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PLATO BAD - ARISTOTLE GOOD



Photo: Martin Harris

Nicolas Walter (left) and Dr David Starkey speaking on "Equality or Diversity? the 'Natural' Foundations of a Democratic Morality" at Conway Hall.

POETRY AND EARTHLY POWERS
Dinah Livingstone 3

QUEER EMANCIPATION
Peter Tatchell 13

ATHEISM AND ANTI-ATHEISM IN THE UNITED STATES
Gordon Stein 16

EDUCATIONAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT
Gerald Vinten 18

HG: THE HISTORY OF MR. WELLS
by Michael Foot
Martin Green 21

VIEWPOINTS
N. Walter, R. Silson,
T.F. Evans 22

ETHICAL SOCIETY EVENTS 24

Speaking as the Ethical Society's 70th Conway Memorial Lecturer on 11 January 1996, Dr David Starkey argued that the pragmatism and toleration of variety, which he maintained were characteristic of the Aristotelian approach to affairs, were the natural foundation for an open society of individuals freely engaging in commerce.

The ideological despotisms of extreme left and right stemmed, on the other hand, from the Platonic insistence on the validity of deductive systems of moral truths. This led to uniformity and conformity. He had reservations about Humanism, which may have jettisoned religion but, he thought, had still not completely shaken off its pious morality - it was too fond of altruism, for example.

Dr Starkey, who lectures in International History at the London School of Economics, was introduced by the Society's Hon. Representative, Nicolas Walter. Judging by the questions following his lecture, several people in his audience remained unconvinced by his analysis.

Dr Starkey can be heard and phoned-in to on Talk Radio (AM) on Saturdays from 1 to 4 pm. - 'brainy barney' - as well as on the *Moral Maze* (Radio 4, Thursday).

The lecture will be available on tape and in booklet form soon.

SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

Conway Hall Humanist Centre

25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Telephone: 0171-831 7723

Appointed Lecturers

Harold Blackham, T.F. Evans, Peter Heales, Richard Scorer, Barbara Smoker,
Harry Stopes-Roe.

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Honorary Representative: Nicolas Walter. *General Committee Chairman:* Barbara Smoker.
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Editor, The Ethical Record: Norman Bacrac.

SPES Staff

Secretary to the Society: Nina Khare. Tel: 0171-831 7723 Fax: 0171-430 1271
(Office: 2nd Floor, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, WC1X 8SP)
Hall Manager: Stephen Norley. 0171-242 8032 for Hall bookings. *Head Steward:* David Wright.

Obituary

We regret to report the death of Ron Cady.

EDITORIAL - HOW MISUNDERSTANDING SPREADS

The report that physicists had formed hydrogen atoms made of antimatter showed at once the highly mischievous nature of the term antimatter. Some commentators used this technological event to suggest that if the universe contains antimatter, it is decidedly less substantial than one might think.

In fact, so-called antimatter is just as material as ordinary matter. It has mass and therefore energy (since $E = mc^2$). An anti-hydrogen atom differs from an ordinary hydrogen atom in having a + (positive) electron orbiting a - (negative) proton instead of a - electron orbiting a + proton. + and - just designate the two varieties of electric charge, which obey rules: (1) + repels + (2) - repels - (3) + attracts - (4) whereas + and - pairs may appear or disappear, single + or - particles may not.

A radio commentator said that when a + particle met a - particle, the pair disappeared 'in a puff of smoke' - but there is no smoke at this small scale so this is needless mystification. He could have said that they disappeared in a flash of gamma radiation, or that they were transformed into two photons of the same total energy. Since photons can transform back into a + and - electron pair, it is most unfortunate that the practice has grown up of calling electrons 'matter' and photons 'radiation', where this implies they are not material. It is better to define matter as 'the stuff of which the universe is made' and not to tie it down to just a part of this stuff. Thus electrons (whether + or -) and photons are best regarded as aspects of matter.

SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY - EVENING COURSE AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

Tutor: Tom Rubens, M.A.

A ten week course from Thursday 18 January to Thursday 21 March 1996, 7 - 9 pm. This is emphatically a course for beginners, aiming to acquaint students with some of the major themes in philosophy; to examine their scope and implications; and to encourage discussion and exchange of ideas.

The themes are: the nature of moral values; free will and determinism; perception and the external world; rationalism and empiricism.

To be held in the library, Conway Hall.

Fee: £1 per lecture, including tea.

POETRY AND EARTHLY POWERS

Dinah Livingstone

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 19 November 1995

As this is such a huge subject and I have had to be selective in order to give my talk a coherent shape, I will start by focusing on a passage by the poet William Blake and refer back to him at points during the talk. My starting point is Plate 11 of Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity;

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of, and enslaved the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began priesthood;

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things.

Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast.

Reversing the christian philosophers notably Thomas Aquinas with his Five Ways of logically proving the existence of a transcendent God who created us Blake is saying that poets, that is, the human imagination, created God, in fact many gods. The poets animated natural or cultural entities that we find on earth: woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, on the one hand, cities and nations on the other: with gods or geniuses. That is to say they called the 'genius' perhaps what Hopkins would later call the 'instress', perhaps the twentieth century equivalent might be the 'deep structure' a god. Blake is saying these gods were not supernatural, but immanent, inherent in the earthly entities, as we might speak of Old Father Thames, the spirit of London, or even the spirit of the blitz. For example, I love the great London plane trees which wave to me over the tops of the houses opposite, as I sit typing by my second floor window. They have great presence and a spirit that has often encouraged me. But of course I do not regard this as a supernatural encounter.

Blake, when asked where his own visions came from, tapped his forehead and said 'Here!'. I do not want to become bogged down in Blake scholarship in this talk, but merely to suggest that the point he is making in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* about how gods were and are created by the human imagination, or, if you like, poetic genius is both obvious and illuminating to humanists.

Then he goes on to describe how 'a system was formed, which some took advantage of to enslave the vulgar, by attempting to realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began priesthood, choosing forms of worship from poetic tales'. That is to say, the spirit of a forest or a mountain, or a city or a country was abstracted cut loose and supernaturalised and turned into a transcendent god, whose cult was guarded by priests and used to keep people in order, or as Blake puts it, 'enslave the vulgar'. For example, we can think of countries where the dead king was turned into a god, whose power was perhaps then embodied in his successor, the living king. And in our own tradition we know how rulers have used Christianity and its priests as a tool for oppression. They 'pronounced that the gods had ordered such things.'

Thus, says Blake, 'men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast.' They are poetic creations, products of the human imagination. Animating 'sensible objects' that is, things on earth with gods is a metaphorical or poetic way of talking about them. The way we speak about something does contribute to its identity for example, when we say 'oak tree' we communicate more than just 'that large green wavy thing over there' because the name is loaded with connotations such as 'hearts of oak'. However, these 'sensible objects' are not wholly created by our words. Woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, hurricanes and other forces of nature exist physically in this world, whether human beings are talking about them or not. Likewise, although poets may contribute something to the way a city or country sees itself or even to what it becomes, a single poet does not make a city or a country. It is a social creation, which also has a physical dimension on earth, covering a real physical area. These natural and cultural entities are real earthly powers. When poets described the genius of these entities as gods, this was a metaphorical way of talking, not about supernatural beings, but about real forces and presences on this earth. So while it makes sense to be non-realist or idealist about God, because God is an idea, it also makes sense to be realist or materialist about things that really exist in this material world. The gods personify or represent real earthly powers. That is why Blake says the poets had to study them in order to describe them. In particular they studied the genius of each city or country.

Why Do Human Beings Invent Gods?

So why do human beings invent gods? Firstly, gods are a perhaps now obsolete way of talking about real forces in this world and also who controls them. Every country wants a 'God on our side' and accordingly creates one. Forests and rivers are not only beauties of nature but valuable resources, over which people fight. Hence the local forest people might create a god who is the guardian of their forest, whereas loggers might see themselves as serving the forces or god of progress. Even though the resources are real, the gods are myths, but potent myths, backed up by more or less political muscle. Likewise we might say that money or 'trading in futures' is unreal; it is just a series of ever-changing noughts flashing round computer screens on the world's stock exchanges. It is a myth or a god, and if people refused to believe in it, the whole system would crash. Nevertheless although in its most megalomaniac manifestations money may be notional and never turned into hard commodities or even hard cash, it has real effects on thousands of real everyday lives. In far greater numbers than the monstrous god Moloch, capitalism demands innumerable human sacrifices every day. An idol has been defined as a false god that demands and feeds on death. By this definition, Mammon is an idol.

Even though we may not want to talk in terms of gods or idols as the ancient poets did, we still have poets in our modern world. There is no reason why it should not still be the poet's task to study the genius, that is, discern these earthly powers and name them for what they are. In this sense creating gods means calling things by their true names, telling things straight, that is, witnessing or speaking out.

Good poets have always respected the earth and its creatures in all their intractable particularity. The body matters. Physical details matter. It matters whether a tree is a poplar or an ash, whether a bird is a robin or a sparrow. It matters what time of day it is and how the light falls. In poetry it is the particular which often has the most universal resonance. So in 'studying the genius' of a particular poplar tree, the poet will try to grasp its 'inscape', Hopkins' term or to use the term of his-favourite philosopher Duns Scotus, its 'thisness'. But part of its 'thisness' is also what happens to it, perhaps, how human beings treat it. Thus Hopkins, who apparently felt physical pain when trees he loved were cut down, gives a wonderful feeling of his Binsey Poplars:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;
 Of a fresh and following folded rank
 Not spared, not one
 That dandled a sandalled
 Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow and river and wind-wandering
weed winding bank.

Then he goes on to say:

After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc unselfe
The sweet especial scene...

'There lives the dearest freshness deep down things' in all their multiplicity of forms, perceptible to 'enlarged and numerous senses', which poets will try to communicate. This is the earth we are given and of which we are part. Nature's gifts and forces including the marvellous variety of human bodies are in themselves earthly powers.

Speaking of the power of poetry, the poet García Lorca gave a famous lecture on 'The Theory and Function of the Duende', which he describes as 'that mysterious power which everyone feels but no philosopher has explained'. The duende, he says, flourishes most in arts which have a living body as an interpreter, in music, dance and spoken poetry. This power, he says, 'gives a sensation of freshness wholly unknown, having the quality of a newly created rose, of miracle, and produces in the end an almost religious enthusiasm'. But the duende it is not a supernatural power. It is in fact, he says, 'the spirit of the earth'. The duende surges up through the soles of the feet, only because we have our feet on the ground. The spirit of the earth can speak through us in poetry because we belong to the earth, we are made of the same stuff and are part of the same organism. This spirit whose voice is sometimes heard in poetry is an earthly power.

Poets have been called seers when they not only feel and describe the earth's richness but also when they see clearly what is happening to it, who controls it and what they are doing to it. These human forces are earthly powers too. The poet's task has been to see, that is discern, both kinds of earthly powers. Not only that. The word seer also means prophet, someone who speaks out against abuses of power, sees how things could or should be different. Poets can be witnesses to their time, not only by expressing the 'thisness' of their own particular time and place, not only by seeing clearly what is going on in their own particular world, but also by judgment of it and when things are not right, by imagining alternatives. Or to put it another way, when they have discerned what is going on, they make meaning out of it and the meaning they make will depend on judgments of value.

For obvious reasons, the human species itself is an earthly power of central importance to us. Above all, supernatural stories have been created to put across ideas of what humanity is and could be and what human life is therefore about. At this point I will concentrate on the christian story, because of the dominant influence it has had on our own tradition, both English culture as a whole and the humanist movement in particular. The first obvious point is that ever since the creation of the christian story, there has been struggle for possession of it, or to put it another way because the christian story has dominated our

culture, the political struggles of the day have been expressed in terms of it. It was used by the ruling classes of the day to enslave the vulgar, terrify them with threats of hell fire if they rebelled against their lowly lot. In this version God the Father became a horrendous patriarchal dictator, who not only allowed his own son to be tortured to death but was perfectly willing to send millions of others who did not obey him to eternal torment as well. This figure of terror became both pinnacle and underwriter (or 'ground', as theologians say) of a hierarchy, in which virtue meant keeping to your allotted place, even if you were a serf at the bottom of the heap. In the words of the hymn All things Bright and Beautiful:

The rich man in his castle
the poor man at his gate,
God made them high or lowly
and ordered their estate.

A form of this version is still used in christian countries today to maintain ruling class privilege and keep the rabble in line.

Although it was taken over and used as a means of oppression by the ruling class, from the beginning the christian story had subversive potential. The figure of Jesus himself with his proclamation of good news to the poor is subversive. His beatitudes in their original form carry a literal as well as an etiolated spiritual meaning: for example, not: Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. The Hebrew word is *anawim*, meaning dispossessed, so a better translation is: Blessed are the dispossessed, for they shall have land. The message is highly subversive. Jesus' parable of Dives and Lazarus the Beggar says something diametrically opposed to the smug lines from All Things Bright and Beautiful, and in fact directly challenges the same smug complacency in the Pharisees of his day. As Blake says in his Everlasting Gospel:

If he had been Antichrist, Creeping Jesus,
He'd have done any thing to please us:
Gone sneaking into the synagogues
And not used the elders and priests like dogs.

In the Acts of the Apostles authorities complained: 'These Christians have turned the world upside down'.

As well as the figure of Jesus, the theological doctrine of the incarnation has been interpreted in a liberating way. The Word of God, by which the world was made, comes down from heaven and becomes human. That is, insofar as words create our world, they are human words. We make the word. So we are back with our poets, word-makers, who not only create the gods, but also the words by which these gods create our world... Poetry is incarnate word. Writing poetry is hard work. It is an act of creation. Poets have been called makers because they make poems, which in their turn help make our world.

We find in the history of our radical tradition, the struggle to free ourselves of the burden of a supernatural god, that is to say, the struggle for humanism, out of which organisations like SPES emerged, has gone hand in hand with the struggle for political liberation. The supernatural God and king consorts more readily with the hierarchical right-wing view of Christianity than with the theology of the incarnate word as a human liberating force. When God has been de-supernaturalised and is seen as a creation of the human imagination, then, for example, the idea that God is Love is seen as a way of expressing our own human potential to love greatly.

One reason why the struggle for liberation from a supernatural god and for political liberation has been a common struggle is the other potent subversive idea in the christian story, the idea of the utopian shining city, the reign of justice finally coming on earth. The New Testament calls this city the New Jerusalem. Blake sees London's 'marks of woe' with ferocious clarity in his poem London. Although the poem is firmly set in the London of his time, we can still see equivalents for every 'mark of woe' he mentions in the Londoners of today:

I wander through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear.

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appals;
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

Just walk through Kings Cross at night.

But Blake also sees London as a vision of the utopian shining city:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood...

Pancras and Kentish Town repose
Among her golden pillars high,
Among her golden arches which
Shine upon the starry sky.

The Jew's Harp House and the Green Man
The ponds where boys to bathe delight,
The fields of cows by Willan's farm,
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight.

Politics is Within, not Above, Poetry

As the tradition liberates itself from supernaturalism, this city, Jerusalem the Golden becomes the decent human society, which human beings have to strive to create for themselves without any help from on high. In this struggle politics have often been expressed in theological and poetic terms; theology has been a metaphorical way of talking about earthly

powers, that is to say, one kind of poetic language.

Listen, for example, to Gerard Winstanley writing during the English Revolution in 1649, both de-supernaturalising the creation story by speaking of Reason, rather than God, and at the same time demanding political rights for all:

In the beginning of time the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a Common Treasury, to preserve beasts, birds, fishes and man, the lord that was to govern this creation; for man had dominion given to him over the beasts, birds and fishes, but not one word was spoken in the beginning that one branch of mankind should rule over another. And the Reason is this: Every single man, Male and Female, is a perfect creature of himself; and the same Spirit that made the Globe dwells in man to govern the Globe.

To return to Blake, E.P. Thompson in his recently and posthumously published study of the poet, *Witness against the Beast*, tells how in 1975 he, Thompson, met the last Muggletonian, who showed him their archives going back to the time of the English Revolution. Thompson, who once described himself as a 'Muggletonian Marxist' believed that Blake's mother Catherine Hermitage was a Muggletonian. Muggletonians believed that when Jesus died on the cross, God died. The story of the resurrection meant that humanity rose, as, in Blake's words, 'the human form divine', i.e. qualities that had been called supernatural were reclaimed as natural human potential:

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity, a human face,
And Love the human form divine
And Peace the human dress.

Or to quote Blake's *Everlasting Gospel* again:

Thou art a Man, God is no more,
Thine own humanity learn to adore.

In England at the moment we frequently hear the dogma that 'poetry is above politics'. The idea that 'poetry is above politics' has a curious resemblance to Ruskin's (similarly dualistic) view of woman as the 'queen of a garden enclosed', apart from and 'above' the dirty hurly-burly of the world. It is well known what happened to Ruskin when confronted with a real naked woman. Alienated from the truth of our human condition as bodily and therefore social and political creatures, how can poetry be born?

In fact as in most countries, our English poets have tried to express the truth of the human condition 'travelling and tormented, dialectic and bizarre', without making a doctrinaire exclusion of any aspect of it. And when the dominant language of their epoch was the language of christian theology, it is not surprising they used it. This theological language was a currency in which people thought not only about the nature and destiny of individuals but also about society and politics.

There is no space here to do more than glance at a very few poets from our tradition. In *Piers Plowman*, probably written in 1377, four years before the Peasants' Revolt, Christ's challenge to Lucifer at the gates of Hell looks forward, not just four years into the future when the peasants cut off the Lord Chancellor's head for imposing an intolerable poll tax (and incidentally also the Archbishop of Canterbury's head, for the burdens laid on them by the Church). From *Piers Plowman* Christ's Harrowing of Hell in which he confronts the prince of this world and the power of darkness resounds down the ages and is echoed feel-

ingly by Latin American liberation theology today. And we have heard echoes of this confrontation in that we have witnessed recently between Ken Sara-Wiwa and Shell Oil. So here is Christ denouncing Lucifer at the gates of Hell:

Thou art Doctor of Death, drink that thou madest.
I that am Lord of Life, love is my drink
And for that drink today, I died upon earth.

Here the poetry is in the passion. Likewise in John Ball's couplet which became the slogan for the Peasants' Revolt:

When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?

The poetry is in the propaganda, as well as in its delightful nursery rhyme quality. Wilfred Owen said of his war poems: 'The poetry is in the pity'. This passion, this propaganda, this pity are all political.

To take just one example from Shakespeare: for the main characters in *As You Like It*, the idyll of the Forest of Arden, the pastoral, is an enlightening holiday and at the end of the story they return to play their part in their polis, they go back to the city.

Milton gives us his highly personal, and perhaps the most moving description of what it feels like to be blind in the whole of English literature in *Samson Agonistes*, which is also his great lament for the failure of the English Revolution:

... O glorious strength,
Put to the labour of a beast, debased
Lower than bond-slave! Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves...

The poem does not end in quietism.

Wordsworth and Coleridge took it for granted that the French Revolution was a matter of vital interest to poets (Wordsworth went to Paris), because early on it was one of those times when the imagination is in power. 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive!' Most of their greatest poetry was written in its wake, by 1805. Mary Wollstonecraft, daughter of the Enlightenment though she was, when she also went to witness revolutionary France, wrote to her lover Imlay: 'Imagination is the true fire stolen from heaven.' This was echoed during the events of May 1968 by students who wrote on the walls of the Sorbonne: 'L'imagination au pouvoir!': Power to the imagination!

Hopkins, who is surely saluting Coleridge in the metaphysical mountaineering of his 'terrible sonnets', salutes the unemployed with great tenderness and rage in 'Tom's Garland'. I could go on...

Poetry as Incarnate Word

Humanists do not believe that the incarnate word was a supernatural god come down to earth. However, I still find the term incarnate word is a useful one for talking about poetry, words created by human beings. What do I mean by calling poetry incarnate word? Firstly, a poem is a body of words with physical attributes: rhythm, sound patterns, shape etc. Second-

ly, human beings can only create poetry because we are intelligent bodies. We can only give our poems rhythm because our own heart beats and thereby connects us with all the other physical rhythms of the universe. The power of poetry as incarnate word is that it both speaks and creates what we, mysteriously, are as human beings: mortal living bodies whose spirit and imagination have no limit. Thirdly as was said earlier, poetry is concerned with the thinness of this world this thing or person in this time, this place, Hopkins' 'inshape' but also 'instress' not only pressure to be what we are but to become what we might be.

What makes each of us a separate individual is our own particular body, which is born, lives through time, changes and dies. This is mysterious to us because we are intellectual, spiritual and have infinite longings. Poetry explores this mystery of what it feels like for a particular human being to be alive. Our bodies are sexual and so when we reproduce our kind, we create new human beings, who may be like ourselves but who are not ourselves: they are other people. The price of sexuality is death: to make room for these other people. And because we are bodies, we are members of one another, of a species, who must struggle, imaginatively and physically, to create a body politic, where it is possible for humanity to fulfil its potential.

Just because theology has turned out to be a form of poetry and though the ancient poets animated all sensible objects with gods or geniuses, whereas modern poets on the whole do not, nevertheless, I would argue, that there is no reason why the scope of poetry should now be reduced. As we have seen, poets used theological language to talk about real earthly powers. Just because we might not want to talk in theological terms today, this does not mean that these earthly powers do not still exist and contend. The postmodernist idea that everything is relative and in quotation marks is utterly incompatible with humanism. The idea that the debunking of a supernatural god leaves humanist values without any foundation is complete nonsense. On the contrary, humanism gains in strength by reclaiming what supernaturalism alienated into another world. We believe in humanity because we value it. If we value individual and social human life on earth our home, the whole breadth of this concern remains the proper subject of poetry. If we limit poetry's scope to, say for argument's sake, what has been called the 'inner life' or even worse, to bright little insights nicely expressed, we are denying our full humanity.

This is not the place for me to offer a critique of individual contemporary British poets. But I do want to express my dismay at the dominant ethos of the allegedly vibrant poetry scene in England today. Last year the Poetry Society promoted a bunch of widely diverse poets some good and some dreadful as the New Gen poets. The editor of the Poetry Review described poetry as a new form of pop and the poem as a 'superior soundbite'. In an article in the current issue of the Poetry Review, entitled 'Why the New Popular Poetry Makes More Sense', the editor boasts, and I quote, that 'the Poetry Society has been transformed into a modern promotional organisation'. Indeed, this issue of the Poetry Review comes complete with a Christmas sales catalogue advertising 'Poems for Christmas', which is tied in with the Review, where nearly all the poems printed and virtually all the titles reviewed are those in the sales catalogue. In other words, this entire issue of the Poetry Review has become a supplementary advertisement.

I said above that the poet's task is to witness to their time. It may be said that trading in superior soundbites using modern promotional methods is being a witness to our time, because that is what our times are like. However there is a difference, indeed a sharp contrast, between being a witness to your time and being a phenomenon of it. I would suggest that the Poetry Review is a phenomenon. It is a phenomenon and fails to be a witness to our time, not only because it has transformed itself into a modern promotional organisation

marketing superior soundbites (a bit like superior tea), but because it has absorbed the dominant ethos peddled, indeed brutally enforced on us, by both the Thatcher and Major governments, of privatisation. To maintain that poetry should be a public witness is dismissed as 'naff', the last stand of the 'dinosaur leftie'. Poetry is regarded as a private recreation 'a little of what you fancy', one hype, perhaps of silly poems about dogs, followed by another about something completely unrelated. This is called postmodernism, another phenomenon of our time, which I regard as a cop-out, deeply decadent and, as I said earlier, anti-humanist.

The True Task of Poetry

The idea that we have arrived at the end of history, because neo-liberal ideology has triumphed and we are all just fine, thank you, is patently untrue both in London, where many faces still bear very obvious marks of woe, and abroad. The so-called 'collapse of the grand narrative' is simply a loss of nerve and will to make meaning out of human life on earth. Certainly the meaning is not given us from above or from some sacred text biblical, marxist or whatever. We make our meaning, depending on what we value, and historically this has been a major concern of poets. Precisely because we cannot abdicate responsibility for this task and put it upon some supernatural lawgiver or sacred text, precisely because we are humanists, this crucial creative act, the struggle to make meaning of our lives, has become more urgent than ever.

The dominant ethos in poetry today is to boast that abdication from this task means gaining the 'freedom to party', or in the ugly jargon of the introduction to the Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry, to be 'ludic'. Poets who embrace the whole scope of our humanity on earth, the personal and the political, the local and the global, poets who try to produce books that add up to a whole coherent vision risk an unwept burial under a pile of rejection slips.

I do not mean that the little things in our lives are unimportant. The taste of bread, the sound of a blackbird singing on a London tree, the colour of the dress she wore on that particular night, are the stuff of life and the stuff of poetry. They matter. But if we write nothing but a series of separate poems about such mini-epiphanies and renege on the struggle to see further, embrace more, connect, our poetry's scope will be severely limited to that of a hobby or leisure skill. Serious poets who set out on pilgrimage and steadfastly pursue poetry as a way, rather than potter along it as a pleasant diversion, must still take on the ancient burdens of their craft: study, discern and speak out about the earthly powers operating in their world. If a society has no poets who can do this, it is corrupt and humanity cannot thrive in it.

At this point I would also like to say that although I think many of the most interesting poets writing at the moment are women, I think women poets should beware of falling into the Ruskinian trap: I mean taking the line that of course the big wide world out there is violent and dirty, so we will retreat into a cosy womanliness, fragrant with the fresh smell of crisply ironed linen. I think poetry that is confined to the domestic and personal can be claustrophobic and as much of a cop-out as the traditional male ploys of compartmentalisation, self-withdrawal and flight from commitment, sometimes expressed crudely as: 'He simply screws and bolts.'

But why, it may be asked, should this struggle to make meaning out of our lives be the task of the poet? Of course it is also the task of every human being, since, as Keats says:

Every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions and would speak if he had loved
And been well-nurtured in his mother tongue.

Certainly, poetry is not the only way in which human beings make meaning of our lives. Certainly, on its own it is insufficient to build the shining city. That also requires political action. Nevertheless, I would argue, that poetry is essential to any human culture that is not to fall into decadence or barbarism.

Over this century poetry has had to become increasingly concentrated and economical some of its functions having been superseded by other genres, for example, its narrative role by fiction, cinema and television. I think poetry has a special and partly new role to play in our own culture, where we are bombarded by a superfluity of waffle, jargon and bullshit, so much verbiage, in print, on screen, online. Perhaps this role could be described as that of the 'pure fool'.

In an article published in the Guardian on 27th October 1995, entitled *Apocalypse Now*, about whether books will become obsolete with the millennium, the growth of computers etc, Elaine Showalter says: 'Interestingly, it is the otherwise conservative Saul Bellow who now accepts that writers at the millennium must compete with a plethora of attractions and excitements and recommends that they answer the problem of quantity with that of improved quality aim for intensity and stripped down economy.' Isn't that a definition of poetry?

A Humanist Spirituality?

Lastly, there has been a debate going on recently in the *Ethical Record* about whether we can have a humanist spirituality. I would like to suggest that, whether or not we call it spirituality, we need something, to which poetry can make a vital contribution. We need ceremonies to mark important turning points in our lives birth, love and death. Some people do not want to express their feelings on these occasions in what they regard as supernaturalist gobbledy-gook. We know, for example, that Barbara Smoker is in great demand as a conductor of humanist ceremonies for these occasions. And these are moments when people often want poetry and song. When we are engaged in struggle for a cause, we want songs, such as, 'Carry Greenham Home' or 'We shall Overcome'.

So many people say they would like some godless ritual to express, for example, that we belong together as citizens of a magnificent and terrible city, we are Londoners, or to celebrate our membership of smaller local groups, to mark the turning of the year: midwinter, that nadir when we feel we need a feast to get us through the dead time, the coming of spring at last, high summer (why else the Battle of the Beanfield than because some people were determined to make it to Stonehenge for the Solstice?), September, season of fruits when the new school year begins again. Some unbelievers are even driven to go to church because they feel the lack of ritual so strongly. I do not think this is a need for opium or religious mumbo jumbo, but a human need, which expresses itself naturally in song and poetry. Why should God have all the best tunes?

As humanists we also want sometimes to commemorate the seers and doers, the heroes and martyrs of our tradition. Fortunately many of these were poets and we can use their own words. They are a great cloud of witnesses. Among their company I would list William Tyndale, who not only produced some of the most glorious prose in our language, but translated the Bible, which helped along the whole process of demystification. Of course he was burnt for it. I read lately that there is talk in the Church of England of making William

Morris a saint. Morris was a socialist atheist humanist. Why should his commemoration be left to the godly? He is one of us and his utopian vision and longing remains a powerful inspiration to us, as when he wakes up from his dream at the end of *News from Nowhere*:

I lay in my bed in my house in dingy Hammersmith thinking about it all; and trying to consider if I was overwhelmed with despair at finding I had been dreaming a dream; and strange to say, I found that I was not so despairing... Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say, 'No it will not do; you cannot be of us. You belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past ... Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship but not before... Go on living while you may, striving with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.' Yes surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.

Gerrard Winstanley, quoted earlier, was a leader of the Diggers, whose song ends with a rousing refrain making the same point: Glory, here, Diggers all!

Finally Blake's own song, *Jerusalem*, commandeered though it has been by flag-waving hooligans and tweedy jam-makers, is ours. The first two verses of the song are a question, and I think the whole point is that the answer to that question is: No. The Holy Lamb of God was not on England's pleasant pastures seen. He was a vision of possibility. He himself did not save us. For that we must move on, perhaps inspired by the vision, to our own efforts. The last two verses of *Jerusalem* are glorious poetry, Blake's own personal poetic programme, and a profoundly humanist anthem summoning all the earthly powers that can aid us to confront those with which we must contend:

Bring me my bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my spear: Oh! clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire.

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land. □

BEYOND EQUALITY: EQUAL RIGHTS OR QUEER EMANCIPATION

Peter Tatchell

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 26 November, 1995

I believe it's time the age of consent was reduced to 14 for everyone, gay and straight.

On 21 February 1994, the vote to cut the gay male age of consent to 16, to bring it into line with the heterosexual and lesbian ages of consent, was lost by 307 votes to 280. MPs decided in favour of continuing discrimination, thereby reiterating the system of 'sexual apartheid' which treats homosexuals as inferior, second class citizens.

During the age of consent campaign, some of us had doubts whether 16 was the appropriate age to aim for. Even if 16 was achieved, it would still leave thousands of young gay men under that age subject to criminal sanctions. The idea that the campaign for equality should collude with penalising the young and vulnerable seemed neither fair nor right. Nevertheless, for the sake of unity we did not publicly express our misgivings.

Now, however, many lesbians and gay men are openly questioning the cautious conservatism of the age of consent campaign. While acknowledging that the achievement of a minimum age of 16 for both gay and straight sex would have been a valuable advance, there is

a growing realisation that it would have also perpetuated the criminalisation of tens of thousands of teenagers, both homo and hetero, who have sex prior to their sixteenth birthday.

A New Queer Agenda

This realisation is symptomatic of an emerging new queer agenda which has goals beyond equality and which challenges the way the lesbian and gay establishment so often seems willing to settle for equal rights on heterosexual terms.

The objective of the main gay lobbying organisation, Stonewall, is legal parity. Although achieving equal rights is important, it also has limitations. Since the legal system has been devised by and for the straight majority, equal rights for lesbians and gay men inevitably involves equality within a framework determined by heterosexuals. *We conform to their system.* Without a wholesale renegotiation of sexual values and laws, heterosexual men and women will always define the basis on which homosexual equality is achieved.

A narrow equal rights agenda also colludes with the assimilationist assumption that lesbians and gay men can best improve their lives by quietly blending in with mainstream straight society. This idea may have had great resonance in the Wolfenden era, but nowadays many of us have no desire to copy the flawed example of heterosexuality with its frequently oppressive role-playing and suburban uptightness. There are many unique and liberating aspects of lesbian and gay culture which we value and want to keep.

For the modern queer generation, the route to lesbian and gay freedom is not via our adaptation to the heterosexual-dominated status quo, but through our transformation of it. The age of consent is a prime example of legislation requiring radical overhaul. Puritanical and repressive, it works against the well-being of young people, both gay and straight. Surveys show that about a third of lesbians, nearly half of all heterosexuals, and two-thirds of gay men have their first sexual experience before their sixteenth birthday (mostly after the age of 14). The present law treats every one of them as sex criminals. From 1989-92, for example, it is estimated (based on imprecise Home Office statistical categories) that legal action was taken against about 150 males aged 10-20 for sexual relations with other males under 16, most of whom consented. A dozen received custodial sentences.

Furthermore, in each of the three years 1990-92, between 701 and 982 heterosexual men were arrested and cautioned for the consensual offence of "unlawful sexual intercourse" with a girl under 16 (but over 13). Three-quarters of these men were below the age of 21. For this victimless offence, an average of 388 males a year were prosecuted and 247 convicted. Several aged 16-20 were sentenced to youth custody. While teenagers (and everyone else) need protection from unwanted sexual advances and exploitation, it is doubtful that a rigid age of consent of 16 is the best way to achieve this.

Perhaps we should start by listening to the views of young people themselves. A survey by the British Youth Council found that 80 per cent of 16-25 year olds want the age of consent to be the same for both heterosexual and homosexual relations, and believe this common age should be 16 *or lower*. In the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and Malta the age of consent for everyone is effectively 12. It is 14 in Slovenia, Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia, Italy, San Marino, Albania and, in certain circumstances, Germany.

The introduction of these comparatively low ages of consent has not led to any increase in the sexual abuse of young people. Teenagers have adequate protection through the laws against rape and indecent assault, while at the same time having the legal right to make their own decisions about sexual relationships without the interference of the law. In the Netherlands, freer and franker attitudes towards teenage sex have, in fact, led to greater sexual responsibility and wisdom. The Dutch rate of pregnancies and abortions in girls under 16 is less than one-seventh of the rate in this country.

All the evidence suggests that Britain's high age of consent is one of the factors which inhibits the provision of effective sex education, contraceptive advice and safer sex messages. Instead of colluding with an unjust age of consent of 16, campaigning for consent at 14 might be more realistic and fair, given that so many young people have sex from that age onwards. Empowering them to make their own free choices about sex is, together with more factual information, the best way to ensure they have happy, healthy sexual relations without unwanted pregnancies or HIV infection.

End Criminalisation of Young People

The importance of ending the criminalisation of young people involved in consenting sex was recognised many years ago by both the National Council for Civil Liberties and the Howard League for Penal Reform. Together with the Bishop of Woolwich, the Rt. Rev. John Robinson, they proposed that the minimum legal age for sex should be lowered to 14, albeit with some qualifications.

Even fairly recently, policy makers in one government department floated the idea of reducing the age of consent to 13 as a way of removing legal obstacles to better sex education and contraceptive advice for young people. Needless to say, this idea was quickly denounced by Ministers who seemed more keen to appease their right-wing backbenchers and constituency associations than to promote the sexual welfare of vulnerable teenagers.

Another worthwhile reform would be to introduce a degree of flexibility into the age of consent. This would end the way the current law criminalises a person just over the minimum age who has sex with someone just under that age, even if there are only a few weeks difference in their birth dates. This flexibility could be achieved by a policy of not prosecuting consensual sex involving people under 14, providing there is no more than three years' difference in the partner's ages. In other words, sex between a 15 year old and a 12 year old would not be prosecuted providing there was mutual consent and neither party lodged a complaint. A system of flexibility in the age of consent already exists, to varying degrees, in Germany, Switzerland and Israel.

These changes would remove the threat of legal sanctions from tens of thousands of teenagers engaged in victimless under-age sex, benefiting both heterosexuals and homosexuals. That, paradoxically, is what the new queer agenda is all about: sexual emancipation for *everyone*.

* Peter Tatchell is a member of the lesbian and gay direct action group OutRage! His recent books include:

Safer Sex: The Guide to Gay Sex Safely (Freedom Editions, 14.99), and

We Don't Want to March Straight - Masculinity, Queers & The Military (Cassell, 4.99). □

The views expressed in this journal are not necessarily those of the Society.

ATHEISM AND ANTI-ATHEISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 3 December, 1995

The United States is a relatively young country compared to the European countries. Therefore, any historical coverage of religion and unbelief will only be found once the western religions were established in North America by settlement. I know of no atheism among the American Indians, although many of the early missionaries certainly might have called them *all* atheists.

We know that the main European settlement of the "Colonies" occurred in the 1700s; this period corresponded to the growth of deism in England and France. Deism, I will briefly define as the idea that God created the universe and the earth, as well as life on that earth, then left it alone. He did not listen to prayers, write the Bible, send a messiah or rule people's lives. Deism had its peak in Europe from 1700 to 1750. In the United States, many of the Founding Fathers were deists themselves. These included Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Thomas Paine, James Madison and Ethan Allen.

There was no organized deist movement in the United States until after the publication of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* in 1795. By this time, the deist movement in England had been virtually dead for 50 years. There were a good number of books published in the United States in opposition to Paine's. This was the major anti-deist reaction. American deist groups were small and transitory. Among them were the Deistical Society (New York City), the Theophilanthropists (Philadelphia), the Society of Ancient Druids (Newburgh, NY) and the Theophilanthropic Society of Baltimore. The major leader of the deists was the blind lawyer Elihu Palmer (1764-1806). He has a British connection in that Palmer's major work, the *Principles of Nature* (1800), was one of the books for which British freethought publisher, Richard Carlile, was convicted of blasphemy for publishing in 1819 and for which he received a jail sentence.

One other book which deserves mention here is Ethan Allen's *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, first published in 1784, which was the first anti-Christian book published in America. Unfortunately, a fire at the publisher destroyed almost all the copies. Today, there are only about 20 copies known of the original edition, so it probably had little influence at the time.

With the death of Elihu Palmer in 1806, the deist/freethought movement in the United States was virtually dead. It did not revive until the mid-1820s, this time with the help of some recent British immigrants to the United States such as Frances Wright, Robert Dale Owen, George Houston, Benjamin Offen and Gilbert Vale. Wright and Owen's attempt to found a utopian colony at New Harmony, Indiana, is fairly well known. Less well known is the fact that Wright was the first female freethought lecturer; her first lecture on freethought took place in 1828. She and Owen set up a "Hall of Science" in New York City, where freethought lectures were given and freethought books published. Wright also edited the *Free Enquirer*, a freethought newspaper.

There was a great public outcry among the orthodox against Frances Wright but it was mostly due to the fact that she was a woman lecturing in public, rather than as a reaction to the content of her lectures.

George Houston came to the United States from England following his release from prison where he had served a term for blasphemy for publishing an English version of *Ecce Homo*, by Baron d'Holbach. The work is critical of Jesus. In the United States, Houston began the publication of the *Correspondent*, the first American freethought magazine (1827-1829).

The major figure during this period was probably Abner Kneeland (1774-1844). A former Universalist minister, he became a full-time freethought lecturer, first in New York City and then Boston. He founded the *Boston Investigator*, which became one of the two major freethought publications - the *Truth Seeker* was the other - and founded the publishing company (later called J.P. Mendum) that was to be responsible for many of the American freethought publications of the nineteenth century.

Kneeland is chiefly remembered today, among non-freethought historians, as the defendant in the most famous American blasphemy case. In 1833 he was arrested for saying in print that he did not believe in the God of the Universalists. The case is complex but hinged upon an interpretation of the meaning of the offending sentence. After three appeal trials (guilty each time), Kneeland was sentenced to 60 days in jail. He eventually left Boston to found a utopian colony in Iowa, where he died in 1844.

Gilbert Vale (1788-1866), another British immigrant to America, is important as a freethought publisher and as the editor of the periodical, the *Beacon*. Several attempts to make a national organisation of non-believers were made during the 1830-1840 period but none lasted long. The *Boston Investigator* which Abner Kneeland founded in 1831 became a weekly newspaper that lasted until 1904. For most of those 73 years it was edited by Kneeland, then Horace Seaver and Lemuel K. Washburn; it was published by J.P. and then Ernest Mendum.

Opposition to atheism during the period before 1860 was scattered and weak. Certainly clergymen preached against atheism, and there were a number of books written against atheism. None was popular or notable.

However, the period from 1860 to 1900 marks the "Golden Age" of freethought in the United States. It was also the period of the greatest activity in the United Kingdom, with Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, Charles Watts, "Saladin", G.W. Foote and others prominent. In the United States Robert G. Ingersoll (the "American Bradlaugh") was the foremost personality but there were many others who laboured valiantly during this period. Among them were D.M. Bennett, B.F. Underwood, Samuel Porter Putnam, Lemuel K. Washburn, H.L. Green, C.B. Raynolds, John E. Remsburg, the Macdonald brothers and Charles C. Moore.

Robert G. Ingersoll (1833-1899) was perhaps the orator heard by more people than any other person before radio, TV and movies were invented. Trained as an attorney, he spent several months a year travelling around the United States delivering lectures which lasted hours and were attended by thousands each time. Ingersoll, although an atheist, also lectured on "safe" topics, such as Shakespeare. However, he did have a series of lectures which were primarily against hypocrisy in religion. These included *Some Mistakes of Moses*, *The Gods, Ghosts*, and *Liberty of Man, Woman and Child*.

Ingersoll, although the central figure in the freethought movement of the period, was also a source of finance for the cause, much free advertising and the magnet that attracted many anti-atheistic responses. Dozens of clergymen challenged Ingersoll to a debate. He refused. Hundreds of responses to Ingersoll were written. None was noteworthy nor now remembered.

D.M. Bennett (1818-1882) had a chequered career as a seed merchant and pharmacist. He finally got into a dispute with some clergymen and found that the only way in which he could get his view published was to found his own magazine. This was the birth of the *Truth Seeker* in 1873. The magazine struggled for a while, then became a weekly published in New York City until 1930, after which it became a monthly. Bennett also published many books and wrote a number himself, under the auspices of the Truth Seeker Company.

B.F. Underwood, C.B. Reynolds, Lemuel K. Washburn and John E. Remsburg were prolific lecturers and the authors of several books, usually based upon their lectures. Samuel P. Putnam was a popular lecturer and is also known as the author of *400 Years of Freethought*, one of the best histories of freethought written by a participant in that history. H.L. Green and the Macdonald brothers were the editors of *Freethought* (later the *Freethinker's*) magazine, and the *Truth Seeker* (after Bennett's death), respectively. C.C. Moore edited the *Blue Grass Blade* and was also imprisoned for publishing his views.

With the death of Ingersoll in 1899, the Golden Age drew to a close. In the twentieth century, the American movement had as prominent figures Joseph Lewis, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Charles L. Smith, Marshall Gauvin and Franklin Stainer. The latter two were lecturers and authors. Smith was one of the editors and (owner eventually) of the Truth Seeker Company. Haldeman-Julius was the publisher of the Little Blue Books and Big Blue Books, which revolutionised the publishing industry and provided much cheap freethought literature (along with other literature) for the masses. Lewis and O'Hair tried, with limited success, to found atheist organisations. Lewis's was the Freethinkers of America, while O'Hair has the American Atheist Press. There is also Prometheus Books, the largest humanist and freethought publisher at present.

Opposition to atheism in this century has largely been confined to opposition to Secular Humanism. The American fundamentalists have stooped to a new low in their attacks against Secular Humanism, by making up totally false charges against it. Supposedly, if you can believe what they say, the Secular Humanists have 250,000 members who control the media and all of the sources of power (including public education). They force their views upon all children and viewers of the media. Of course, this is absolute nonsense, but much of it has gone unchallenged by the mainstream media. The anti-humanists are well-funded and will probably not go away. They are also involved in the creationist movement and are now heavily involved in Republican politics in America. The future could become a lot worse if they gain preponderant political power. □

EDUCATIONAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT: BEHAVIOURAL ASPECTS

Professor Gerald Vinten

Summary of a Lecture to the Ethical Society, 3 December, 1995

"Come give us a taste of your quality." Shakespeare *Hamlet* IIIii, 460.

"Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive, easy to govern but impossible to enslave" attributed to Lord Brougham (1778-1868)

The Brave New World of Educational Quality Assurance

In the new-wave educational quality culture we have inspections of schools under the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), of further education under the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), assessments of higher education under the Higher Education Funding Council

(HEFC), and quality audits under the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). Whatever the name and variation on the theme, the recipients of the quality visit will suffer a degree of stress, since much may depend on the outcome. For those judged as unsatisfactory, the stress could, if uncontrolled, turn to panic, with the very survival of the institution at stake. Behavioural aspects of educational quality assurance receive little recognition or comment. The process is represented solely by written reports, which are the end product. Yet such exercises impact both in their anticipation and implementation. The thinking behind them, the way they are structured, and the form of the organisations which underpin them, are the product of a political philosophy, as well as of consultation with interested parties. Much is at risk if an institution is judged unsatisfactory, and so the final wrap-up meeting has the potential to be fraught. The presence of academic fraud and of whistleblowers to reveal it adds to the tension (Vinten 1994).

The first two schools to be identified under the new system of inspection to be failing to give their pupils an acceptable standard of education were highlighted in December 1993. Crook Primary School, Durham and Brookside Special School have forty days for their governing authority to produce an action plan detailing how they intend to put matters right. Where the Secretary of State considers these plans to be inadequate, or unlikely to be implemented effectively, he can transfer control of the school to an education association consisting of a minimum of five members. Where an education association has not been set up, for schools under Local Education Authorities (LEA) or dioceses, they can take the additional special measures of appointing additional governors. The LEA can also suspend the right to a delegated budget. Such failing schools will be monitored regularly by Ofsted. Schools conducted by an education association may either be discontinued by the Secretary of State, or transferred to become self-governing following proposals submitted by the association. The first grant-maintained school to fall foul of the requirements was Stratford School in east London following a draft report in December 1993. The report on Stratford School was accused of containing political bias and exaggerating the problems. The inspectors were said to have disliked the maintenance of uniform, discussion-led teaching methods, and alleged under-representation of ethnic minorities on the governing body.

Independence and Objectivity

The educationalists are external to the institution visited, and any recent connection will disbar due to potential conflict of interest. Three years is the period specified by the HEFC in the conflict of interest statements signed by assessors. This would include full and part-time employment, external examinerships, and other substantial involvement. One institution objected to a designated assessor who had applied for a professorship there in the past, even though few could remember it; the event was some eight years away, and the chair was reduced to the status of a research fellowship in midstream resulting in the loss of interest of the applicant. At the same time an assessor was visiting an institution from which he had only just been turned down for a chair.

Nobody that knew this individual considered that his judgement would be impaired, although it would have been understandable if either party had decided a change of assessor would be advisable. In the other case, one has to ask how far into the past it is sensible to delve. There must be a presumption that the objecting institution was less concerned with strict neutrality, than that as a result of this their bid for excellence might not be upheld. In the event, even with the objected-to assessor not present, only a satisfactory judgement was awarded. In this situation, with less than pure motives, one has to question whether permitting a juror-objection type system undermines independence. On the other hand one has to balance this with the wish for the HEFC to avoid accusations that the verdict is open to dispute on grounds of assumption of assessor bias.

The educational quality visit is undertaken by teams of staff of high seniority and experience, current practitioners well-known in their subject area or as academic managers. The fact that the assessors may have themselves been in the classroom or seminar just prior to the visit is seen as

adding an additional layer of street credibility. Otherwise there is an unwanted slippery transition from George Bernard Shaw's famous dictum in his "Maxims for Revolutionists" that "He who can, does. He who cannot teaches" to the view of someone with a different theology:

"The head's friend saw that the head was no use as a head, so they made her an inspector, to interfere with other heads. And when they found she wasn't much good at that, they got her into Parliament, where she lived happily ever after." C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953)

The next election is eagerly awaited to see how many assessors make it into Parliament. One can assume that it will be vindication for the Funding Councils if the number turns out to be zero.

The anticipation of an educational audit impacts on behaviour. The minutes of one department's staff meeting showed that nothing else was discussed in advance of the visit. The various public documents relating to the visit are avidly read by institutions, and where feasible practice is modified accordingly. There are bound to be occasional pressure points, and considerable tact and diplomacy will be required to resolve these. The process of arriving at the educational audit methodology has involved participation and consultation. The 'wrap-up' meeting can be fraught if there are untoward findings which are challenged. This occurs in a few of the educational audits. The impact of an unsatisfactory or negative report is loss of reputation, with the reports made public, funding can be removed, and eventually an entire institution shut down.

The problem was summarised in a publication on the whole gamut of British inspectorates:

If we are to say that the work of the inspectorate must be judged in the end by whether the general standards and progress of education are satisfactory, this presupposes both that we have some means of measuring that progress, and that in doing so we also have some means of judging the particular contribution made by inspectors and indeed its relation to their particular methods of operation. Such questions are relatively easily disposed of when there is general agreement about the progress of education, but much less easy once doubt is raised about standards. It is likely, therefore, that there will be continuing debate about what inspectors should be doing, and questioning of their role." (Rhodes 1981)

Despite the passage of over a decade since this was written, these words remain prophetic.

Quality Assessment - Quo Vadis?

The HEFC Assessments come under a constant barrage of criticism. Conrad Russell attacks the method, which he wishes abolished in favour of visiting teams of expert subject assessors making up their own minds in terms of what confronts them. An example of the inanity of the method was the need, he suggested, to prove links with and satisfaction with employers. In the case of history, graduates had taken up employment as missionaries in Africa, probation officers, marketing specialists and the whole gamut of occupations. How was it practical to have this reflected in the assessment?

There are the games played during the visits - the star performers brought out and the weaker lecturers banished for the duration, the special handouts and the rush to the reprographics unit, the dress rehearsals and the hand-picking and briefing of students and employers!

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Vinten, G. (1994) *Whistleblowing: Subversion or Corporate Citizenship?* Paul Chapman Publishers, London. □

H.G: THE HISTORY OF MR. WELLS

by Michael Foot. Doubleday, 20
Review by Martin Green

'H.G. Wells (1866-1946) was one of the intellectual giants of his time. Famous on both sides of the Atlantic for his best-selling books and prolific journalistic output, he played a leading role in all the most important controversies of his turbulent age. He lived through momentous times which included both World Wars and the Russian Revolution. Other burning issues also prevailed throughout his life such as the fight for women's rights, liberation from Victorian sexual morality, arguments about democracy and Communism and, of course, Socialism in all its many shades.'

This is how the blurb describes Michael Foot's 'inspired new biography' of his admired friend, of whom he has written an endearing portrait.

H.G. Wells had a remarkable success as an author and journalist, emerging as he did from a modest background as the third son of an unsuccessful shopkeeper in Bromley. At the age of eighteen he left his job as a draper's apprentice to become a pupil-teacher at Midhurst Grammar School, where he won a scholarship to the Normal School of Science at South Kensington, to study biology under T.H. Huxley. He obtained a B.Sc. and lectured for a while until he was able to earn his living as a writer. He threw his energies into the issues of the day - free love, Fabianism, progressive education, scientific theory, 'world government' and human rights. His personal life reflected the diversity of his interests and his marriages and love affairs scandalised his contemporaries.

His literary output was extraordinarily varied, pioneering the new genre of science fiction, and at the same time writing prophecies about the dangerous new powers of scientific discovery. He also wrote a group of comic novels evoking the lower-middle class world of his youth, the best-remembered being *The History of Mr. Polly*, as well as other novels, one celebrating the 'New Woman'. But it was his *The Outline of History* which enabled him to bring together his world view of the state of mankind as he saw it.

His deep and passionate relationships with Rebecca West and Moura Budberg, who he had met as Gorki's mistress, remained constant until his death at the age of 80 in 1946. He had prophesied and campaigned against the outbreak of World War II though, as in the First World War, he had used his energies and abilities to campaign for the defeat of the Axis. One of his last books, *Mind at the End of its Tether*, reflected the disillusion he felt at the state of the world following the Allied defeat of Japan through the use of atomic weapons. It was a long journey he had travelled from the hopeful horizons he had seen as a young socialist and scientist with a gift for words.

The difficulty posed by writing a biography of a prolific author such as H.G. Wells, is that on the whole his work is more interesting than his life. This is reflected in Michael Foot's work, via the number of lengthy quotations from the works of Wells, and some of his political and literary adversities. His main achievement is to remind us of what an abundant genius Wells had and of the record he left of the times through which he lived. It is a bleak world we have inherited. Western Capitalism has destroyed whatever hopes that might have emerged from Post-Stalinist communism, not through the use of reason, or a superior economic theory, but the might of a nuclear arsenal and the threat of its use, something almost beyond the comprehension of Wells at his darkest. Perhaps the best summation of his

value is in the words of those writers who came after and admired him. J.B. Priestley said:

'Of all the English writers I have known, he was the most honest, the frankest, the one least afraid of telling the truth.'

And George Orwell, in an obituary notice, said:

'No writer of our time, at any rate no English writer, has so deeply influenced his contemporaries as Wells. He was so big a figure, he played so great a part in forming our picture of the world that in agreeing or disagreeing with his ideas we are apt to forget his purely literary achievements. In his own eyes it was a secondary, almost an unimportant thing. He had faults of intellect and of character, but very few writers have had less literary vanity.' □

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VIEWPOINTS

The Concept of Humanism

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is not a reliable guide to such words as *Humanist* and *Humanism* (Viewpoint, December 1995), because even the Second Edition of 1989 leaves out not only important information about their origins (in the Italian Renaissance and the German Enlightenment respectively) but also significant variations in and example of their meanings, especially in the development of our particular usage during the late 19th century.

But if it is used, it should be used correctly. As the quotations from Samuel Taylor Coleridge shows, when he used the word *Humanism* in 1812 he meant by it no more than the belief that Jesus was merely human - i.e. Unitarianism. And as the other early quotations show, it also meant humanness and humanitarianism, classical studies and liberal education, before it was used for the Positivism of Auguste Comte and then the Pragmatism of F.C.S. Schiller and William James - by which time it had been used by freethinkers in ways which aren't covered in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and which anticipate our usage today.

But of course the *concept* of Humanism is much older than the *word*. More than 2,500 years ago the Greek philosopher Protagoras said, "Man is the measure of all things", and, "About the gods, I cannot say whether they exist or what they are like, because the subject is too difficult and time is too short". There were several Greek and Roman, Indian and Chinese writers in the Ancient world who similarly denied the supernatural and the divine and affirmed the natural and human, and even in the Bible the book of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs breathe secularism and hedonism.

Nicolas Walter - London

Unfair Market

David McDonagh claims that 'The market is utterly fair in its distribution of wealth'. How does he reconcile this with the repeated cycles of boom and bust that waste vast resources and cause immense human suffering?

In the simplest case a shortage creates high prices and excessive profits. The prospect of further high profits encourages excessive new production. The market glut causes low prices - often below cost. Surplus goods are destroyed, owners go bankrupt and workers become unemployed.

A more general recession produces widely unequal effects. Increasingly people restrict their spending to necessities. They stop buying luxuries and defer replacements. Producers of luxuries and durables become unemployed but those of necessities continue to work full time.

Responsible engineers include control mechanisms to stabilise their designs and prevent runaway catastrophes. Conversely the repeated oscillations and crashes of the market, both locally and worldwide, indicate a lack of inbuilt controls and a major defect in the design of the market mechanism.

Where is the fairness when rewards depend as much on chance and smooth talk as hard work and product quality?

Roy Silson - Tring, Herts.

William Blake approves of Tom Paine

In the review by Martin Green of *Blake* by Peter Ackroyd (*The Ethical Record*, December 1995), there is an incidental reference to Tom Paine. Readers may be interested to be reminded that Blake (a devout, if unorthodox, Christian) read an attack on Paine by R. Watson, Bishop of Llandaff. Blake's annotations to the Bishop's *Apology for the Bible* (1797) end with the following comments:

It appears to me Now that Tom Paine is a better Christain than the Bishop.
I have read this Book with attention & find that the Bishop has only hurt Paine's heel while Paine has broken his head. The Bishop has not answer'd one of Paine's grand objections.

(These comments are to be found in the one-volume Nonesuch Library edition of Blake's poetry and prose, first published in 1927, page 767).

T.F. Evans - Stone, Staffs.

SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

Registered Charity No. 251396

Founded in 1793, the Society is a progressive movement whose aims are the **study and dissemination of ethical principles based on humanism, the cultivation of a rational and humane way of life, and the advancement of research and education in all relevant fields.**

We invite to membership all those who reject supernatural creeds and find themselves in sympathy with our views.

At Conway Hall there are opportunities for participation in many kinds of cultural activities, including discussions, lectures, concerts and socials. The Sunday Evening Chamber Music Concerts founded in 1887 have achieved international renown. A reference and lending library is available, and all members receive the Society's journal, *The Ethical Record*, eleven times a year. Funerals and Memorial Meetings are available to members. Please apply to the Secretary for membership, £10 p.a.

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS AT THE ETHICAL SOCIETY

The Library, Conway Hall Humanist Centre,
25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, WC1
Tel: 0171 831 7723

JANUARY 1996

- Thursday 18** SPES EVENING COURSE - INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
7.00 - 9.00 pm 1st of a ten-week course for absolute beginners in philosophy.
Tutor: Tom Rubens, M.A. Fee: £1 per evening (includes tea).
- Sunday 21** THE ORIGINS OF THE SPANISH THEATRE. Christopher R. Burke.
11.00 am
- Thursday 25** SPES EVENING COURSE - INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
7.00 - 9.00 pm 2nd of a ten-week course for absolute beginners in philosophy.
Tutor: Tom Rubens, M.A. Fee: £1 per evening (includes tea).
- Friday 26** BOSNIA - IS A SECULAR SOLUTION POSSIBLE? Forum organised by the N.S.S.,
7.30 pm with Branka Magas, author and Melanie McDonagh, journalist.
- Saturday 27** JOINT HUMANIST FORK SUPPER £6.50 per person All Welcome
6.30 for 7.00 pm Supported by the B.H.A., N.S.S., R.P.A. & SPES. Tel: 0171 430 0908 for details
- Sunday 28** HUME'S DIALOGUES ON RELIGION PART II. Dan O'Hara
11.00 am THE PROBLEMS & EXCITEMENT OF RESEARCH INTO BRAINS.
3.00 pm Dr Harold Hillman.
- FEBRUARY**
- Thursday 1** SPES EVENING COURSE - INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
7.00 - 9.00 pm 3rd of a ten-week course for absolute beginners in philosophy.
Tutor: Tom Rubens, M.A. Fee: £1 per evening (includes tea).
- Sunday 4** THE EVOLUTION OF LOVE. Dr James Hemming says the theory of
11.00 am evolution concentrates on raw natural selection but co-operation and love
also evolved almost from the start of life.
3.00 pm VIDEO SEMINAR: TELEPATHY - IN TWO MINDS? led by Anne V. Toy.
- Thursday 8** SPES EVENING COURSE - INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
7.00 - 9.00 pm 4th of a ten-week course for absolute beginners in philosophy.
Tutor: Tom Rubens, M.A. Fee: £1 per evening (includes tea).
- Sunday 11** THE BIRTH OF GEOLOGY. Mike Howgate examines pre-science ideas
11.00 am about prehistoric life.
- Thursday 15** SPES EVENING COURSE - INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
7.00 - 9.00 pm 5th of a ten-week course for absolute beginners in philosophy.
Tutor: Tom Rubens, M.A. Fee: £1 per evening (includes tea).
- Sunday 18** CAN HUMANISTS BE 'SPIRITUAL'? Peter Heales (SPES Appointed Lecturer)
11.00 am reviews various uses of the word & explores what Humanists might convey if they
choose to use it.

SOUTH PLACE SUNDAY CONCERTS - 6.30 pm at CONWAY HALL - Tickets £3.50

- January 21** LEVRON CHILINGIRIAN (violin) and CLIFFORD BENSON (piano). Mendelssohn:
Sonata Op. 4. Howard Ferguson: Sonata No 2. Mozart: Sonata K304. Brahms: Sonata
Op. 78.
- January 28** VELLINGER STRING QUARTET. Mendelssohn: No 2 Op. 13. Beethoven: Op. 132.
February 4 SCHIDLOF STRING QUARTET. Haydn: Op. 20 No 5. Mathew Taylor: Op. 18 No 3.
London Premier Ravel in F.
- February 11** VANBRUGH STRING QUARTET 'Harp'. Beethoven: Op. 18 No 2; Op. 74; Op. 131.
February 18 LEOPOLD STRING TRIO. Beethoven: Op. 9 No 2. Schnittke. Bach.

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