

“‘WHERE ALL THE LADDERS START...’

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In his old age the poet W.B.Yeats suffered something of a crisis over the source of his art. It was more than writer’s block, that inability to get going, get the juices flowing, that has confronted most people who’ve ever had to get a quota of words down on a blank sheet of paper. This time it seemed to have more to do with the origin or authority of his inspiration as a poet. In *The Circus Animals’ Desertion* he sets out the problem:

**‘I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show’.¹**

In his note on this poem, Daniel Albright tells us that Yeats ‘...once thought that his symbols – the matter of his art – were taken from some celestial public domain’.² Actually, we know quite a lot about the kind of celestial public domain from which Yeats thought his inspiration was derived. Yeats dabbled in many esoteric practices, such as occultism, Rosicrucianism, and spirit-writing. W.H.Auden was probably referring to this gallimaufry of supernatural and spiritualist theories when he wrote of him:

**‘You were silly like us: your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself’.³**

In *The Circus Animals’ Desertion* it gradually dawns on Yeats that his art did not have its origins in some occult, celestial domain after all, but in his own messy humanity. He ends the poem like this:

**‘Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut**

¹ W.B.Yeats, *The Poems*, Editor Daniel Albright, Everyman, London, 1994, p.394.

² Ibid. p.844.

³ W.H.Auden, *Collected Poems*, Editor Edward Mendelson, Faber and Faber, London, 1976, p.197.

Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.'

Albright tells us that Auden used these lines to illustrate the lack of relation 'between the moral quality of a maker's life and the aesthetic value of the works he makes': 'every artist knows that the sources of his art are what Yeats called "the foul rag-and-bone-shop of the heart", its lusts, its hatreds, its envies'.⁴ That was why Auden hated the idea of anyone writing his biography. He knew that his art, like Yeats', was its own thing, whatever its dubious origins, and should not be compromised by association with its maker's lusts, hatreds and envies. It may be a miracle that a beautiful rose can bloom on a midden, but no excavation of the midden can account for the heart-breaking beauty of the flower. And, to flip to the other side of the phenomenon, nor ought the mean origins of a work of art be allowed to detract from its value. As we'll see later, this is a lesson Scotland has had difficulty in learning. We have been such avid connoisseurs of humanity's middenhood that we have been ungratefully reluctant to prize the extraordinary blossoms that have grown from it.

Interestingly, in recent years religion has been going through a similar crisis of authority and appreciation. What is the source of its inspiration? What is the ultimate origin of its creations? Where does its menagerie of circus animals spring from? The traditional answer, like the convictions of the younger Yeats, was 'the celestial domain'. According to this view, religion is the result of the prompting of God. Indeed, in some versions religion is held to flow from the direct dictation of God, so that humans are held to be little more than stenographers or neutral conduits for divine inspiration. There are weaker versions of this claim which acknowledge that, given the proverbial fallibility of humanity, it is likely that the divine dictation got severely mangled in translation at our end of the transaction, so we should approach all religious claims with our critical faculties keenly alert. One of the main difficulties faced by the divine inspiration model of religion in our era, in either its strong or weak form, is that the resulting manual of behaviour is premised upon a stage of human culture that is radically at variance with some of the best values of today's society. This

⁴Yeats, *The Poems*, p.844.

is why religion in its more dominant and traditional forms finds itself in a state of strident opposition to some of the moral imperatives of our own time, such as the emancipation of women or the recognition of the rights of sexual minorities. This collision between traditional and contemporary values has helped to prompt another interpretation of religion, and one that is close to Yeats' re-interpretation of the source of his art. According to these thinkers, religion should be understood as an entirely human creation. Like any art, it is a work of the imagination that flows not from some celestial domain, but from the foul rag-and-bone-shop of the heart. This understanding of religion need not reduce its value, anymore than Yeats' acknowledgement of the lowly source of his poetry diminishes its worth to us. It does mean, however, that we will value it in a different way and for different reasons. It means that we will be less interested in the authority, or otherwise, of its origins, than in its works and the gifts of interpretation it offers us for understanding our own lives. Lewis Hyde captures this mysterious commerce well in his book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. This is how he describes the transaction between us and the artist:

‘A work of art that enters us to feed the soul offers to initiate in us the process of the gifted self which some antecedent gift initiated in the poet. Reading the work, we feel gifted for a while, and to the degree that we are able, we respond by creating new work (not art, perhaps, but with the artist's work at hand we suddenly find we can make sense of our own experience). The greatest art offers us images by which to imagine our lives. And once the imagination has been awakened, it is procreative: through it we can give more than we were given, say more than we had to say. This is one reason we cannot read an artist's work by his life. We learn something when we read the life, of course, but the true artist leaves us with the uncanny sense that the experience fails to explain the creation’.⁵

The uncanny sense that the experience or humanity of artists fails to explain the astonishing creations that come through them applies to religion as well. We

⁵ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Vintage Books, NY, 1983, p.193.

know enough about the origins of religion and its ugly history to be wary of it, maybe even revolted by it; but we also have to acknowledge that from that seething refuse tip some wonderful blossoms have bloomed – justice and mercy, love and forgiveness, as well as a whole gallery of tropes and metaphors that have helped us make sense of our own experience and find ways to imagine our lives. Religion at its best and most subtle is well aware of the fragility and ambiguity of the human mediators who are called to act as conduits of grace to the world. As far as the ordained ministry of Christianity is concerned, the most comforting doctrine in the book is that the unworthiness of the minister does not affect the validity of the sacraments. Broken, flawed, unworthy humans are still able to mediate the grace of God to their fellows. ‘He saved others, himself he cannot save’,⁶ was what the mob chanted at Jesus on the cross, and that is not infrequently the dilemma of the artist as well as the priest. Mediators of grace and meaning to others, their own lives are often characterised by turbulence and tumult. The romantic in me wonders if this brokenness may not be the mysterious ingredient that is transmuted into grace through the priestly work of art and religion. Certainly, some of the most creative priests and artists are well aware of this covenant of the wounded. Tennessee Williams said he was afraid to exorcise his demons, in case he lost his angels. In his prologue to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* he developed the idea.

‘Of course, it is a pity that so much of all creative work is so closely related to

the personality of the one who does it. It is sad and embarrassing and unattractive that those emotions that stir him deeply enough to demand expression, and to charge that expression with some measure of light and power, are nearly all rooted, however changed in their surface, in the particular and sometimes peculiar concerns of the artist himself, that special world, the passions and images of it that each of us weaves about him from birth to death, a web of monstrous complexity, spun forth at a speed that is incalculable to a length beyond measure, from the spider mouth of his own singular perceptions...Personal lyricism is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life’.⁷

I want to look at an example from one of Williams’ plays, *The Night of the Iguana*, which, to me, exemplifies that outcry of prisoner to prisoner that often

⁶ Gospel of Mark: 15.31.

⁷ Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Other Plays*, Penguin, London, 1976, p.7.

lies behind the creative act. It comes in Act 3. Shannon, the disgraced Episcopal minister, is quizzing Hannah about her love life. She tells him there had only been two incidents, the first a brief encounter in a cinema when she was sixteen, when a young man had sat down beside her and pushed his knees against hers. The second had been only a couple of years ago. A middle-aged Australian ladies' underwear salesman had paid generously for one of her watercolours. Later that evening he had invited her out on a sampan and, because of his earlier generosity, she accepted. This is how the scene continues:

Hannah: ...I noticed that he became more and more...

Shannon: What?

H: Well...*agitated*...as the afterglow of the sunset faded out on the water. [*She laughs with delicate sadness.*] Well, finally, eventually, he leaned towards me...we were vis-à-vis in the sampan...and he looked intensely, passionately into my eyes. [*She laughs again.*] And he said to me: "Miss Jelkes? Will you do me a favour? Will you do something for me?" "What?" said I. "Well", said he, "if I turn my back, if I look the other way, will you take off some piece of your clothes and let me hold it, just hold it?"...Then he said, "It will just take a few seconds". "Just a few seconds for what?" I asked him. [*She gives the same laugh again.*] He didn't say for what, but...

S: His satisfaction?

H: Yes'.

Hannah accedes to the Australian's request. He keeps his promise, turns his back, and she slips off an intimate part of her underwear. Politely, she looks the other way while his satisfaction takes place. She goes on.

H: He'd bought a watercolour. The incident was embarrassing, not violent. I left and returned unmolested. Oh, and the funniest part of all is that when we got back to the Raffles Hotel, he took the piece of apparel out of his pocket like a bashful boy producing an apple for his school-teacher and tried to slip it into my hand in the elevator. I wouldn't accept it. I whispered, "Oh, please keep it Mr Willoughby!" He'd paid the asking price for one of my water-colours and somehow the little experience had been rather touching. I mean it was *lonely*, out there in the sampan with violet streaks in the sky and this little middle-aged Australian making sounds like he was dying of asthma! And the planet Venus coming serenely out of a fair-weather cloud, over the Straits of Malacca...

S: And that experience...you call that a...

H: A love experience? Yes. I do call it one...

[*He regards her with incredulity, peering into her face so closely that she is embarrassed and becomes defensive.*]

S: That, that...sad, dirty little episode, you call it a...?

H: [*cutting in sharply*]: Sad it certainly was – for the odd little man – but why do you call it “dirty”?

S: You mean it didn’t disgust you?

H: Nothing human disgusts me unless it’s unkind, violent. And I told you how gentle he was...apologetic, shy, and really very, well, *delicate* about it’.⁸

‘Nothing human disgusts me unless it’s unkind, violent’. The bleakness of Tennessee Williams’ plays are lit with little acts of wistful understanding and forgiving kindness like that, encounters he describes in the same play as, ‘broken gates between people so they can reach each other, even if it’s just for one night only’.⁹ A few moments before she’d described her encounter with the Australian fetishist, Hannah had been trying to reach out over their broken gates to the troubled Shannon. She told him she respected a person like him, ‘who had to fight and howl ...for his decency and his bit of goodness, much more than I respect the lucky ones that just had theirs handed out to them at birth and never afterwards snatched from them by...unbearable...torments’.¹⁰ The ‘unbearable torment’ in the lives of great artists is sometimes transmuted into a sweeping compassion for the human condition. Though this does not account for what Hyde called the artists’ ‘antecedent gift’ for making great art, it certainly informs and infuses it. That is why it is legitimate to see Williams’ compassion for the haunted losers in his plays as the fruit of his own unbearable torments. If you’d exorcised his demons, you would have destroyed his angels. The same seems to be true in the moral life. Moral failure can be the mother of compassion, success the father of arrogance. It is no accident that the people in the gospels who really understood Jesus’ anger at the cruelty of the righteous were sinners tormented by their own unexorcisable demons. Of course, anxious editors came along later and added their own moralistic gloss to the anarchic compassion of Jesus, by informing us that the sinners who were drawn to him all cleaned up their acts and became respectable. I suspect that the opposite is the case, and that the people who really adored Jesus were not those who were loved out of their sins, but those who knew they were loved in them, loved, indeed, with particular passion because of them. That’s probably why Charles Péguy said no one understood Christianity better than the sinner. Given the

⁸ Tennessee Williams, pp.317-318.

⁹ Tennessee Williams, p.308.

¹⁰ Tennessee Williams, p.304.

existential affinity between religion and art, therefore, it is not surprising that they have had such a tumultuous relationship. So, let me spend a little time thinking about the complex bond between this odd couple.

Religions can be crudely divided into those that reject images and those that affirm them, and that conflict goes back a long way. The rejection of images in Hebrew religion is clearly related to their radical mistrust of all attempts to explain or find natural equivalents for God, which is not unlike the resistance of the artist to explanations of her work. Only God is God, so any representation of God, including verbal representation, is close to idolatry, which is the sin of according absolute value to what is merely contingent. This fierce protectiveness of the otherness of God, and refusal to allow the possibility of ever finding an adequate way to express the inexpressibility of the divine mystery, is very close to atheism, though its motive is very different. Indeed, you get a strong sense from the Hebrew tradition that it would prefer atheists to idolaters: better to deny the existence of God altogether than to identify God with any contingent reality, whether physical or conceptual. This kind of radical theism has a wise mistrust of all religious forms. Precisely because religion is a human construct, humanity's response to the possibility of God, it is constantly in danger of falling into the trap Aaron stepped into when he gave the children of Israel the kind of representation of God they longed for. To Moses' fury, he gave them an honest-to-god golden calf, something they could see and touch. However, the really insidious idols are the conceptual or ideological ones. They have always abounded in religion, and they multiply today. Richard Dawkins exposed some of the grosser versions in his gloriously unbalanced look at religion in a recent TV series. It is intriguing how close radical theists and philosophical atheists can get to each other in their mistrust of the hysteria of popular religion.

It is no accident that the religions that best exemplify the rejection of images had their origin in the desert. The austerity of the wilderness speaks to some people of the otherness of God, unmodified by human interpretation. Image-rejecters like religion stripped of everything that might impede the soul's naked encounter with the divine. A few years ago I went to Geneva to make a television programme about the great Reformer John Knox, who had spent some of his

happiest years in that city as a friend and disciple of John Calvin. We filmed in the great mediaeval cathedral, which was once bright with the colour of imagery and heavy with the smoke of incense. Calvin stripped it bare, and bare it remains, a sort of desert in stone, from which everything has been removed that might distract attention from the utter otherness of God. As someone who prefers religions that let the transcendent filter quietly through the windows of the senses, its fierce and uncompromising emptiness made me shiver – but I was impressed by its audacity.

If rejecters say a passionate No to the claim that the artefacts of human culture can mediate the divine, the other archetypal response says an equally passionate Yes. The handiest definition of culture is any widespread behaviour that is transmitted by learning rather than acquired by inheritance. On the basis of that definition, culture is the most distinctly human thing about us. We have many things in common with the other animals with whom we share the planet, including what T.S.Eliot summarised as ‘birth, copulation and death’, but the thing that is most distinctive about us is what we learn from the legacy of humanity’s creative response to the world. As well as feeding, sheltering and propagating ourselves, we have built cities, composed symphonies, painted pictures, written novels and plays, invented science and philosophy, founded complex civilisations – yes, and developed religions that sought to express the mystery of humanity’s struggle to understand its own existence and the universe in which it is set. Is human culture, therefore, a rival or an ally of God? Does the lure and fascination of art, science and philosophy draw the soul away from its search for God, or is human culture itself best interpreted as having been inspired by the Creator himself? Religious history has reverberated with the noise of the controversy between those who have said No to Nature and Culture and those who have said an equally passionate Yes. Though it has its blind spots, Catholicism is probably the most complete form of a religion that says Yes to the mediatorial possibility of images. That is why it has sometimes been described as Christened Paganism. Catholicism demonstrated its genius for synthesis by co-opting the ancient instinct for identifying God with, or locating God within the natural order, and claimed it for Christ. It pulled human culture close and harnessed it for the service of the Church. Now if, as one line of recent thought

is suggesting, religion *is* an entirely human construct, then this ancient controversy must be reflecting a tension in humanity itself. We certainly find it in Islam. The Polish journalist; Ryszard Kapuscinski, calls it the conflict between the desert and the sea. He said the tension was encapsulated in the city of Algiers with its open-minded Islam that looks to the Mediterranean, while behind it, in the Atlas Mountains, Islam looks to the desert and its contempt for the genial corruptions of those who live by the sea. But we find the same tension in classical Greek thought, described by Nietzsche as the tension between the Dionysian and the Appollonian, the ecstasy of the senses versus controlled rationality. We saw it expressed during the Edinburgh Festival this year in David Greig's thrilling version of Euripedes' *Bacchae*: Deny Dionysus and he takes his revenge; embrace Dionysus and he can drive you mad. It is the human dilemma, not just the religious dilemma: to say Yes or to say No to the senses. But let me reflect on the Scottish dimension of this ancient quarrel.

A few moments ago I mentioned John Knox's sojourn in Geneva. He came reluctantly back to Scotland in 1559, and in May of that year he preached at the Church of St John in Perth. The congregation responded to his sermon by destroying the beautiful iconography of the church, its shrines and statues and winking lights. By the following year the Reformation triumphed in Scotland and 'swept away every vestige of what Philip Larkin called the 'vast, moth-eaten musical brocade' of Medieval Catholicism. With it went much of the colour and song and closeness to nature that was inherited from the old paganism, and which had been tactfully baptised into Christianity by Catholicism. With it also went Catholicism's rueful tolerance of human weakness, and its genial and not-so genial corruptions.'¹¹ The easy-going Yes of Catholicism had been replaced by the ardent No of radical Protestantism and, in the market language of today, it branded Scotland with a particular kind of character, the residue of which still lingers on. Here's the beginning of Edwin Muir's romantic lament for what was lost from his poem *Scotland 1941*:

A simple sky roofed in that rustic day,
The busy corn-fields and the haunted holms,

¹¹ Richard Holloway, *The Sword and the Cross*, St Andrew's Press, Edinburgh, 2003, p.xiii.

Your grained hands
dandled full and sinful cradles.
You built for your children stone walls.

Your yellow hair
burned slowly in a scarf of grey
wildly falling like the mountain spray.

Finally you're alone
among the unforgiving brass,
the slow silences, the sinful glass.

Who never learned
not even ageing, to forgive
our poor journey and our common grave

while the free daffodils
wave in the valleys and on the hills
the deer look down with their instinctive skills,

and the huge sea
in which your brothers drowned sings slow
over the headland and the peevish crow'.¹³

'Who never learned to forgive our poor journey and our common grave'. Religions of the No can breed a flinty and enduring courage like that; and maybe it was a creed suited to those who had to live by the huge sea in which their brothers drowned; but it does tighten the heart with sorrow for the lives of such constricted and unpitying souls. In another of his poems, Crichton Smith told us that, 'From our own weakness only are we kind'.¹⁴ Sadly, sometimes unforgiving religion can turn human weakness into hate. At her father's graveside in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* that is the realisation that suddenly hits Chris:

'Father, father, I didn't know! Oh father, I didn't KNOW! She hadn't known, she'd been dazed and daft with her planning, her days could never be aught without father; and she minded then, wildly, in a long broken flash of remembrance, all the fine things of him that the years had hidden from their sight, the fleetness of him and his justice, and the fight unwearying he'd fought with the land and its masters to have them all clad and fed and respectable, he'd never rested working and chaving for them, only God had beaten him in the end. And she minded the long

¹³ Ian Crichton Smith, *Selected Poems*, Carcanet, Manchester, 1985, p.18.

¹⁴ Ian Crichton Smith, *She Teaches Lear*, in *Selected Poems*, p.54.

roads he'd tramped to the kirk with her when she was young, how he'd smiled at her and called her his lass in days before the world's fight and the fight of his own flesh grew over-bitter, and poisoned his love to hate. *Oh father, I didn't know*'.¹⁵

I hope you are becoming aware of the paradox that is emerging here. We have listened to the work of artists whose voices, to adapt Reid, are peculiar to this piece of the planet. So the claim that Scotland since the Reformation has been an artistically blighted land – a Knox-ruined nation – won't stand up. One of the reviewers of John Carey's book *What is Art?* made a witty and telling point. He accused Carey of saying there was no such thing as art, and that literature was its highest form. [Which reminds me of the theologian who said there was no God, and Jesus was his son]. The point I'm making is that literature, whether or not it *is* the highest art, has been Scotland's particular glory for centuries; and its ascendance is directly related to that same blighting Reformation. The reformers exalted literacy and built a school in every parish, mainly so that people could read the Bible. But once people know how to read and write, no tyranny - whether spiritual or political - can contain them for long. A profound literary culture began to flourish in Scotland after the Reformation, subverting authority and challenging hypocrisy. That is why the historian T.C.Smout says that 'the peculiar richness in the flowering of the Scottish cultural enlightenment after 1740 can be partly explained by a process of action and reaction from the reformation'.¹⁶ We might have pulled down the images, but we became a literate, argumentative nation that exalted words – and we still do. Scotland is full of writers, published and unpublished. And here's the point: there is something about writing that corresponds to the great controversy over images, between those who say Yes and those who say No. In *The Unquiet Grave* Cyril Connolly wrote something that has haunted me since I first came across it twenty five years ago:

'There are two ways to be a great writer. One way is like Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe to accept life completely, the other (Pascal's, Proust's, Leopardi's, Baudelaire's) is to refuse ever to lose sight of its horror.'¹⁷

¹⁵ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, in *A Scots Quair*, Hutchison, London, 1967, p.95.

¹⁶ T.C.Smout, *A History of the Scottish People*, Fontana Press, London, 1998, p.93.

¹⁷ Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave*

The Yes and the No. Both religion and art stand astonished before the being of being, the there-ness, this-ness, that-ness of things, and they respond with both wonder and horror. Heidegger said art was not imitation or representation of the real – it was the more real.¹⁸ The artist’s concentration of seeing heightens, enlarges, concentrates the there-ness of things. Yes, and the strangeness of things. ‘Rilke said of Cezanne that he did not paint, “I like it”, he painted, “There it is”.’¹⁹ In contrast to art, which paints or writes or transposes the there-ness of things, religion has a fatal weakness for trying to explain them. But if you abandon religion’s explanatory function, you can sometimes get it back as an art that refuses ever to lose sight of life’s horror. Behind the architecture of religious doctrine in its pessimistic mode can be heard a great No to the crimes and follies of humanity. Theologians say that the only Christian doctrine for which there is any empirical evidence is the doctrine of original sin. Taken as a metaphor, an imaginative construct, it fits the reality of the human condition: the horror, the horror. There is a fiction of original sin, a refusal ever to lose sight of that horror, and some of Scotland’s best writing belongs to it.

But in the midst of the horror, people can still reach out to each other over broken gates and remind themselves, as Ian Crichton Smith put it, that ‘from our own weakness only are we kind’. We need both forms of religious and artistic honesty today, the Yes and the No; but I believe we are in greater need of the Yes. I have no reason to suppose that individuals are less forgiving than they ever were, less disposed to reach out to others over broken gates, but there is something ugly and unforgiving about our common culture at the moment, reflected in the gleeful vindictiveness of certain sections of the press at the tragic weaknesses of public figures. That is why I am proud that it was a melancholy Scottish poet who told us it was ‘from our own weakness only are we kind’ and went on to remind us that it is never too late ‘to forgive our poor journey and our common grave’. Scotland has been good, too good, at saying No to human weakness and need. I am hoping that we are finally finding it in our hearts to say Yes.

¹⁸ George Steiner, *Heidegger*, Fontana, London, 1992, p.136.

¹⁹ In Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Arc, London, 1985, p.59.