaker inspirational writing uses the image of God as a weaver:

We who are members of the Society of Friends have little to fall back on except our experience with Truth. We cannot resort to ritual or creed or ecclesiastical decisions for guidance. We must find our way by seeing the hand of God at work in the weaving of the fabric of daily life.

It is improbable that this passage from Clarence E. Pickett was ever read by the excellent Canadian fantasy-writer Guy Gavriel Kay, but the image of the Loving Creator as the Weaver and all of life as the Loom is precisely the imaginative core of his first work, The Fionavar Tapestry. Just as Quaker spoken ministry is always in search of the revivifying image, so fantasy writers forever experiment to find a vivid central metaphor for the theology of the worlds they create.

Tapestry, being largely a woman's art-form, has become quite popular among feminist Utopian and arcadian fantasists as a metaphor for The Creation. Admittedly, tapestry is an elaborate, decorative and often pictorial form of weaving, but all forms of weaving are evocative, and all shaping-work offers a real formal satisfaction. Take the God-as-potter metaphor that delighted such nineteenth-century myth-making imaginations as Robert Browning and Edward Fitzgerald (re-making the poetry and tradition of Omar Khayyam and the great Persian culture he represents). It survives in some very old stories indeed, including those of Akkad and Sumer that influenced the second chapter of Genesis, where Adam is the clay that God remoulds into two successive art-forms, male Ish and female Ishshah. The Greek titan Prometheus, in one story, stole fire from Olympus to give it to desperate humanity, but in an alternative

story he puffed it into little clay figures he had moulded, and thus, as the Demiurge, breathed life into humanity.

Smiths, woodcarvers, musicians and brewers also sometimes claim that their 'mystery' imitates God's creation, but no craft-worker needs that claim to find their work is its own reward. Are you consciously tempted by the love of beauty into the pursuit of personal satisfaction? Don't worry. This can be easily forgiven, by yourself as well as your fellows, when it yields a social product that is obviously useful. The fascination of what's difficult and the pleasure of applying your skills can transform forever the glum duty and drudgery we identify with 'the Protestant work ethic'.

Beauty in Utility has none of the idle superficiality that the 'work ethic' so resents. The subject-matter is also perfectly innocent, beyond any taint of sex or violence. No lascivious thought is attributed to the head bent over the embroidery of a marriage-bed sheet; no shapely bottom is assumed to haunt the hand that planes the chair-seat for the women's gallery. Better still, the Testimony of Simplicity is not defied, but ratified (to the vast satisfaction of both craft-aesthetic and conscience) by straight and spotless hemlines, by the economically elegant shape of beam and bench. Quakers, in the first age of 'conspicuous consumption', took cryptic pride in being the Peculiar People who conspicuously refused to consume beyond decorum and need.

The same can be said of the language arts characteristic of the early Quakers. At about the time of the complete (1611) translation of the Bible, the conventions of the philosophical essay were established by such writers as Bacon and Montaigne, and the polemical pamphlet genre is only slightly older. The third public non-fiction mode of the Tudor period was the sermon, and collections of these were among the commonest products of the printing presses, which were also about a century old. It has been estimated that about one Quaker pamphlet a week appeared during the Society's first forty years; these heartfelt testimonies, prayerful urgings, wrathful rebuttals and righteous or querulous anti-sermons usually show close acquaintance with one or more of those three developing traditions of prose composition.

It has been said that eighteenth-century poetry was prose, while seventeenth-century prose was poetry. Early Quaker letters and journals are as fine as other serious autobiographical writing of the period, if at times too full of moral pith and hortatory uplift. Testimonies to the grace of God seen in the life of a departed Friend are often modelled on "Characters" of a secular kind: Aubrey's

Brief Lives or their model, North's translation of Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans. But in one regard Quaker prose is unique. The tenderly enthusiastic Meetings for Worship that developed were shaped only by reverent silence. The impassioned, even quaking, spoken ministry that arose from it was at its best also organic, a new and powerful form of communication, no more fragmentary than a sermon: it is open-ended, needing no more frame than a vignette does, and shaped, when it is shapely, only by the energies of its own contents, by its inspiration. This is Margaret Fell describing the first time she heard George Fox preach:

[Fox] opened the Scriptures, and said, *'The Scriptures were the prophets' words and Christ's and the apostle's words, and what they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord.'* And said, *'Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say. Christ saith this and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?'* This opened me so that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly that we were all wrong. So I sat me down in my pew again, and cried bitterly. And I cried in my spirit to the Lord, *'We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves'*

Beauty in Utility of prose indeed. No doubt some ministry was planned ahead, no doubt some was over-long, but most of it was genuinely impromptu, an unstudied improvisation that expresses the searching -- or celebratory recognition - experienced by the individual spirit. By its nature, it implies that many of its audience can understand and perhaps vicariously share the speaker's unique experience. It is this that made Fox the leader and the leaven of the early Friends: not the wisdom of what he said, or its applicability, though his ministry had both virtues in plenty, but the unique openness of the man's spirit to renewing inspiration.

5 George Fox's Reconstruction of the Christian Story

What was Fox's story? I don't mean his biography, I mean the crucial narrative that made him what he was.

As I had foresaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those esteemed among the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then O then I heard a voice which said: *'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.'* And when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.

So, his story was the Jesus story. But was this the 'historical' (or at least legendary) Jesus described in the synoptic gospels? Or was it the slightly weird Jesus that Paul constructed, from material like that in the book of Luke? Neither, it seems. Fox often quotes the Bible with precision and panache, as in an early collision (1646) with gentlemen who joked that women had no souls. He refuted them by a single citation:

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

But he did not accept that the Bible was all *The Word of God*. Fox reasoned that Jesus had said firmly that he was himself the living *Word*. There was no point being a Christian if one did not believe Jesus, so the balance of the Bible's words cannot be the living *Word*.

the Lord said unto me, *'That which people trample upon must be thy food'*. And as the Lord spoke, he opened it up to me that people and professors trampled upon the life, even the life of Christ. They fed upon words, and fed one another with words, but they trampled upon the life; trampled underfoot the blood of the Son of God, which blood was my life.

This is the nearest Fox comes to a sacramental story of Jesus 'dying for us', and even that is transformed into 'the life'. He felt he was 'made to speak', but not by man's will, that his church was one not made with hands. After his acceptance of the Son of God, Fox collapsed, 'worked' by the Lord, or as it was later described, 'searched by the Light within', so that,

I was very much altered in countenance and person, as if my body had been new moulded or changed.

The newborn Fox constructed, and wholeheartedly loved, a Jesus reborn in faithful and tender living beings. This is no magic-supernatural figure; 'Christ' has risen already, as much as ever He will, in the lives of those that love The Light. The Day of the Lord is not some dim promise about a distant future but an experience now, at the centre of a human spiritual life. Those key phrases from Fox and his contemporaries, 'The Christ Within', 'the Inward Light of Christ', have exactly the same meaning as 'The Light'.

There is no doubt that Fox strove to imitate the life of Jesus in ministry, but he does not pursue the way of parable, and rarely that of healing. Certainly he never sought martyrdom, as his ecstatic contemporary James Nayler seems unconsciously to have done by making himself a 'sign' of the Second Coming, riding in triumph into Bristol in an imitation of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Fox's martyrdom was of long duration, in the eight imprisonments which broke his health. That fierce, righteous teacher who had strode with such speed and certainty from town to town, always compelled to bear witness, undismayed by stones, filth or gunbutts, whose very gaze had sometimes frightened those who reviled him, was physically broken by appalling prison conditions that were punitively designed to promote illness, crippling and death. Yet he never swerved from the next ordeal, the next prison gate, until he could no longer travel at all. Even then he spent most of the last eighteen years of his life writing, sometimes from his bed.

Fox was generous in offering other metaphors, all sprung from what he felt to be the crucial story of the life of the spirit. 'The Wisdom, sweet, cool and pure' may remind you of Sophia, of Shekhinah; 'the love that bears all things' is closer to Jesus as martyr; 'the Guide within' might be what enabled Joseph to interpret dreams, 'the Spirit of Truth' the tongues that the disciples spoke at Pentecost. 'The Bread of Life' relates to Jesus' ministry at the Last Supper, and the Vine to a parable. 'Truth's voice'? Well, as I looked up the theophanic image that phrase had made me think of, Kings 1:19:12, when the still small voice spoke to Elijah after the whirlwind, the earthquake and the fire, I stumbled on a heart-lifting phrase, in the New Revised Standard Version: 'a sound of sheer silence'. What Quaker could ask for more?

Fox's imagery often implies a Light of more intense Life that can irradiate our shadowy life, a Oneness of Eternity that can express itself in our brief and divided time. Divinity, he says, was 'opened clearly to me' and at once he comprehended 'the Lord', 'Jesus Christ', 'God', 'the Holy Ghost' all as both personally internalised and yet unconfined, trapped in neither God the Father, nor

Jesus Christ the Son, nor The Holy Ghost, nor anything that the human intellect could divide by three! God the Father was 'the Will of God', interpretable by and identical with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was, as at Pentecost, operative in and identical with individual respondent Christian spirits. The historical Jesus was the Spirit of God active and expressive as the Light of the World in a human life, and totally delightful to Fox's spirit. But that spirit was and must be in any lover of God, any Friend of Truth, whether Churchman or Dissenter, Protestant or Catholic, Christian or doubter -- or worshipper in some other convention of belief. In Fox's other most famous metaphor, all spiritual response is 'the Seed of God within, which is Christ':

the Holy Scriptures were given forth by the Spirit of God and all people must first come to the Spirit of God in themselves, by which they might know God and Christ, of whom the prophets and the apostles learnt; and by the same Spirit know the Holy Scriptures. For as the Spirit of God was in them that gave forth the Scriptures, so the same Spirit of God must be in all of them that come to understand the Scriptures.

So George Fox's story is of Biblical truths than can only be understood in their fullness and directness by those who have ears to hear, whose Inner Light both responds to and reveals the meaning. Otherwise, the words, and any rituals or customs that develop from or become associated with them, are dead. They have not been, as we should say, imaginatively accepted and made new. Fox knew that he, and others liberated into reverence by their own light, could not only make it grow brighter but also stimulate others. This might happen by quoting Scripture, but that was most unlikely; the wisdom discovered by your own light would do more good to you, and be received as more authentic and challenging by other spirits.

Quakers rejected an exclusive Churchianity. 'We Are the Saved', was vicious nonsense to Barclay, who employs the word 'catholic' very precisely in his Apology (1676), for two centuries the central Quaker theological text,

The church ... comprehends all that are thus called and gathered truly by God... of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue, or people they be, though outwardly strangers, and remote from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words... There may be members therefore of this Catholic church both among heathens, Turks, Jews, and all the several sorts of Christians, men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart, who... are by the secret touches of this holy light of their souls. . become true members of this Catholic church.

What the early 'convinced' Friends were convinced of was an end to the state of sin, a renewal of Edenic innocence and unselfconscious belief, not for some elect but for any and all of those faithful to their inward guide:

And the Lord showed me that such as were faithful to him in the power and light of Christ, should come up into that state in which Adam was before he fell.

This Truth could of course be incendiary, but the very humility of these newly dazzled and liberated believers made them immune to bible-thumpers, evangelical mass hysteria, or the self-proclaimed sinlessness of the Ranters.

Certainly some Quakers interpreted the story of 'the state in which Adam was before he fell' as meaning that they should go naked among the people to bear witness to the unconvinced, as a sign of their conversion. To the pure, all things are pure, but such wildly dramatic performance was alien to the austere simplicity of the preferred Quaker art-forms, and most of the extremists were glad to be dissuaded from such extravagance by their Meetings. The frame of silence was the ultimate test of the integrity of all ministry.

In the collection of early testimonies called The First Publishers of Truth are many metaphors both like and unlike Fox's. I will quote only one, by Richard Davies in 1657. It suggests to me that the man was well acquainted not only with the integrity of silence but also with smithies:

Though it was silent from words, yet the Word of the Lord God was among us; it was as a hammer and a fire; it was sharper than any two-edged sword; it pierced through our inward parts; it melted and brought us into tears that there was scarcely a dry eye among us. The Lord's blessed power overshadowed our meeting and I could have said that God alone was Master of that assembly.

Why is it important that early Friends did not simply echo, or even reconstruct and recycle, Fox's metaphors? Not only because each must stand in the Light unaided, rather than depend on the insight of another, though that of course is true. It is especially important because these images, impressions, analogies, as-ifs, are all truncated stories, just as Jesus' metaphor, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman', is a parable in seed-form.

Every Friend, indeed every attentive spirit in the world, has her or his own image or story, whether or not consciously treasured within, and to discover and accept your own story (by which I do not mean biography) is a crucial process in

yourself, and perhaps also a gift to your friends and descendants. And if your story takes a non-verbal form -- a garden or an alternatives-to-violence program -- that's all right too! Be careful, though, spirit-stories are not sentimental: not all will have what others would think are happy endings, and some seem to run counter to those of the people around us, but they're still very important and strengthening to know. Quaker Meeting seems to me the best system of 'free attentiveness' I have met, both for discovering and sharing our own stories, and for incorporating the help of God, our eternal Co-Author and Audience.

Where other sects called for instant action -- 'Come up to the laying on of hands and be healed!', 'Proclaim yourself saved by the blood of Jesus!', 'Follow me, and smash the doors of the Synagogue!' -- the Society of Friends sat in God's quiet and let the wisdom percolate deep into them, the hectoring fade feebly away. Their imagination, their light, could not become obedient to the outward urgings of another; they could not hand over their story to others for rewriting, perhaps with a different ending!

6 Organic Form and the Romantics

The literary conventions of English-language culture eventually caught up with the organic-form ministry that the Quakers had developed. At the end of the eighteenth century the Romantics, especially Coleridge, were experimenting with lyric forms ('conversation poems' and 'fragments') much like spoken ministry, that were inconclusive but yet felt powerful enough to deserve printing. Coleridge perfectly understood the principle of Imagination as representing God within us:

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the infinite **I AM**. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Bioqraphia Literaria, chapter 13)

Those who walk in the light more frequently than I - or Coleridge - might ask, 'But if all human perception is in itself a representation of the infinite **I AM**, that is, Godlike, why does it need a secondary, artistic side at all? Why should we need to "dissolve, diffuse, dissipate" parts of our experience?'

One part of the answer is that as we grow up we lazily take for granted the wondrous world around us: habit ruins perception. Wordsworth puts it this way, addressing a child and revering his own imagination's childhood::

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.

This applies to vision and experience alike. Earlier, John Woolman had described how habit subdued the moral awareness of slave-owners' children:

The customs of their parents, their neighbours, and the people with whom they converse working upon their minds and they from thence conceiving ideas of things and modes of conduct, the entrance into their hearts becomes in a great measure shut up against the gentle movings of uncreated Purity.

Coleridge knew the inward devastation of such habit: his own temperament, his

unhappiness, his ill-health had blighted his perception, as he testifies in his wonderful poem 'Dejection' :

All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze -- and with how blank an eye!
... I see them all, so excellently fair.
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

He was harmed not only by migraines and insomnia but also the medication he was prescribed for them: it was laudanum, a tincture of opium (or opium dissolved in alcohol). Its initial effect was to intensify his dreams and memory for dreams, but as dependency increased withdrawal was deeply depressing. Also, as a disappointed radical socialist, his misery was social. Tyranny, injustice, battle, murder and sudden death were all around. Greed and cruelty seemed to rule the political world, and invited the numbness of despair.

But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of imagination.

Joy, the indwelling spirit of God, renews the vital, creative imagination: with responsive joy all is made new. All Quakers know that,

we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
And would we ought behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world, allowed
To the poor loveless, ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth –
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

Emerson, as a transcendentalist, put it, 'Every natural fact is the symbol of a spiritual fact. Nature is the symbol of spirit.' And he went further:

The poets are liberating gods. The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, "Those who are free throughout the world" They are free, and they make free. An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward when we we arrive at the precise sense of the author... nothing is of any value in books excepting the transcendental and extraordinary... the magic of liberty, which puts the world like a ball in our hands.

I here publicly admit that I cannot savour much of what our sect, in common with Evangelicals, calls **Inspirational Reading**. It goes stale in my mind, like shop-bought cake the day after. Emerson explains this too:

the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. Here is the difference between the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for transport, not as farms and houses are, for homestead. Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one... The history of hierarchies seems to show that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and was at last nothing but an excess of the organ of language

Though a symbol has 'its true sense [only] for a moment', we do, Friends believe, share symbols, especially in ministry. But we cannot found systems on them. Response to ministry is itself a creative act in the imagination of the hearer or reader: the symbol is remade each time, and each re-maker is slightly different, so each ends up with a different symbol. If one Friend's ministry is responded to by twelve Friends, there will be twelve imaginative acts, all unique.

I am not talking merely about temperament. The twelve responses will also have twelve distinct forms, and may have amazingly distinct results. Nor, when as author or performer I try to control the impact of story on audience, is emotional tone the instrument I rely on. If I tell the story of a love-affair, I may decide to make it bitter, comic, tragic, joyous, touching, and so on. But audiences often respond against the grain, the surface current of feeling, often because they sense the sentimentality lurking within an ironic style, the potential for neurotic self-pity in an idyllic dream-love. Good storytellers will orchestrate responses by where their story begins, the point of view from which it is told or focalised, and especially by where it ends. Think of a love-affair of your own. What a difference it makes to the story if you decide to end it with the first eye-contact, the first passionate embrace or the first quarrel, at the altar, between the sheets, just after

childbirth, in the divorce-court, at the graveside, or after twenty solitary years shot through with memories. Yet all these points might occur in the same story in 'real life', yet none of them be THE END.

Thus organic form is not lack of form, but experience discovering its own necessary form. It does not deny traditional 'abstract' conventions but allows them to emerge and adapt themselves to the new voice and life that it offers for new audiences. To walk a mile in another brave's moccasins offers you new experiences, but you have enough in common with him to respond to most aspects of those experiences as they arise.

A story stimulates us by its 'tropes', Emerson's word for metaphors and other figures of speech, but also by its patterns of action and character. Imaginative response to the patterns of a story is a complex -- though not an intellectual - creative act about deeds and motives, causes and effects. A few of those patterns may seem unfamiliar and surprising, but most we have seen and responded to before. A good story gives them new life.

This is partly by identification with a focalising character (the narrator or chief actor). I remember an erotic novel in which the controlling character recalls that most of the girls at her school identified with Cinderella in the folktale, but a few identified with the ugly sisters (it's more fun dressing for a ball than blackleading a grate, and no fun at all to be passive all the time). Her best friends, she says, both identified with Prince Charming, who could help others if he wanted to, and got to make decisions about his own love-life. But she was the only one who identified with the fairy godmother...

No two people (say, Jean and Norman) have entirely the same response to an event thrown up from the flux of 'real life', but we all have in common some recognition of what happens in a shaped story. Story conventions do not weary us, like too many chocolates, but become more welcome for both their familiarity and their variant vitality. Take 'Puss in Boots': we would both respond to a generous temperament frustrated by poverty, though one of us might identify with the cat and the other with its 'master'. The focaliser of the story is the bewildered boy who trips and stumbles into a happy ending, but the active hero of the story is the trickster cat. We both relish the story's traditional development in a three-stage build-up, made new and amusing by the double perspective of the naked and innocent 'Marquis of Carabas' and the ebullient con-man cat. Jean's subtle cat-self and Norman's naive boy-self - or the other way around - are contraries, not negations: the contrast animates and empowers both

More recent aesthetic inheritance may be represented by two contrary attitudes to art. In 1855 Walt Whitman, deeply influenced by the preaching of the brilliant 'mystic' Quaker Elias Hicks, published twelve untitled poems in a book called Leaves of Grass. This sequence of free-verse psalms on his own response to experience was rewritten and enlarged several times through the poet's life - there are hundreds of poems in the 'Deathbed Edition': the title remained, but the book changed shape in every edition. For example, the poet's response to the Civil War became a new sequence called Drum-Taps. Leaves of Grass grew to be a million-tongued instrument of self-discovery, of self-acceptance and self-forgiveness, the first great free-verse celebrations of personal and communal love. Whitman's poems are himself writ large, a life-long confessional ministry.

William Morris' very different temperament made out of his quarrel with factory capitalism, war machines, and the degradation of human labour, a joyous series of new priorities which are almost without ego. He stimulated in all the major useful crafts and 'lesser arts', a new range of perspectives about the satisfactions of art in society, creating the Arts and Crafts movement. Late in his career, after he had lost faith in the political triumph of socialism in his time, he invented alternative-world magical fantasy fiction, loosely based on medieval narrative. His stories set the conventions of quest-romance in most generously invented worlds, evoked with the formal beauty of distance, the clarity of close-up detail, and the music of a strange Norse-based English. The expectations and energies of the hero's quest, whether male or female, are shrewdly built up, and as perceptively satisfied by its ending.

'Have nothing in your house you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful,' is Morris' very direct advice about how you furnish your life. The same applies to stories: value the ones that challenge you by delighting you. Morris used himself up in, Whitman expressed himself by, his work.

7 The BIG BANG Stories: Sword or Words?

The stories we tell describe ourselves and construct our world, so I turn now to the Old Testament account of the Creation and the Fall of man. European Christianity, reconstructing its Hebrew origins, gives far more attention to the first chapters of the book of Genesis than to all the rest of the Old Testament. Introducing the Canongate genesis, Steven Rose points out mildly that

Creation may have taken God six days; the text deals with it in 31 short paragraphs. By contrast the complex sagas of the travels, loves, and lusts of cunning Jacob and later of his virtuous and put-upon, but ultimately successful, son Joseph take up virtually half the book.

Belief in the literal truth of Genesis is not required for us to learn from it as a story. A myth is true, but it is not factual, whether it is your own or other people's myth. We are counselled in Advices and Queries,

Take time to learn about other people's experiences of the Light. Remember the importance of the Bible, the writings of Friends and all writings which reveal the ways of God. As you learn from others, can you in turn give freely from what you have gained? While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in us all.

Does the Genesis account of creation still speak to our condition? It certainly conditions our world-view. First, it praises a Cosmos ordained rather than a world hacked violently out of chaos. Genesis has three stories of the creation. The first and third are attributed to the so-called **P** author, who worked in exile in Babylon about 539 BC. The Persian Emperor Cyrus II, conqueror of Babylon and Egypt, allowed the Jews to rebuild a temple in Jerusalem:

we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem. (Ezra 9:9)

P was a priestly scholar, who designed his story to reorganise and confirm tradition, rituals and observances (I'll describe the other author-compilers, **J** and **€**, later). His major enthusiasm is the sabbath, so he compresses a Babylonian

eight-day creation into six (giving days three and six two kinds of making), plus one rest-day. So, the Jewish week is the nature of the universe! P presents an all-powerful, unerring God EI, who creates by a word. In Genesis 1:26, EI decides to make humanity:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion...

If the word *man* is an obstruction to you here, change it to humanity, human-kind, or some similar term. This is not cheating: the word 'them' shows that all our species, in the plural, is meant. And who is the *us* EI addresses? I'll come to that.

The next verse, the first poem in the Bible, says firmly that this creation is not only plural, but also of both sexes:

So God created man as his own image,
in the image of God created he him;
male and female created he them.

God-sexing is both impudent and unhebraic, so a better translation might be,

So God created humankind as an image of God,
created them in the image of God;
created them male and female.

It is cheating, however, to interpret verse 28's 'be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth' as forbidding homosexuality, or family-planning. These issues are not present in the text. As the third verb, 'replenish', shows, God is instructing a newly agricultural people to plant crops and breed herds. If the word 'dominion' gives us pause in verse 26, it is amplified in 28:

...and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

The verb *qabash*, subdue, means tread down, as herds crush pasture. The noun *radah*, dominion, also implies trampling, or possibly taming. Neither convey, I am told, any of the tender veterinary care, nurture or protection I'd prefer.

We are too familiar with this account of God giving humans authority over nature to be appropriately amazed at what it is not - a fight! The Jews were surrounded by theologies whose Big Bang was a cosmic battle. In their eastern captivity they heard a story like this:

In the beginning the primordial waters were in constant battle. Apsu, the sweet-water Ocean, protected and nourished the island of the world, with its springs from below and rain from above, and Tiamat, the eternal chaotic salt-water Sea, strove to tear it apart. Their erotic tussle begat Mummu, 'the tumult of the waters', then two serpentine children Lakhmu and Lakhamu (perhaps Tigris & Euphrates?) who in turn begat Anshar and Kishar, male-sky and female-earth principles, the parents of the first organising, intelligent creator-gods Anu (power), Enlil (judgment) and Ea (wisdom and magic). Ea's son Marduk (fertility) was the active hero among his siblings in the next generation, all the Igigi of the sky and the Anunnaki of the earth.

Anu and Ea and their children were constantly busy building and experimenting, till Apsu could get no rest by day, nor sleep by night: even Mummu couldn't dull the noise. Tiamat admitted these young gods were troublesome, and let Mummu and Apsu plot to wipe them out. But Ea foresaw the plot and magically captured both, whereupon Tiamat, angry and fearful, swore to destroy all the living gods. She raised a great army of her dragon and serpent offspring, scorpion-men, fish-people, and all the monstrous brood of chaos. The generations of the gods decided, at a noble climactic feast, to promise Marduk supreme power if he defeated the immortal Tiamat. Marduk netted her with magic, then used his tamed hurricanes and his arrows of lightning:

She opened her mouth, Tiamat, to swallow him.
He drove in the evil wind so that she could not close her lips.
The terrible wind filled her belly. Her heart was seized,
She held her mouth wide open.
He let fly an arrow, it pierced her belly.
Her inner parts he clove, he split her heart.
He rendered her powerless and destroyed her life.
He felled her body and stood upright in it.

Marduk's battle is not merely a victory, it is creation. Marduk made this world out of Tiamat's body. He split it like a flatfish, and carved and crafted it into our physical heaven and earth. He made the heavens a high starry place for his divine relatives, by which he regulated time, the earthly cycles of day and year. Then he used the blood of his rival Kingu, Tiamat's general who had worn 'the tablets of fate', to mould mankind out of clay, so that the gods should be able to rejoice in the world -- though in one version the goddess Aruru gave him essential help in this part of creation, and 'produced with him the seed of mankind'.

The warrior chops the chaos dragon in many myths. Baal, meaning 'the Lord' in Phoenician (or Philistine) kills the death-serpent Yamm under the stormy

Mediterranean. The cosmology of imperial Egypt too offers a creation-by-conflict, where Shu tears apart the bodies of the lovers Nut the sky-goddess and her brother-and-husband Geb the earth-god, to make the space where we all live.

In another Egyptian story, Horus, as a boy warrior, defeats his cruel uncle Set, who wears such chaos-guises as hippopotamus and crocodile. Set had betrayed and killed his brother (Horus' father) Osiris, and chopped his body into fourteen pieces, which are laboriously regathered by, his loving sister-wife Isis (though one significant part has been eaten by a crab). Only when Horus defeats Set can Isis restore Osiris to life, creating the natural world as we know it. Osiris is a direct influence on Hebrew imagery of the Messiah, and -- or and therefore -- the ways Matthew describes Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. Even his ritual meal, the Sed, is the origin of the Jewish Seder. His Heavenly father is Rain-Heaven, his son Horus his reincarnate self. He is called the Good Shepherd, the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Resurrection and the Life. His birth was announced by Three Wise Men (Mintaka, Alnilam and Alnitak, the stars on Orion's Belt that point to Osiris' star, Sirius). He eventually prefers to leave earth and rule the dead, but like other fertility gods he passes on his unquenchable vitality to his descendants, his grateful worshippers, and the fertile Nile valley.

Just as spectacular is the demon-fighting episode in Hindu mythology, where Indra needs a weapon neither wet nor dry, at a time neither day nor night, against the paradoxical enemy, the Brahmin-created Demon Vritra, who had swallowed the waters of the world. Now Indra is the thunder-god who brings the monsoon to parched Indian plains; however, Vritra, that dry-throated dragon, is so powerful a summer that he swallows not only rivers but the god himself. Though Indra escapes, the stand-off between them will doom our mortal world unless the rain-god is given an unfair advantage. So Vishnu incarnates his own body as a huge column of foam, an impossible weapon, with which Indra smashes the demon to open the torrents of the world's waters, bringing fertility to India.

Hindu mythology has, as you might expect, complexities about it. Indra's heroic victory is also his abiding shame, because this conflict all began with his slaying a Brahmin. In the same way, the Jews were aware that problems come with the assertion that the phenomenal world is born of violence, and that such problems are compounded in a monotheist system. So, in their exile in Babylon, the Hebrew compilers deliberately constructed a new, non-violent creation story.

This radical creation of creation meant that they had to collude in suppressing the dragon-battle images, for in their older stories too the sky-god had

fought and defeated the water-dragon, Rahab or Leviathan. Spare a thought for the Old Testament prophets who, before Genesis was written, evoked that primal conflict without realising that their editors would be slotting it in to a quite different story and cosmology:

Canst thou draw out Leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn?... Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish spears?
(Job 41:1 -7)

Thou didst divide the sea with thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of Leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness.
(Psalm 74:13-14)

In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish Leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea. (Isaiah 27:1)

Israel was surrounded by neighbours and conquerors whose creation-story was Marduk-like, the warrior-god defeating the chaos-dragon of the deeps. Dragon-slaying had even more variations among those wild Greeks up North: how Zeus slays Typhon, how Apollo slays Python, and (my favourite) how Perseus slays the sea-monster to rescue Andromeda. I always get a thrill of recognition from the name Andromeda for this archetypal 'virgin saved from the monster': it means 'Ruler of Men'. In the early iconography she probably looked down on the conflict, a serenely amused goddess enthroned on a rock, but male artists with male clients changed her jewelry to chains and reconstructed her as a helpless victim for their hero to save.

The Old Testament's compilers sometimes re-cast old dragon-fight images rather than discarding them (remember that odd story about Jonah and the great fish?), or applied them to other stories. Even the story that underpins the very identity of their race, the ancestral exodus from Egypt, can wear archaic trappings, with Egypt, the Pharaoh or the Red Sea playing the monster:

Thus saith the Lord God: behold I am against thee, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers, which hath said, My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself. But I will put hooks in thy jaws, and I will cause the fish of thy rivers to stick unto thy scales and I will bring thee up out of the midst of thy rivers, and all the fish of thy rivers shall stick to thy scales.
(Ezekiel 29:3-4)

Art thou not **IT** that hath cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon? Art thou not **IT** which hath dried the sea, and the waters of the great deep; that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over? Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing into Zion: and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads... (Isaiah 51:9-10)

This version of the Lord God's victory gives the crossing of the Red Sea a pagan splendour to make unforgettable the Jewish origin and identity, as well as the lesson about having no other God before the Holy One of Israel.

P's creation-story is far more radical than the mythology it replaces. In a highly intellectual alteration, Light is the first thing created, days before the physical sun and stars that emit light. This implies rejection of the worship of astral bodies (as does his not naming the 'great lights', sun and moon).

Another radical element is dietary:

And God said. 'Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat,' and it was so. (1:29-30)

Though humans subdue and dominate both vegetable and animal creation, our food is to be fruits and seeds. Our 'meat' does not include the animals, birds or creeping things whose food is the green leaves and grasses: no flocks and herds are mentioned, nor even hunting... Ah, that's a vegetarians' story (matching P's version of the Ark in Genesis 7:19-22). The contrasting sacrifices of Abel and Cain make up a meat-eater's story.

The third account, in chapter 5:1 b-2, is a summary of the first, and also by the P-author, but it gives humanity a name:

In the day that God created Adam, in the likeness of God made he him; Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created.

Adam appears earlier in Genesis, in the J-author's creation-of-man account, the Eden story, also not naming a male but 'them', male and female humanity. *Adam* is first used of a single male, like a proper noun, in 4:25, in a ploy to avoid the

implication of 4:1-16, that all humanity is descended from the fratricide Cain. Thus in 5:3 it becomes the name of the all-father; Seth is 'a son in his own likeness, after his image'. The genealogy that begins the books of Chronicles follows, ignoring Cain altogether and making *Adam* the name of the first father of the race; so does Luke's account of the genealogy of Jesus for non-Jewish readers. But surely few of us are surprised that this late rewriting of *Adam* has been adopted by male priesthoods in preference to the actual creation stories.

The name comes from *h'adamah*, meaning 'red soil'; its connotation is of red-clay-coloured people working the very soil they have sprung from and will die back into: Adam might be translated *the groundling*, or *the earthling*. It first appears in 2:5, in the first stages of creation before there had been rain, 'and there was not a man to till the ground' -- but *bd* means 'tend' or 'serve' as much as 'till'. **J**'s story is of God as a sculptor who moulds a single image out of mud and breathes life into it. The word is *nepesh*, not 'soul' but vitality, but the early Quakers identified it, as the Authorized Version's phrase 'living soul' instructs them to, with the 'Spirit of God' of the Bible's second verse.

Who is **J**? She is the first Genesis author, and calls God **YHVH**, which might be pronounced **Yahweh**, or in important moments **YHVH-Elohim**. Later rabbis decided that this tetragrammaton was too holy to say, so they used **Adonai**, Lord, when reading out the Torah, and put its vowels between the four consonants to remind themselves to do so. Hence we acquired the fine non-word **Jehovah**. The later Genesis authors use Yahweh too, but circumspectly. The **€** author (who tells no creation-story, but Northern hero-tales about Jacob, Joseph and Joshua) says that this name was first revealed to Moses by the voice from the burning bush, on Mount Horeb (Exodus 3:14), **I AM THAT I AM**, and **P** uses it first in the confrontation with the Pharaoh (Exodus 6:2-3) for its power and mystery; **J** uses it from Creation onward. **J** is a patriot, a monarchist, writing in Solomon's court, about 900 years BC; her fine epic story needs a dramatic, anthropomorphic God, and she may, possibly, be female. But none of this is certain.

J's story of Adam's manufacture from clay is not unusual in other mythologies, however irreconcilable with the ordaining-word God of the first chapter. In Egypt the creator-God (Ptah or Khnum) was a potter using a wheel, in Babylon Marduk (and Arum) used bare hands. A crucial difference is that this sculptor takes tissue from the already sentient creation *Adam* and re-processes it, correcting the first version, which mortals can't do with baked clay. Maybe **J** is a female storyteller after all. Or maybe a potter.

8 The Eden Story: the Fall (or is it the Push?)

Does the Eden story fascinate you? And if so, which one? Genesis 2-3 has been constructed and reconstructed by innumerable Christians, including Christian Quakers, to make it their own definitive statement about our relationships with God, or guilt and alienation, or our own moral competence - even, rather strangely, our sexuality.

In Genesis 2-3 God entrusts the earthling *Adam*, the simultaneously male and female creation, with a garden 'eastward in Eden... to dress and to keep it' - though most English translations follow the King James version in referring to *Adam* as 'the man'. The animal creation is brought before *Adam* to be named, but also to see if *Adam* finds any of them a suitable helper or partner -- presumably in looking after the garden. But *Adam* needs a partner who is an equal: God is too obviously superior, and the animals are inferior; the Hebrew *kenegdo ezer* seems to mean a 'corresponding' or 'equal' helper.

Yahweh-Elohim (something like, 'Lord of the Hosts of Heaven') puts *Adam* to sleep, takes out a rib and closes up the place with flesh. Using this rib as a tissue-base, he makes a female. Only identity, a perfect DNA match, will guarantee equality. The rest of animal creation was made from ground, so they are similar to *Adam*, but obviously not *kenegdo* to them. Why a rib? This probably comes from the Sumerian *ti*, meaning both "life" and "rib" - Nin-ti (Lady of Life, Lady of the Rib) is the Sumerian goddess of childbirth, shaping the bones of babies from the ribs of their mothers.

The earthling needs a new name now, being simplified to male, but it isn't '*Adam*'. He speaks for the first time, in the second poem in the Bible:

Then the man said,
"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh:
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man." (2:23)

The names are 'Ishshah' (from-the-male) and 'Ish' (male).

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (2:25)

Milton is at best a patchy Bible interpreter, but his Paradise Lost splendidly evokes a peaceable kingdom, where mutual love and trust are not threatened by self-consciousness, inhibition or prohibition:

Two of far nobler shape, erect and tall.
Godlike erect, with native honour clad
In naked majesty seemed lords of all,
And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
The image of their glorious maker shone,
Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
Severe but in true filial freedom placed;
Whence true authority in men; though both
Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
For contemplation he and valour formed.
For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
He for God only, she for God in him:
His fair large front and eye sublime declared
Absolute rule; and hyacinthine locks
Round from his parted forelock manly hung
Clustering, but not beneath his shoulders broad:
She as a veil down to the slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied
Subjection, but required with tender sway,
And by her yielded, by him best received,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay.
Nor those mysterious parts were then concealed
Then was not guilty shame, dishonest shame
Of nature's works, honour dishonourable,
Sin-bred, how have ye troubled all mankind
With shows instead, mere shows of seeming pure,
And banished from man's life his happiest life,
Simplicity and spotless innocence.
So passed they naked on, nor shunned the sight
Of God or angel, for they thought no ill:
So hand in hand they passed, the loveliest pair
That ever since in love's embraces met,
Adam the goodliest man of men since born
His sons, the fairest of her daughters Eve.

Milton's orotund sublimity assumes that the equal-creation or cloning of Eve means its opposite, that maleness is primary and femaleness an inferior echo. This Renaissance assumption was equipped by Aquinas with pseudo-scientific 'proofs' based on dedicated clerical ignorance about sex and pregnancy - how could a cleric consult women on such shaming topics? Milton despised hiring priests yet swallowed this, one of their most powerful de-sensitising drugs.

Milton's vision is influenced by two passages from St Paul. One claims, confusing mortality with awareness of it, that humans did not die until Adam ate the fruit. Since Paul's purpose is to claim Jesus as the New Adam, his reading ignores the Tree of Life, and most other aspects of the story:

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered the world, and death by sin: and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.
For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. (Romans 5:12-14)

These confusing verses, connected with late apocryphal rather than biblical theology, are an origin of the confused doctrine of 'Original Sin'.

Paul is famous for a worse misuse of the Eden story, to justify an ordinance that women learn in silence from males:

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve.
And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.
Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety. (I Timothy 2:12-15)

It is most unlikely that Paul wrote this pastoral epistle, considering the large number of women ministers he worked harmoniously with, but the Desert Fathers' misreading of the Eden story has been blamed on him.

George Fox, whose Bible reading was always vigorously independent, saw Eden differently, and wanted Friends of both sexes to be 'help-meets in the Restoration as Man and Woman was before the Fall in the Garden of God.' He defied Calvinist predestination, firmly convinced that nobody had to consent to being Fallen, and that those faithful to the Inward Light of Christ 'should come up

into that state in which Adam was before he fell.' The divine Seed within humanity was still capable of germinating, stimulated by the uneffaceable divine Light.

Milton knew that, in Catholic Italy and Puritan England alike, sex was often equated with guilt. Love in his Eden is marred not by lust but by Satan's jealousy. Perched up in the tree of life 'like a cormorant', this first grand thief, the eternal voyeur, 'saw undelighted all delight' ('O hell! What do mine eyes with grief behold!') But his mighty drama and the War in Heaven which is its background are not from Genesis. Paradise Lost is Milton's story, as 'The Voice of the Devil' explains with splendid irritability in Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.

And being restrain'd, it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of desire.

The history of this is written in Paradise Lost, & the Governor or Reason is call'd Messiah.

And the original Archangel, or possessor of the command of the heavenly host, is call'd the Devil or Satan, and his children are call'd Sin & Death.

But in the Book of Job, Milton's Messiah is call'd Satan.

For this history has been adopted by both parties.

It indeed appear'd to Reason as if Desire was cast out, but the Devil's account is, that the Messiah fell, & formed a heaven out of what he stole from the Abyss...

But in Milton, the Father is Destiny, the Son, a Ratio of the five senses, & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum!

Note: The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

In Genesis 3 the crucial characters are Ishshah, the new-created woman, personified innocence, and the serpent, personified subtlety. The story focuses on a single prohibition, which was established before the woman had separate existence: one of the two trees in the centre of the garden must not be touched. Milton has Adam lecture Eve about the prohibited tree, for Satan to overhear, but in Genesis Ishshah quotes the prohibition directly to the serpent -- she knows it by heart -- and the serpent attacks it just as directly.

The serpent is a puzzle. "He is one of the beasts of the field that the Lord God had made", that is, he's an animal, not a fiend, and his motive in persuading

the humans, his guardian fellow-creatures, to disobey their loving creator is by no means clear. Is the serpent 'fallen', evil already? Is he jealous because in spite of his subtlety and independence of spirit he was passed over as a helper *kenegdo* with Adam? Genesis 3 does not say so.

I suspect he is a ring-in from another mythology, some-one else's story, in which he had personified mystic wisdom, the truth of a darker spirituality. Snakes, that sleep through winter and glory in spring sunlight, not dying of old age but sloughing their old selves to be born again, seem not only immortal but to have a wisdom unlike any other beast of the field.

The trees don't seem to be wholly explicable, either.

And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (2:9)

But Yahweh-Elohim tells the earthling, Adam, about only one tree:

Of every tree in the garden thou mayest freely eat:
But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (2:16b-17)

Yahweh-Elohim does not mention to Adam -- is perhaps anxious not to draw his attention to - the Tree of Life. In at least a hundred cultures, for at least a thousand years before Genesis was written, the Creatrix or Mother-Goddess had been described and depicted with trees, or sometimes fountains, of immortality. Such trees are usually guarded by serpents or dragons (which are, at the very least, heroically intensified snakes) closely allied with the Creatrix. It is very possible, as Robert Graves argues, that the tableau of Ishshah with the tree and the serpent derives from pictures or sculptures in this tradition, iconotopically interpreted by Jews in exile, probably in Babylon. Iconotropy is the misunderstanding of a representation by foreigners who then explain away its details by another story entirely. The sacred trinity of Goddess, tree and serpent may never have been associated with temptation until the highly suspicious Jews were confronted by it.

A word about the European identification of the Fruit as an apple. This begins, perhaps, because painters and weavers needed to show one specific fruit rather than an unidentifiable blob, but the choice is excellent. As we know from the Apple Isle of Avalon and Idun's Apples of Immortality that Aesir and Vanir

alike needed to remain gods, both Celtic and Norse tradition saw the apple as the fruit of immortality, identified with the Uttermost West. The Teutonic Yule Boar was always brought to table with an apple in his mouth, to promise him rebirth, and human beings spring. In Suffolk when I was a child the cider-harvest ended with the broaching of last year's cider and a 'harvest-home' village party that celebrated completion of the harvests. Wassailing on Twelfth Night included both cider-drinking and bobbing for apples: rituals of communal gratitude that ask for another good crop in the coming year. In some villages, I'm told, cider-soaked toast was hung from apple-trees for the robins. And the order of the courses of Roman feasts was *ab ovo usque mala*, from egg to apple, from birth to rebirth.

The name of the Greek spring-goddess, Kore, coincides with the apple-core, but she eats another fruit, the pomegranate. The apple-core has seeds for the future and iconographically represents procreation and new life. Sliced vertically the core looks like a woman's genitals, and sliced horizontally it shows the pentagram of occult and ancient science, the quincunx, the five-pointed star of the mother-goddess, which the five-petalled apple-blossom echoes:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a pleasure for the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit there and did eat, and gave unto her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened. (Genesis 3:6)

Greek myth is much more carefully preserved than other European traditions, so two versions of the plucking of the fruit of paradise survive there. In the far West, out in the endless Ocean, the apples of immortality grow in the garden of the Hesperides, on a dragon-guarded tree. The Hesperides who tend the garden and dragon are singing maidens, daughters of Hesperus and granddaughters of Atlas (they are also called Atlantides). For male questers, their virgin power is more dangerous even than the poisonous fangs of the dragon. Heracles is sensible enough to persuade their grandad to fetch the apples for him.

Far in the East, above Colchis Strand, the Golden Fleece hangs on a tree; it is guarded by a deathless dragon who can only be commanded by the princess of Colchis, the enchantress Medea. Jason wins the Golden Fleece only by winning the enchantress, who metes out death readily but can also brew a rejuvenating elixir for her husband's ailing father. But that story ends bitterly. That magic is long lost!

Babylon's Gilgamesh epic is directly influential on Israel, but its vegetative immortality emblem has a different connection to snakes. Gilgamesh rejects the Goddess's advances, which make her angry enough to kill his blood-brother Enkidu. The hero tries to harrow Hell to rescue him, but the only way to bring Enkidu back to life is the herb of immortality, so he consults the Noah-figure Utnapishtim, finds where in the depths of the ocean it is sunk, and dives for it. No other hero could have achieved Gilgamesh's feat of bringing up the sacred herb, but it wounds his hand terribly; in his consequent exhausted swoon beside a fresh-water spring a snake slips past him and steals the herb -- this time forever.

One more myth-snake may be enough. In The Book of the Dead, that crucial Egyptian text, we are taught how to become immortal. Just keep repeating this prayer to identify yourself with the Great Serpent:

I am the serpent Sata, whose years are infinite.
I lie down dead.
I am born daily
I am the serpent Sata, the dweller
in the uttermost parts of the earth.
I lie down in death,
I am born.
I become new,
I renew my life every day.

Sata's name could hardly be more similar to Satan, that Son of the Gods (*bene ha-elohim*), God's counsellor in the book of Job. *Satan* is, in Hebrew, 'Adversary', in a legal sense, a little like 'public prosecutor'.

The urbane serpent in Eden, neatly tempting the humans to tempt themselves, is more like the sneaky snake that cheats Gilgamesh than the darkly wise serpents of Egypt or Greece, or the menacing monster dragons of other mythologies. In the shalom, the harmony of the paradise garden, the serpent and the woman Ishshah can talk freely, but the serpent asks the questions and manipulates the answers:

And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?
And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the tree which is in the midst of the garden. God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

And the serpent said unto the woman, ye shall not surely die; For God doth know that in the day that ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband who was with her, and he did eat.

Milton arranges for Adam to be blamelessly absent while Eve is tempted, but in Genesis the serpent uses the plural, addressing both Ish and Ishshah. He may not think of them as physically distinct: they are literally one flesh. Only Ishshah speaks, but as soon as she plucks and eats the fruit she shares it with 'her husband who was with her'. George Fox, unlike anyone from his century that I have read, sees that both humans are equally targeted; he refers to

the trees, the serpent [did] make his text of to beguile and deceive man and woman with, which God had forbidden man and woman to eat of.

Even more remarkably, Fox emphasises that there were two trees and that the test of obedience might relate to both.

Now let us play with a different reading of the Eden story, always remembering that it is a story and not an allegory, so each distinct telling offers us questions, not ordinances. What you do with the questions is entirely up to you and those around you! Quakers cannot really be told what to think, but stories are excellent provocation, as you know from ministry.

The concern of the serpent, in the major traditions, is to protect the Tree of Life. Why does he here discuss only the Tree of Knowledge, and encourage the humans to partake of that? Surely for the same reason that God diverts attention from the Tree of Life: both are defending divine immortality against human thieves and heroes, though more subtly than in the older stories. The serpent's trickery in preventing humans becoming immortal is appropriate to a poisonous creature who can worm his way into the underworld's chthonic wisdom.

God, the authority, and his subversive antagonist, agree in this: both want to steer Ishshah and Ish away from that Other Tree, from the sacred fruit of immortality. They can't destroy it or hide it, but they can, between them, focus human desires on the wrong object. Human disobedience and theft from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil brings guilt; but that's our problem! Ishshah and Ish are now, if not "as gods", at least knowing enough to be parents. And of

course they are banished from the garden, the only place on our earth where immortality can be reached.

Ish and Ishshah now know sin, or rather disobedient naughtiness. They know and hide their nakedness (we were all children once). They've caught that dreadful disease, that "getting of wisdom", that swamps self-knowledge in self-consciousness, repentance in finding someone to blame. God knows the fruit must be why they know they are naked, and Ish whines that,

The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. (3:12b)

Typical: 'It's not my fault, Ishshah done it -- and she was Your idea, Lord!' God makes no comment, but commands Ishshah to explain herself. Not surprisingly, she imitates her clone-husband in finding someone to blame:

The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. (3:13b)

God can now punish the disobedient humans by banishing them into a world of incessant labour and pain, and does so with a special relish:

Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil, and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever, Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. (3:22-3)

But who is 'us'? Who is this God, Yahweh-Elohim, speaking to? We cannot be sure what the name Elohim meant for the J-writer (or, of course the writer) but it combines female (-oh) and male (-im) plurals of El (God), so to convey the serpent's version of the story we might render Yahweh-Elohim 'Lord among Goddesses and Gods' instead of the shadowy 'Lord of Hosts'.

Genesis 11, the Babel story, confirms this: Yahweh takes counsel with the other Elohim, the gods frightened by human architecture and cooperation. It is Yahweh's cunning plan to bring chaos on humanity by cursing them with diverse languages. The Elim may also be the 'Sons of God', the highly-sexed immortals who keep getting mortal girls pregnant, in the lead-up to the Flood story in Genesis 6. Notice how God argues that this proves that *humans* are getting to be unbearably wicked: a divine version of 'the double standard'!

Well, the outcast Ish is called Adam again now, the earth-toiler. And Ishshah changes her name to Chavvah, or Heva, meaning mother of all living -- or all mortals, to be more precise. That fallen name is the origin of our Eve. And we leave Genesis as God shuts the garden and curses Adam, the serpent, and Eve. The last curse is the most precise: a woman who has given birth knows about death, and hates snakes... Dr Freud might give that comment a different emphasis, but that's all right, that's his story.

It's also close to St Augustine's story. He had a burning conviction that everything in his life could be controlled except his sexual desires. Once he accepted the Desert Fathers' story that the disobedience in Eden caused all mankind to fall into sin, and was all Eve's fault, he persuaded himself that the Eden story was all about sex. The amount of damage done to Christian sexual experience, and especially Christian respect for female sexual activity, by this story of Eve seducing and betraying Adam into sin, for so long superimposed on the pages of Genesis, is incalculable.

However, Christianity has at times offered reconstructions of the Eden story far more hideous than Augustine's. About 200 AD, Tertullian accuses women, as some other fanatics have blamed Jews, for crucifying Jesus. More, he blamed them for humans being mortal:

And do you not know that you are an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway... the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert -- that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.

By this logic the Council of the Church in 418 proclaimed it was heresy to teach that death was natural rather than the result of Eve's disobedience. What a difference it makes how you tell a story! A.E. Housman's brief irony shows us the dull thug a husband would become, informed by this belief:

OCCASIONAL POEM

When Adam day by day
Woke up in Paradise,
He always used to say
'Oh, this is very nice.'

But Eve from scenes of bliss
Transported him for life.
The more I think of this
The more I beat my wife.

Those of us who accept no inescapable 'original sin', like George Fox, not only beat our wives much less, we reject the logic of paying for one tree's fruit by the agony of Jesus' body on a quite different 'tree'. Rather, we value our unfallen kinship with a God more like the one Jesus taught of, a welcoming, loving parent who forgives sins. George Fox's Jesus is identified with the Divine Vision; Blake calls him, 'Jesus the Imagination'.

From that viewpoint the Eden story offers enigmatic rules of power and conduct, where human beings are told two contrary but equally deceptive kinds of truth, just as we are by nature (*use the land and conserve the land*), or economics (*save and spend; protect our jobs but open our markets*).

The story isn't a fable to remind the children of Israel to beware of snakes. The serpent is revered: in Numbers 21, some of the Jews complain about desert conditions, so the Lord sends fiery serpents to bite them. The complainers apologise to Moses, so the Lord tells Moses to set up an idol, a fiery brazen serpent on a pole: everyone who comes before it, presumably bowing before it, is healed. This idol, *Nehushtan* or High Serpent, may relate to the priestly house of the tribes of Israel at that time: the Levites, sons of Levi, the wriggling one, Leviathan, snake-god as sea-monster. Aaron, the new priest, has strong wisdom-snake connections too, and God's high angels the *seraphim*, are winged fiery serpents, maybe lightning-snakes, venerated before featherwinged humanoid angels had been invented.

As for who is right between God, Ishshah and the serpent, the Gnostics, and especially the early Jewish Gnostics, praised the serpent in Eden for bringing the light to benighted humanity. The Hypostasis of the Archons (a 3rd century Gnostic Gospel) tells a story in which the Goddess, or Sophia, not Milton's Satan, enters the serpent, to prompt it to take pity on the innocent humans who have been forbidden to eat of the tree:

and it taught them, saying, 'you shall not die: for it was out of jealousy that he said this to you. Rather, your eyes shall open, and you shall become like gods, recognising evil and good.'

Blake certainly knew a version of this Gnostic story of why 'the arrogant Ruler' cursed serpent and woman.

Even above the other Romantics, Blake worked wonders with Eden. In a famous Song of Experience the story is told as a garden-plot, so to speak. The owner deliberately tempts his 'foe' to steal and eat the poisoned apple:

A POISON TREE

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it with fears,
Night & morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright;
And my foe beheld it shine,
and he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole
When the night had veil'd the pole:
In the morning glad I see
my foe outstretch'd beneath the tree.

Could we really be God's unforgiven enemies, though he's never told us why he is so angry with us? This is a bracing, even dismaying, variant of the story.

D.G. Rossetti's poem 'The Orchard-Pit' (influenced by Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci') is spoken by a misogynist, sure that an all-powerful Goddess presides over the deaths of her male lover/worshippers:

Piled deep below the screening apple-branch
They lie with bitter apples in their hands,
and some are only ancient bones that blanche
And some had ships that last year's winds did launch
And some were yesterday the lords of lands.

In the soft dell, among the apple-trees,
High up above the hidden pit she stands,
And there forever sings, who gave to these
That lie below, her magic hour of ease.
And these, her apples holden in their hands...

Rossetti disliked the Catholicism his family had left Italy to avoid, but he understood St Augustine very well. This did not make for a happy marriage, nor were his passionate relationships with his mistresses and models entirely satisfactory, least of all to him. A complex man with a complex delight in women, his life is a testament to the ill effects of misreading the Eden story.

Though Eden may be the story we most need to re-examine, all traditional tales are traditionally reconstructed for different audiences. It is said that every society responds to a different Red Riding Hood story, from Perrault's cautionary tale for ladies of the court to the feminist alliance of radical girl and grandmother. There is genuine pleasure and benefit in the reconstruction or adaptation of old stories, and some amazing successes. Diana Wynne Jones tells the story of the greatest of the Border Ballads, 'Tarn Lin', in Fire and Hemlock, with the Elfqueen's captive as a present-day classical cellist and the Queen herself totally authentic as an idly expensive Society Lady. Yet this contemporary treatment, for Young Adult readers, sells short neither the magic nor the menace of the poem. Nothing is explained away. Alan Garner's The Owl Service takes even more risks, re-enacting with modern teenage characters and for a Young Adult Audience the ancient and sexually passionate Welsh story of Blodeuwedd from the Mabinogion. More, the story itself actually demands to be re-enacted -- though it has to settle for a deconstruction and a different ending.

Of the many versions of the Garden of Eden story produced in recent generations the freshest, with no Fall at all, is C.S. Lewis' Voyage to Venus, also called Perelandra, and Lewis makes things very hard for himself by starting from Milton's kind of story rather than that in Genesis. A fallen human struggles against a satanic Unman, and almost dies, to save the Ishshah/Eve of this story, the future mother of an unfallen race, from yielding to temptation. For Lewis, the point of the Fall is, as for Milton, a failure in obedience, not an expansion of knowledge, however dreadful and decisive. A key point for both writers is the absence of Ish: the male would have opposed evil wholly and actively. Eve internalises temptation in both Milton's and Lewis' variants on the story, and both can be uncongenial to women readers. If you are attracted by the prospect of

retelling this story yourself, I advise you to think very seriously about the activity or passivity of your female character.

Modern writers run a risk disproportionate to the challenge when they try to reconstruct or adapt traditional stories which are not, like the Eden story, seen as open to all. That danger is labelled appropriation, and applies mainly to writers of European descent who work with indigenous materials. Patricia Wrightson, a magnificent Australian writer for children, has often been denigrated and resented for her greatest work, The Song of Wirrun, because its material is aboriginal mythology and the key characters are Aborigines -- or spirits from their tradition. I should add that no one accuses her of bad faith or falsification, like certain writers, painters and the like who have recently gained notoriety (and profit) by pretending to be Aboriginal.

The trilogy's first volume, The Ice is Coming, is one of Australia's great novels, and the trilogy as a whole is a major achievement, but it will not be given its due in our lifetime because of the racial sensibility -- some would say racial censorship -- which asserts that only those of indigenous blood should be allowed to tell stories from their traditions. My own position is, as you will have guessed, that writers should be encouraged, not forbidden, to travel imaginatively within Aboriginal story: we are welcomed as audiences and purchasers of these materials, but we can never be wholly Australian if we are inhibited from telling or using the oldest Australian stories.

Anyone who has sought to understand those indigenous Australian stories that aren't *butherum*, restricted to the initiated, finds it hard to imagine as evil the Rainbow Serpent, the cutter of rivers and digger of springs that bring the land new life. Indeed, the whole perspective on the Fall, sin, and the human spiritual state that Christian churches have generally developed from their addiction to the Eden story is a little bent, according to many Aboriginal stories.

This is a poem I derived from a riddle I first heard from a Queensland Murri Friend, David Carline:

THE AUSTRALIAN EDEN

It's a rum sort of Garden of Eden
With its bushfires, its floods, and its drought,
But the Kooris have dwelt here since time began
And they never were thrown out.

When the Snake came tempting Australia's Eve
In the way it always did
To pluck and eat the very fruit
The Creator had forbid,

The Koori girl stayed obedient,
Loved God for God's own sake,
So she left the bush apple on its bush
And skinned, and et, the snake.

The Garden of Eden is not lost for ever, even if business, or complex urban life, obscures it. Our imaginations still return there to ask the old questions about the purposes and constraints of human life, and the nature of our agreement, if any, with God, if any. Nor is Original Sin non-negotiable. Any time we receive a new vision of relationships between humans and the nature around them, especially of a harmony under threat, Eden opens within us. And the greatest work of fiction of this century, in impact as well as invention, The Lord of the Rings, presents several versions of Eden, all under seige, surrounded by a Middle-earth that is turning into one giant battlefield. But some temptations are resisted: Tolkien's Edens resist.

9 Fear and Loathing of THE LORD OF THE RINGS

J.R.R. Tolkien's noble and nobly-imagined book has made permanent alterations to publishing, book-selling and book-buying habits worldwide, and of course most markedly of the English-speaking world. The book came out a decade after the end of the Second World War, and is certainly partly inspired by it. The so-called Art Novel or Serious Novel, first formulated by Henry James and his cultured fellow-reviewers in the eighteen-nineties, and bolstered by the development of University English Departments, was sixty years old and fast running out of credibility. Many of the early responses to Tolkien, usually written by graduates of the said English Departments, were contemptuous: America's Puritan apologist for elite modernism, Edmund Wilson, on its first publication called it 'juvenile trash', and a little later, in 1961, the British elite reviewer Philip Toynbee gloated in The Observer that these 'childish' volumes 'have passed into a merciful oblivion'.

But the real viciousness started when, in the sixties, *LOR* was suddenly recognised as the great cult book of the Beat generation, the anti-war protest movement, the green ecological radicals, the jazz-folk-and-rock post-Woodstock alliance, the drugged-out-and-alienated mind-trippers, the clean-limbed trekkies, and even the American college campus readerships. Then the whole vast literary-critical establishment, from cultural studies and sociology to more or less elegant analysts of *Serious*, literature, began to pour out denigration and detestation with tireless imprecision.

No, not the whole establishment at all! Many of us praised the book, taught it with relish and defended it with vigour, and yet far fewer than was appropriate. Now that the sixties are a generation away and *LOR* is read and valued more than ever, the resentment persists, equally ineffectually.

No, not the whole establishment. Some scholars were most regretful. A representative well-intentioned victim is Burton Raffel, who in 1968 wrote an essay, '*The Lord of the Rings* as Literature' that admits,

Tolkien's three volumes tell an entrancing 'good and evil story' and tell it with power and wisdom; he has succeeded in constructing a self-contained world of extraordinary reality -- and grace.

But Raffel ends with a mysterious discrimination: 'making stories, even wonderful stories, is not the same as making literature'. It isn't? Why not? Because he felt committed to a definition of 'literature' that excluded stories.

How did this happen? It is mainly because in the 1890s Henry James and his allies convinced the elites that telling stories was plebeian and uneducated: proper novels were *High Art*, and ought to be at least as incomprehensible and indifferent to narrative development as a poem.

James asserted that story-based fiction was not *Serious*, that a true Novel was all about *Style*. He and his followers saw that stories had recognisable conventions in common, and stuck a genre-label on every thing that wasn't *Serious* - that is, whatever had a prior concern with story rather than *Style*, or than subtle psychological notations. Treasure Island was an adventure yarn, The Monkey's Paw was a ghost story, Stalky and Co was a school story, The Time Machine was scientific romance (what is now called science fiction), News from Nowhere was a Utopia, The Picture of Dorian Gray was a fantasy, The Story of the Glittering Plain was an alternative-world fantasy, 'The King of the Golden River' was folktale, King Solomon's Mines a lost-city yarn, The Hound of the Baskervilles a detective story, Under Two Flags was a romance, The Virginian a Western; A Night in a Moorish Harem was pornography, Under the Hill was erotica (and Teleny homosexual erotica). And every definition implies the word 'merely'. No cultured reader need bother with any work in any of these categories, and any reader foolish enough to do so is unserious, lowbrow and intellectually inferior, has bourgeois tastes, or is even (the ultimate put-down) an escapist!

What such expert labellers sought to inculcate was guilt - and of course guilty readers might spend a bit more buying *proper books*! The 1890s genre-lists have been constantly updated, so that you can now be ashamed of reading thrillers, spy stories, war yarns, horror, dark fantasy, historicals - many of them bodice-rippers-- hardboiled whodunnits, disaster novels, animal fantasy, hollywood novels, sex-and-shopping blockbusters, space opera, catastrophe SF, and spoofs of any or all the above. There are also labels based on the target audience (Children's, Young Adult, Gay, Women's, Christian) and heaven help the innocent bookshop assistant who wheels the Young Adult bookcase up beside the Adult shelves! Labels for films are equally abundant, though snobbery about Art Films is often linked to foreign languages and resentment of Hollywood's financial dominance in the genre as well as to real or fancied sophistication of technique or *Style*.

'Yes, oh dear yes. The novel tells a story,' E.M.Forster admits with *Stylish* reluctance. But in fact story is the most important aspect of fiction. To make a strange place seem familiar, a non-naturalistic event convincing, a non-human character authentic, is to do a difficult job well, and to nourish readers more than either mock-historian realist. If the realist fails, what is lost? If the realist succeeds, who cares? As Oscar Wilde says in The Decay of Lying, a brilliant dialogue about literary-critical glibness and the smug dullness of Realism and Seriousness,

The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction...

M. Zola sits down to give us a picture of the Second Empire. Who cares for the Second Empire now? It is out of date. Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life.

Wilde's case against imitation history pretending to be imaginative literature is very hard to rebut!

But a century earlier the representation-artist and the fantasy-artist had been in alliance. This is Coleridge's summary of his agreement with Wordsworth in their Lyrical Ballads, which included his amazing The Rime of the Ancient Mariner:

my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, that constitutes poetic faith.

Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to try 'to give the charm of novelty to the things of everyday' and awaken their audience from 'the lethargy of custom' that made them take for granted the world around them. Familiarity and self-absorption, Coleridge explains, reduce our experience until 'we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand'. We all need to imagine more keenly, and to participate in the stories we hear and read with more gratitude. If we repress our sense of wonder, we come to see the world only through narrow chinks in the prison of habit and rationality we have built around our god-given capacity for imaginative experience.

Fantasy must remain a necessary part of our imaginative diet. The alternative is to gradually reduce ourselves to a fast-food diet of complex non-

events, the sugary, salty nibbles of fragmentary representations of 'life', slick high-resolution pictures with no attendant recognitions, self-testings or questions. Prognosis one: on-screen fictional conduct rendered increasingly grotesque to retain some audience interest in these 'realistic' representations; prognosis two, spiritual bulimic or anorexic responses to the mismatch of human imaginative digestion with these fashionable diets. Without story structure to provide roughage, such TV-dinners can kill us.

But help is at hand, here represented by J.R.R. Tolkien.

10 How Tolkien Changed the World

Tolkien, in The Hobbit, The Silmarillion, and quintessentially in *LOR*, created a world where heroism and villainy are not only possible, as in our world, but necessary, and can be taken to almost cosmic extremes. The dimensions are heroic, the stakes the spiritual salvation or damnation of the world - and in Middle-earth this does not mean merely human beings.

You will notice that I use the verb create, not invent. Middle-earth and its races, history and languages, presented with such meticulous energy (to use an oxymoron), were worked on over thirty years of reading, teaching, writing, annotated experiment, fervent discussion. Tolkien used the term 'subcreation' for work of this kind, and meant what Coleridge meant by 'an imitation in the finite mind of the infinite I AM', an imitation of God's work, a self-consistent, intriguing world that readers can study, annotate, speculate about, discuss and develop a protective love for. Once you have a clear idea of Middle-earth and its races you will be far better prepared to attune yourself to our own world.

And I mean the word 'races', in a literal sense that racists do not comprehend. The pre-eminent and numerous species in the story's range of rational, communicative beings are elves, men, dwarves and orcs, but there are also valuable rare species like ents and hobbits. The several nationalities of humans are in the approximate middle of the range, but the Peoples of Middle-earth can be as big as ents or as small as hobbits, as spiritually developed as the High Elves or as degraded as orcs. Their conduct can be as morally dedicated as the ceaseless service of Gandalf and the White Council or as riddled with neurotic malevolence as the invincible Lord of the Rings himself and his instruments the living-dead Nazgul, or Ringwraiths, each one once a king among men. As is clear from our fascination with visits by saints and angels, or demons and revenants from beyond the grave, with lost races and hairy men, with messages from the spirit world and kidnapping by aliens, one of humanity's most ardent dreams is to communicate with other rational beings in the universe. And here is Tolkien's plenty!

Plenitude is not slapdash cartoon gimmickry. Imaginative world-making, creation, is deeply challenging; a Quaker is urged to live adventurously, and I urge you also to read adventurously. To read stories is to live vicariously through the major characters of the story, to walk a mile in their moccasins. Why spend your imaginative energies identifying with people and concerns that are, like those of most mainstream Serious Novels, trivial? Henry James novels, written

with enough self-consciousness to annotate a whole Art of Fiction, are in story terms essentially sex-and-shopping blockbusters, though primly anorexic - compared with Danielle Steele or Jackie Collins -- in both their eroticism and their glee about possessions and parade.

To take one example, only the privileged of society and their hangers-on become real to James and his protagonists. Relationships with 'other classes', let alone nations, can hardly occur; Isabel Archer may have difficulty understanding the sophistications of fortune-hunting Europeans, but that's about it. She never has to cope with a Hindu or Shinto world-view, or even a poor American! In *LOR* the problems of interspecies tension are crucial to the story. I referred to an elf-and-dwarf tension earlier, but men, short-lived and patchy in their historical memory, also breed prejudice between their so-called 'races'. For example, the Rohirrim are not an ignoble people and can respect the culture of Gondor, but they show unfeeling contempt for Dunlendings, and for the 'Wild Men' of Druadan forest. Admirable individuals too have their failings: pride and evil works powerfully in Boromir, the heroic champion of Minas Tirith, and lust suborns Grima, the King of Rohan's chief adviser. Despair, and grief at Boromir's death, madden the wise ruler of Gondor, Denethor the Steward. And pride is the fall of the noble Saruman the White.

The focus or theme of *LOR* is the renunciation of power, far more serious than any Serious Novel could possibly undertake except in the tone of dyspeptic irony, as in CP. Snow's Corridors of Power, or sardonic mockery, as in the Yes, Minister TV series. The traditional sources of Tolkien's story are many, especially from north-western Europe, but he has metamorphosed everything he takes. There is a heroic quest, but not to wield an object of power, rescue an imprisoned lady, or acquire a Golden Fleece. No, the almost unattainable quest is to destroy forever the most powerful object in the world. In The Hobbit it had seemed to be merely an illusionist's ring of invisibility, but it works upon and augments power. It is the One Ring, forged in an earlier age by Sauron, the most powerful and evil being on earth, the Lord of the Rings. And there is only one way to destroy it: the hero must take the Ring into Mordor, Sauron's country, and cast it into that same volcano in which and from which he had made it. Not only must the Ring not be used, it must be forever out of the reach of even the wise, the just, the merciful. Galadriel, the incomparable Elf-Queen, knows that not even she could wield the One Ring without being corrupted.

The quest has a hero, who carries and very occasionally uses the One Ring, but he is no Odysseus or Aeneas, Sigurd or Siegfried. For a start, he is smaller and

weaker than an adult human, and has no talent for violence. His most spectacular martial deed on the first journey is to cut at a wraith's hand, and even after he inherits the fine elven-blade Sting (with which his uncle Bilbo had slain giant spiders in Mirkwood) his battle-charge results only in his hurting the foot of one cave-troll. In his company a mighty and virtuous warrior-prince bears a magic sword, his family's heirloom, the Sword that Was Broken, now splendidly reforged as Anduril, Flame of the West. Aragorn is tough and resolute, wise and valiant, undefeated in single combat and an unmatched, charismatic leader of warriors, who is or may be destined to save and reunite Gondor and become the first of a new line of kings. This pure epic hero has suffered long, and fights not only for his people but for all the free peoples of the earth. He is also a romance hero, fighting for the right to wed the one love of his life, the beautiful elven princess Arwen Undomiel. But Aragorn is not the story's hero. When you come down to it, an epic hero can only be Frodo's decoy!

And yet how can Frodo Baggins, the hobbit, be the hero? Even at the outset he is only a quarter of the hobbit-adventurer party that sets forth from the Shire to place the Ring in wiser hands, and when he finds out what the task really entails he is only one-ninth of the Fellowship of the Ring that sets out from Rivendell to complete it. Yet he is the focus of both groups. A mighty wizard leads the company, a wise interpreter of lore, a spell-master entitled to call himself Wielder of the Flame of Anor, but Gandalf plunges to his death in the caves of Moria in the second book (there are six books, often bound as three volumes -- hence the fashion for fantasy trilogies). The company is left broken and confused, unconsolated and uncounselled. Gandalf embodies prophetic power, and even returns from death to complete his task as the angel or bodhisattva who channels opposition to Sauron and overthrows the false wisdom of Saruman. But when you come down to it, Gandalf is not the wisdom-hero; he has to embrace obvious folly, to offer all his virtue and power as bait for Sauron.

Well, where the omniscient unstoppable superman is no use, a few incompetents may, in the collective, twentieth-century way, group their talents to do the job. But even then Frodo and the Ring break apart the company. He must part from his kindred, his King, and all good counsel -- from all those he loves except one - and go into the darkness and despair of Sauron's Black Land, Mordor. And every step is harder than the last. The one Ring weighs him down, tempting him to use it - or to sink into terminal despair. Frodo has become a leader, but only of a single ignorant servant, Samwise (whose name means halfway-sensible). And even that isn't quite the depth of the irony: in the ordeal of Mordor, it is Sam who keeps him going, even carries him piggyback.

Frodo has a guide, and it is his family's deadliest enemy, sworn to hate Bagginses for ever, and obsessively covetous of the One Ring that Frodo has been entrusted with. The degraded protohobbit Gollum has worn that Ring, and it has preserved him alive over many centuries. It is his Precious, his very soul. Gollum began his possession of the One Ring by murdering his brother, and has committed numberless dark deeds since. When he is free he is vicious and treacherous, and when mastered he fawns sickeningly. It is hard for hobbits to admit their kinship with this loathsome schizophrenic combination of slinker and stinker, yet Frodo pities him wholeheartedly, and begins their relationship by sparing his life.

If Aragorn is epic heroism, and Gandalf prophetic heroism, Frodo seems more like a suffering sacrifice, but in Middle-earth there is no specific range of experience called religion. The only religious ceremonial is one that will appeal to Friends, where a party of brave men behind enemy lines in Ithilien, before their evening meal, sit in silence, their heads all turned to the West. This silent grace is the last communal occasion shared by Frodo and Sam before they go into the darkness of Sauron's kingdom.

Gollum, the only person who has ever escaped from there, leads them into Mordor. Their climb up the Endless Stair cut into the West face of the Ephel Duath, is for me unforgettable. Freud would identify the forgiving, suffering, Frodo with Christ as super-ego, Sam as sturdy, well-intentioned, loving but apprehensive ego, and Gollum as the id in turmoil, defined by the chaos of wanting and fearing the Ring, wanting and resenting the love the other two share, needing and fearing the monster that waits beyond the head of the Stair. As they are about to cross into the darkest land of this vast story of a world where religion can be expressed only as prophetic glimpse or inchoate intuition, and where no political or military hope is credible, Sam's meditation on the relationship of story-role and person testifies in naive language to a faith in the meaningfulness of story amid the all grimness of experience - and he speaks with perceptive love, to give respite to Frodo's almost exhausted spirit.

Later, when Gollum, after long and agonised hesitation, betrays them, Frodo is struck down, and Sam, the humble gardener's boy, wields three kinds of elven-magic to defeat the indestructible Shelob, break into the orcish tower of Cirith Ungol, and rescue 'his master'. He also uses the One Ring, and yet is able to return it to Frodo, almost without hesitation - not the least remarkable of his heroic achievements.

Sam is the third hobbit to revolt against the traditional sword-swinger's way of dealing with danger. In the previous book, The Hobbit, its hero Bilbo has a panicky impulse to cut down Gollum (when he is invisible and Gollum unarmed) but suddenly imagines Gollum's lonely centuries, obsessed by the One Ring, in the dark under the mountain:

A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering.

Frodo is rebuked by Gandalf when he says of this episode,

'What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had the chance!'
'Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.'
'I do not feel any pity for Gollum... He deserves death.'
'Deserves death! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some die that deserve life. Can you give that to them?'

Later Frodo himself shows mercy to Gollum, with the help of a memory of that conversation. Finally, on the very slopes of Mount Doom, Sam does the same, not from argument but because to strike the helpless revolts him:

He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shrivelled mind and body, enslaved to the Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again. But Sam had no words to express what he felt.

His wisdom being wordless, he expresses his decision with a curse and a kick. By such eloquence are worlds saved.

As Walt Whitman emphasises in his very Hindu but very Quakerly 'Chanting the Square Deific', we need to accept evil into our image of divinity. Take Odin, who is both an ambiguous and devious ruler of the Norse gods and a willing fellow-traveller with his fellow divinity Loki, the evil father of the three monsters that will destroy Middle-earth and gods alike, the Midgard-serpent, The Fenris-Wolf, and Hel, hideous ruler of the underworld. Take Hindu tradition,

where Siva is both Preserver and Destroyer of life and love. Similarly, those who believe in the necessity of Jesus' death on the cross must also admit to the necessity of Judas Iscariot's betrayal. Frodo and Sam can only get through the Pass of Cirith Ungol by being betrayed. Worse: even when they attain the Sammath Naur, the chamber of the volcano, they would still have failed, but for Gollum.

At the final moment, Frodo fails. Instead of casting the Ring into the volcano's glowing heart, he claims it as his own:

'I have come,' he said. 'But I do not choose to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!' And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam's sight...

Disaster! The ethical hero has fallen, even using the Enemy's language : /-/-/-/ -*mine*... Nothing could better demonstrate that stories with traditional structures need not be formulaic in design, episodes or characters. All seems lost with Frodo's fall: the Ringwraiths of Sauron hurtle towards Mount Doom.

But where the hero fails, the villain saves. Gollum, now genuinely mad, attacks his invisible 'master', bites off his finger, and dances, chanting the wild circular language of pure repetition, pure madness:

'Precious, precious, precious!' Gollum cried. 'My Precious! O my Precious!' And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat upon his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone.

That is Gollum's happy ending. He has destroyed the Dark Lord's empire, and become one with his obsession. What would it have availed him to gain the whole world, since he has lost his own soul in the small O of the Ring. With the completion of the vicious cycle of Gollum's life most of the virtuous are given their happy endings, in renewed life.

The human world seems to start again, not with a republic and a constitution, as many of you might prefer, but with a restored and efficacious monarchy. Aragorn marries Arwen and ascends the reunited throne of his forebears as the High King Elessar Telcontar. But the Elves, Arwen's noble kin in particular, must now end their long love-affair with Middle-earth, and sail away into the Uttermost West. Dwarves and ents will also fade away into their

mountains and forests, and hobbits, in friendship with but insulated from Aragorn's monarchy, will gradually fade too, into humanity.

Frodo has suffered too much for any happy ending, though he is glad of others' gladness. In the mopping-up fights back in the Shire his friends become heroes, but all he does (as far as most hobbits can see) is stand around looking shocked and sad. Actually, as a pacifist, he ensures that no vengeance is taken for the wrongs of the occupation years, and his integrity is such that he can even pass judgment on Saruman, once one of the angelic Istari, and forgive the injuries done by him. But his wounds are too great for the hobbit blessings of health and long life, and soon he passes oversea to the Uttermost West, to find rest of spirit and surcease from bodily pain.

I have spent some pages - and in re-reading such passages as the charge of the Rohirrim and the parting at the Grey Havens some tears - on a book that is a pack of lies. It's not even a matter of Hamlet being amazed at the actor crying as he performs a speech about tragedy:

What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba
That he should weep for her?

Hamlet and the player both believed that the fall of Troy had really happened. But the human Aragorn and the fallen angel Sauron never existed, elves and dwarves are merely legendary, and hobbits - why, Tolkien made them up himself!

But the creations are paradoxically convincing: because this book does not pretend to be about real life, to be history, it cannot deceive us. The truest poetry is the most feigning. Perhaps that's why biographies nowadays routinely out-sell fiction: they pretend to begin with birth and end with death, like a proper story, but unlike most self-conscious *Quality Fiction*.

Partly what moves me when I read the poignant parts of *LOR* comes from myself, from the way a particular story or episode falls into a shape that matches my expectations and my imagination: I develop my version of the book, which will be at least slightly different from anyone else's. Because Middle-earth does not correspond to any ecology, geography or history, its energies are all narrative. *LOR* is a story-space in my imagination, that stirs me to recognise and address the major concerns of human beings in this century: the alliance of human community, nature, and spirit against the power of exploitative capitalism, rationalist economic theory, state bureaucracy and misapplied technology.

A book that is strictly factual would never end, because there can be no end to contingent facts, interpretation of facts according to different points of view and systems of value, and more or less biased debates about the factuality of the facts selected and the method of selection. Only a book that is not factual can be true. In proportion as it tells its audience what to think, how to interpret its story, it risks falsifying itself, but as long as it does not pretend to be history we can forgive it any preaching and self-regard. As long as it remains a story, it cannot be propaganda. As Keats said,

We hate a poem that has a palpable design on us, and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches-pocket.

It is clear that Tolkien is deeply moved by the beauty of trees, for example, but he cannot force us to feel the same way. His world is, after all, not our own, so we, his audience, must discover authentic responses rather than react as a probable, normal self would do. As Emily Dickinson announces,

I dwell in Possibility –
a fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior -- for Doors --

I have spoken to both Chilean and Russian radicals who gained great strength from *LOR* when things seemed darkest in their own countries.

11 Quakers in Eden: SF as Ministry

There have been many Quaker poets, and one at least, John Greenleaf Whittier, definitively caught the ear of his country. For the working-class lad in the ranks of the immensely influential Boston Brahmins, 'homes of wealth... gladly welcomed e'en a rustic boy.' His narrative poems and anti-slavery rhetoric were much valued, though early on very dangerous. A man suffered death in prison in Washington DC for distributing a pamphlet by Whittier.

In our contemporary society, poetry is little read, and a poet would need the performance exposure of Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell to make a difference as Whittier did. Two of the most distinguished voices in modern Quaker writing have chosen instead the field of SF (which we can understand to mean either Science Fiction or Speculative Fiction, but don't call it *sci-fi*). This is both magically alien — though the magic is scientific in rhetoric - and traditionally a genre of ideas. Joan Slonczewski and Judith Moffett both began with major fictions set in Quaker communities on other planets, Edenic in that they seek a sane and ecologically adult lifestyle and reconciliation with the native species. In both Slonczewski's Still Forms on Foxfield (1980) and Moffett's Pennterra (1987) the settlement has problems in accepting the restrictions stipulated by the God of the Garden, but these are surmountable, or at least survivable, until another, higher-tech spaceship from a rigidly united earth arrives, controlled by hierarchical humans who cannot share or respect Quaker values. In both cases the new ship's offer of medical and other wonderful technologies (the serpent twined round the caduceus is an emblem of medicine) has a real impact on the settlement's Eve.

The Quaker state of Pennsylvania, the Holy Experiment, is an inevitable comparison: when militia, guns and colonial greed (both French and British) began to move in from every side, including the various Indian sides, the elders in Philadelphia accepted that they must lay down their rule of Pennsylvania. What followed was a grim and grimy takeover of Philadelphia by pragmatic (but viciously triumphalist) wheelers and dealers.

However, because both contexts are other planets, in these books 'the inevitable' does not take place. The sentient inhabitants are of course more different from the Friends than the indigenous Americans were, but more important is the spirit of place, the planet itself, necessarily quite unlike North America. The planet of each book, much like C.S.Lewis' Mars and Venus in Out of the Silent Planet and Perelandra, has an obviously sentient 'spirit', though much

more attentive than the God of the garden in Genesis, and both are very different from what we can understand of our earth's spirit.

The title Still Forms on Foxfield is from Whittier's lines about a Meeting:

The strength of mutual purpose pleads
More earnestly our common needs;
And from the silence multiplied
By these still forms on either side,
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone.

Since Joan Slonczewski is a top-flight genetic microbiologist in one of the best liberal-science colleges in the States, her future science is, as you might expect, brilliantly intriguing. But also the shocks that science and its high secular civilisation bring to the Quaker settlement are deeply convincing, even if the style, the Queries and the spiritual norms of the Meeting and settlement will strike you as very old-fashioned. How can Quaker farmers explain Meeting for Worship to post-religious rationalists? This is Noah Rowntree, one of the tougher -- I might even say prouder -- survivors:

I'm not sure how to describe something which seems as basic to me as the need to breathe. As people can only breathe a little at a time, so each individual may hold but a fraction of the Light, precious as it is...'

As ministry, this is direct and honest, but it is also quite subtle in its narrative context. The indigenous inhabitants of the planet Foxfield, whom the settlers call Commensals; regard themselves as Fractions of the One Organism, the entity that for them is the planet. Plant-like but mobile, richly chemisensitive but communicating by gesture-language with the settlers, they are all fingers of the one hand, faces through which one eye looks. The very advanced ship *UNIS-11*, from an earth profoundly changed by thermonuclear war, threatens to impose, along with its helpful science, the guided, mechanical democracy of the United Nations Interplanetary System, including some Ultrafeminist aspects, on the consensus of the Quaker community.

The Eve-figure, Allison Thorne, is vulnerable because she runs Foxfield's Tech Center; she experiences and understands the temptation, but refuses guilt and keeps her bond with the Commensals' One. There is a somewhat obvious 'surprise' when the Quakers find they can, in alliance with the Commensals, have impact. Can the *UNIS* 'Adjustors' face that? Well, one of them does, and the

catastrophe that could wipe out *UNIS-II* is averted. Well, probably. Or, for a while... The snake is rebuked, reformed, and welcomed to Eden.

Both these novels belong to a postcolonial pastoral convention that owes much to American literary tradition, and suits Quaker perspectives very well indeed. Both, instead of prowling our planet's old frustrations and power-struggles, offer an Eden where a community tries to live as it ought, and to reconcile their bargain with God with 'fallen' human scepticism of the new arrivals, which is a demand on the Meeting as well as individual faith. A new Eden requires a *kenegdo ezer*, and the Meeting must try to find that of God in the sceptics rather than merely resist them.

Judith Moffett's Pennterra is like Still Forms on Foxfield in presenting a small, technologically under-equipped settlement caught between a huge, tough, all-in-a-hurry hi-tech ship and a fierce Gaian planetary intelligence that permits the humans no technological or territorial expansion. Here the indigenes are far less plant-like, and their sexual drive (on the rare occasions that they are in oestrus) exudes pheromonic stimulants that catch up any human within the area and sweep them away in a tumult of purely physical desire, or lust. With wicked humour, Judith Moffett calls these splendid creatures Hrossa, after the aquatic mammals of the Martian canals in C.S.Lewis' Out of the Silent Planet. Now Lewis was exceptionally prudish about sexual matters, and Pennterra's fierce and witty openness contrasts with that aspect of Lewis, though sympathetic to the low-tech pastoral values and the mutual respect across species that typify his books.

Pennterra is, among other things, a Bildungsroman, the story of the focalising character's growing up. However, Danny Quintan's very erectile psyche is pretty sound compared with that of the earth-people from the ship *Down Plus Six*. The complex relationship between sexuality, identity and communication in Danny's life and community is suddenly irradiated with extra complexities, especially choices that must involve violence and dominance, and Danny, as one of the first humans to reach puberty on the planet, is one of the reasons the lethal burden of Earth's population is not dumped there. He may also become one of the first humans to be a true biological member of the planet, as opposed to a tolerated special case.

Judith Moffett's later books, The Ragged World and Time Like an Ever-Rolling Stream, are set on an Earth desperately short of utilisable energy and benevolently supervised by ethical but unlovable aliens teasingly called Hefn -as

in 'Hefn on Earth'. The search for spiritual or magical power to replace technological power is touching, and again the ironies are keyed to the growing up of sexually self-conscious young people. Quakerism is there in both books, but primarily as a test of integrity, judgment and moral quality.

Joan Slonczewski's second novel, The Wall Around Eden (1989), is set in a Quaker community, barely surviving on a barren and irradiated post-holocaust earth. Though they suffer the physical effects of high radiation and other adverse conditions, the 'wall' is a force-field which is partial protection, apparently provided by insectile aliens nicknamed angelbees. At least the human beings and the animals and plants they farm can still live and breath, but they are a decreasing, badly maimed community. Meeting for Worship gives equal time to Lutheran services, and the protagonist, Isabel, and her Chilean father doubt the sense or utility of either. This earth's ambiguous 'God', who observes the probably doomed Eden with its angelbees, and whose protective wall defines all the few other human communities left on earth, seems far too alien to communicate with. In fact, it may no longer exist, though its instructions do. As for its apparent benevolence, it is blamed by Isabel and others for the brief war that laid waste the world twenty years back, in the Death Year, though some 'Plain Friends' reject the logic of blame, and we soon learn to mistrust the rhetoric of the 'Underground' anti-angelbee movement Isabel wants to join.

In the second half of the book the hero, Isabel, and her young husband Daniel are a new, rebellious Adam and Eve in a garden which the power behind the angelbees has set up to preserve many 'extinct' species. Isabel is pregnant, and childbirth in Eden has its problems. Would any Eve want Adam as her midwife?

As the title implies, Edenic riddles about why we are here and how we should respond to constraints, instructions and temptations are at the centre of the story. Here is a passage of spoken ministry from early in the book:

Why did God allow these events, leaving us trapped as we are here today?

To answer these questions, let us return to the mythic birthplace of all questions, the first Garden. There God's people first tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, knowing how to question, what is good and evil? This knowing of good and evil came at a price: mortality, eternal subjection to the laws of nature, the limits of the physical universe.

But we forget that there was a second tree in the Garden: the Tree of Life, which meant Godlike mastery of the physical universe, the power of eternal life - or eternal death. God never gave us the chance to approach that Tree, the Tree of Life and Death. Instead He barred the way with a flaming sword.

Why, then, have we mortals schemed ever since to get at this second Tree, to master life and death? Despite that flaming sword, we have calculated like Caiaphas that one man should die for the life of a people, ten for the life of a hundred, ten million for the life of a hundred million. We burned heretics at the stake; we exterminated the natives of our American shores. The advent of modern science only heightened our calculation: millions burned in one war, billions in the next.

. . . So as we mourn our imprisonment, and shake our heads at the evil disturbance of our skies, let us recall the road taken. If we ever should regain our mastery of the Earth, let us return to the Tree of Knowledge and learn to master the evil within.

Yes, our Friend Teacher Matthew is not reading the Eden story exactly as I do, but he knows it poses the crucial questions.

Joan Slonczewski's other two novels, A Door into Ocean and Daughter of Elysium, celebrate a peace-loving, all-female ocean-adapted species. The first asks us crucial, and painful, questions about our peace testimony and speaking truth to overwhelming, unfeeling military and administrative power. The pacifist Sharers on the water-planet Shora represent Quaker values, and we see them in community as well as from the outside, in conflict as well as in solidarity. Just as, in the Bible, a character's name-change, say to Israel or Peter, can encapsulate a story, the Sharers come to social maturity when they take a self-name. Magnificently, each chooses a name that accuses her of a major flaw in character in her own life: Merwen the Impatient One, Usha the Inconsiderate, Yinevra Unforgiver. Their names are stories they spend their lives reconstructing into a happy ending. Their language is full of sharply poetic double-takes, and their versions of Meeting for Worship, Clearness Meetings and Civil Disobedience are wholly wonderful. We can all remember times when we would have been glad of the power of whitetrance!

Daughter of Elysium is less Edenic, except when Sharer characters from the previous book appear. Its power is largely in its evocation of a plush, privileged world which guarantees that none of the resentments of racism are traceable to an actual need. The book's logic forces us to accept our own, largely unconscious racism, or at least our xenophobic starting-points, but also illuminates our problems with both art and science as pursuits of need and of leisure. The range of races, beliefs, tastes and values in Elysium is a delight to any reader willing to try on a new perspective.

12 A Space Odyssey, and a Carrier Bag

I said earlier that tapestry, being now largely a woman's art-form, has become quite popular among feminist Utopian and arcadian fantasists as a creation metaphor. Ursula K. Le Guin shows why, in a superb essay called 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' that coincided in 1986 with the middle volume of Kay's Fionavar Tapestry. She quotes Elizabeth Fisher's study Women's Creation (1975) to turn its implications on Arthur C. Clarke's and Stanley Kubrick's screenplay 2001: A Space Odyssey. I'll begin with some words from Fisher, so that you may better appreciate Le Guin's response:

The first cultural device was probably a recipient... Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier.

But no, this cannot be. Where is that wonderful, big, long, hard thing, a bone, I believe, that the Ape Man first bashed somebody with in the movie and then, grunting with ecstasy at having achieved the first proper murder, flung it into the sky, and whirling there it became a spaceship thrusting its way into the cosmos to fertilise it and produce at the end of the movie a lovely fetus, a boy of course, drifting around the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all? I don't know. I don't even care. I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story That is news.

And yet old Before -- once you think about it, surely long before - the weapon, a late, luxurious, superfluous tool... with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home...

So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing and killing, I never thought I had, or wanted, any particular share in it. ("What Freud mistook for her lack of civilisation is woman's lack of loyalty to civilisation," Lillian Smith observed.) ... if that's what it took, to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently I was either extremely defective as a human being, or not human at all.

That's right, they said What you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero.

Le Guin's distinction between the two stories of the ur-artifact that supposedly made a hominid family into a culture is brilliantly developed. Her Carrier Bag story is both more rewarding to write and more satisfying to the Quaker imagination than the Killing-Stick story. And the bag resembles the true human containers, brain, belly and womb, and the true first social container, the

home -- whether a hollow under a rock, a curve of tree-bark, a shelter made of branches, or the nearest cave that has no menacing smell. But doesn't your choice of a story for your people make a difference to your view of your own life, and other people's! Even more, it seems, the Carrier Bag resembles a story, or, like Genesis, a compendium of stories. Can you cope with the image of your Supreme Fiction as a carrier bag?

It used to be assumed that myths, or figures and patterns of action that derive from myths, were mere remnants of other people's failed attempts to explain physical phenomena, but that is a bad definition of myth and a worse one of the experience of story. No one myth can account for our range of perspectives on the physical world or the world of man, but such stories have created our culture, and the consciousnesses with which we observe and respond to both the physical and the cultural world -- whether we are aware of them or not. And their patterns of action often work themselves out, or reconstruct themselves, in our society, our relationships, and in the very provisioning and development of our personal journeys, just as they do in fictional media such as films, novels and stage works.

Not that they are fixed or prescriptive. Just as the focus changes when you tell the story of the Garden of Eden from the serpent's point of view instead of, say, Adam's, so every one of you has a unique perspective on some of the great stories, including some you instinctively or consciously deconstruct. You may find that a version of one of those handed-down stories in your carrier bag is truly your own, once you have processed it.

A carrier bag is a container, crafty as well as artful, and useful to carry things in, including stories; in fact it's at its best when it holds other things. A story is like a carrier bag, portable and satisfying in itself, that deserves to be carefully made and attentively used. There are bags that contain more than you would ever have thought possible. Of others you may treasure only one or two items: the only thing I like about the Red Riding Hood story is the dialogue between the girl and the wolf in grandma's clothing.

Your imaginative world, as your own Supreme Fiction can evoke it, is unique and yet, in the shared ministry of teller and audience, communicable -- not because you have found a definitive generalisable truth to preach but to know it is yours and call it a story implies a way to share it, and readiness to trust people to understand it and apply it in their own way.

But that last task is not easy: remember that those who receive it have to reconstruct it in their own image. As a poem of mine says of audiences,

We have to have free will:
we have no choice in the matter.

Offer your story adventurously, and to be ready to forgive us if we are unsatisfactory audiences. And even if at the moment no one seems ready to understand your story at all, you never know where it will go or how it will change. After a few more metamorphoses, it may reappear in a new variant, wondrous to you, and a delight to your Eternal Co-Author and Final Audience.

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