

NEGATE THE NEGATION!

Rescuing Man from Nihilist Art and Materialist Science

By Duncan Williams

Editor's Preview: For the health of our society, the arts must mirror man's dignity and the sciences must not deny God. The failure of both to meet their responsibility is one of the grave ills of our time, argues the late Duncan Williams in his final essay of a distinguished career.

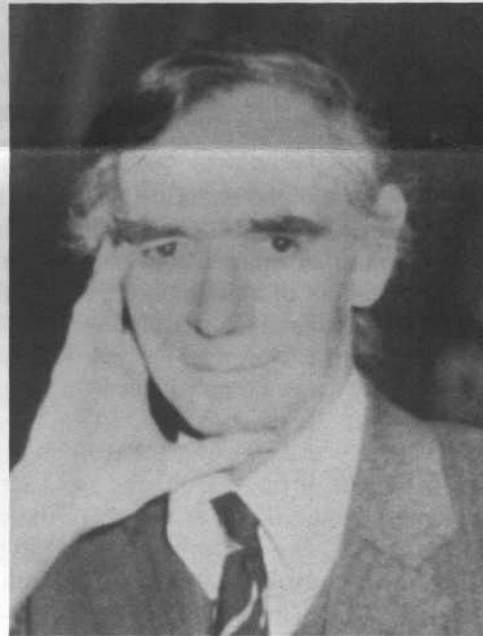
The British-born professor took his degrees at Oxford in the 1950s, subsequently teaching English there and at several American colleges. His book *Trousered Apes*, published in 1971 and now widely translated, made a sensation in Britain, Europe, and America with its critique of the moral disarray of contemporary literature.

A past visiting scholar at Hillsdale College, Mr. Williams returned to the campus in March 1985 to deliver this presentation as part of a Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on "The Theater in our Society: America's Cracked Mirror."

Continuing to West Virginia for a lecture engagement later the same week, he died suddenly, not yet 60 years old. It is a special honor for *Imprimis* to publish this ringing last testament of integrity and hope by Duncan Williams.

The cultural historian, Christopher Dawson, concluding his Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in 1947, declared: "The recovery of moral control and the return of spiritual order have now become the indispensable conditions of human survival." Believing as I do that the arts are not merely a mirror reflecting social and cultural values, but that they are powerful forces which shape and mold the way in which people live and behave (a view held by every major literary critic from Plato to T. S. Eliot), I have examined contemporary literature, drama, music, painting, the cinema, and television. In all these manifestations of the contemporary scene, one finds not only an absence of moral control and spiritual order, but in most instances an overt and deep hostility to any such restraining concepts.

Morality always involves a sentiment of submission because it demands the recognition of an authoritative norm, be it religious or secular, external, as in former times, or internal and self-imposed. The very terms "submission"



and "authoritative" appear to be anathemas to an age intoxicated with the concept of "freedom."

If, in the novels which he reads, in the plays and films which he sees, and in the philosophical and ethical treatises which are presented for his edification, Western man is continually and exclusively subjected to a vision of himself as a being—violent, animalistic, alienated, mannerless, and uncivilized, then is he not being encouraged to identify with such an image and to mold his own outlook and behavior to conform with such an image?

The creative artist, because of his greater sensitivity, is more aware than other men of the trends in his contemporary society which will shape the future. The artist is a prophet or seer. Then what future is presaged by the contemporary arts, saturated as they are with violence and animalism and what one critic has called "death-oriented hopelessness?" Can we recover any of that order, harmony and balance which characterized the

poetry of Pope, the music of Mozart, the paintings of Watteau, the landscaping of William Kent, if our relationship with nature, the environment, and our fellow-beings is increasingly disordered, inharmonious, and unbalanced?

Can great and enduring works of art be produced by men and women living in a society for which a growing number feel at best contempt and at worst a deep loathing and abhorrence? One obvious danger in the present situation lies in the fact that since so many talented artists do display marked anti-social tendencies, both public and critics may be fooled into mistaking mere anti-social posturing for genius. A much greater danger, however, lies in the production and wide dissemination of plays, books and films saturated with hatred and disgust, conveying only hopelessness and negation to a culture, and indeed a species, already suffering a visible and palpable loss of nerve.

How necessary is great and enduring art? Over the centuries, it has sustained and elevated mankind. It represents a conquest by humanity over the diverse and bewildering complexities of human nature and of the surrounding world. It results in "that clarification of life...a momentary stay against confusion" which Robert Frost maintained was the true aim and purpose of poetry. While recognizing that man can be (and frequently is) guilty of great cruelty and evil, it yet also depicts him as a being *capable* of displaying heroic and self-sacrificing traits. It presents a balanced and total view of the struggle between the light and the dark forces inherent in human nature. At its best it consoles man by making him aware of the limitations of his *own* nature, while at the same time stressing the enduring qualities and courage of *human* nature.

Scientists Once Sought God

Equally as damaging as the growing alienation and secularization of creative artists since about the time of Rousseau has been the same pattern of change in the attitudes of our scientists—those who formerly styled themselves (so revealing a title, that sounds so archaic now) natural philosophers.

In *Man and His Universe* Langdon-Davies writes as follows:

The whole history of science has been a direct search for God, deliberate and conscious, until well into the eighteenth century...Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Leibnitz and the rest did not merely believe in God in an orthodox sort of way; they believed that their work told humanity more about God than had been known before.

This statement is true, but one must remember that Plato's central philosophic doctrine that God was the measure of all things was quickly challenged by Protagoras who asserted that *man* was the measure of all things. Moreover, Democritus, who can be described as the father of modern skepticism and empiricism, saw the world as consisting simply of atoms and a void.

Today, thinking men are still divided broadly into two camps. One asserts that man is merely a walking bag of sea-water or a complex but predictable collection of reactions to various stimuli (as Dr. B. F. Skinner and certain other behaviorists assert). The other maintains that this is a case of crass temporal provincialism—that science and the scientific method pose at least as many questions as they answer, and that both modern science and poetry end in a metaphor.

It may be recalled that A. R. Wallace, Darwin's contemporary and co-discoverer with him of the principles of natural selection, challenged the Darwinian attitude to man when he asserted that artistic, musical and mechanical abilities could not be explained solely through a theory dependent on a struggle for existence. Some unknown spiritual element, Wallace insisted, must have contributed to the evolution of the human mind.

The biologist Sir Alister Hardy has remarked that mankind always appears to be enslaved by some fashionable dogma. In the Middle Ages men suffered from an appalling mental nightmare—the belief in a personal Devil and a real and localized Hell, not symbolically but quite literally. Hardy suggests that although it may horrify some of his colleagues, Bernard Shaw's gibe that science has become the superstition of the twentieth century yet may deserve to be taken seriously. He adds:

It is not, of course, science itself that constitutes the superstition, but the dogmatism that many of its exponents have added to it. I passionately believe in the validity of science and the scientific method, but just as strongly do I deplore the false assertions that science finds the mystery of the mind-body relationship to be unreal and has classed consciousness as an irrelevant illusion. Such dogmatic materialism could lead in the future to a world even more horrific than that created by the medieval mind, a future such as Aldous Huxley warned us of; or it could lead to our complete destruction, a possibility that was not even on the horizon when he wrote *Brave New World*.

The destruction to which Sir Alister refers is presumably that by nuclear warfare, but there is another more insidious threat to the human race *and that is the threat to the soul of man*. As C. S. Lewis once observed, when one sees through everything one sees in effect *nothing*. This is the nihilism which is the social and cultural product of misunderstood and misapplied scientific skepticism. It has led, step by step, to historical determinism and to a world in which man feels himself increasingly a spectator of the contemporary scene, powerless to affect its Gadarene march in any significant way.

The Inversion of Values

Railway compartments and lounge-bars, for example, are not normally filled with people debating the finer points of Marx or Freud or engaged in heated discussions regarding "providence, foreknowledge, will and fate." Oblivious as most of us may be to such ideas, however, the fact remains that the majority of opinion-molders in the contemporary world (dramatists, university teachers,

television theologians, and many others) have been infected by notions like these. And just as the full implications of the Newtonian world-view took possibly half a century to permeate the minds of the educated classes of the eighteenth century, so the spirit of nihilism and purposelessness is today seeping through every stratum of society, resulting in the only-too-evident eclipse of civilized values and beliefs which in turn may well bring about the total breakdown of society—the Hobbesian “war of all against all.”

Yet we march myopically ahead assuming that the inversion of values has not taken place. Having destroyed whole neighborhoods and communities to make room for motorways, highways or some other symbol of “progress,” we yet demand that men should behave as neighbors. In a world where naked power is seen to be supremely effective, one is still exhorted to believe that the meek shall inherit the earth.

Confronted by an inflationary situation in which every individual feels threatened and develops, not unnaturally, a tendency for self-regard and self-security, we demand from our fellows compassion, selflessness, and brotherly love. We preach honesty and pay convicted criminals astronomical sums for lecture-appearances or published memoirs. We erect gimcrack, featureless buildings designed to last only a few years, obliterating historic architectural legacies in the process, and extol stability.

In neophilic fashion we destroy the social infrastructure, naively assuming that the dependent moral and ethical edifice will miraculously survive and remain intact. If hypocrisy is the homage which vice pays to virtue, then seldom in the annals of human history can virtue have been so assiduously courted and flattered. Under these circumstances one cannot but recall the profound words of Pascal: “It is the nature of man to believe and love; if he has not the right objects for his belief and love he will attach himself to wrong ones.”

Wordsworth vs. Sartre

Two statements expressing dramatically divergent visions of human existence and experience, spanning as they do a century and a half, summarize and exhibit the violent dislocation of sensibility which threatens to erect a psychological “iron curtain” between modern man and all that has gone before. The first is from Wordsworth’s 1798 poem *Tintern Abbey*:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

The second is taken from a 1951 technical pamphlet entitled: *Atmospheric Homeostasis by and for the Biosphere*.

The first cautious approach to a classification of life, reached general agreement as follows: Life is one member of the class of phenomena which are open or continuous reaction systems able to decrease their entropy at the expense of free energy taken from the environment and subsequently rejected in a degraded form.

The first extract reflects a spirit of cosmic piety, of awe, reverence and a corresponding humility. Few, perhaps, have felt the presence of a transcendental power with the intensity of the young Wordsworth, and even he found the experience virtually incommunicable. Only a spiritual pauper, however, could pass through life without sharing, albeit to a diminished degree, that “sense sublime,” and that instinctive knowledge (apprehended rather than comprehended) that life *is* more than mere atoms and a void. Nor, in the past, was such piety confined to poets and mystics. Newton toward the end of his long life wrote movingly of what his contemporaries considered to be his almost super-human achievements: “I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

The second, self-styled “cautious approach to a classification of life,” not only illustrates, under the thin guise of caution, that dogmatic materialism which Hardy suggests is the greatest threat to the soul of modern man, but also provides a classical example of reductionism *ad absurdum*. For the mind responsible for the formulation of such a statement is itself subsumed within that which is being defined away and is therefore itself, implicitly and ineluctably, part of the total *non*-importance and *non*-sense predicated by the definition. Lest the reader feels that I am giving undue prominence to an obscure and irrelevant example of scientific gobbledygook, consider one statement from *Saint Genet* by that powerful molder of contemporary thought, Jean-Paul Sartre, which illustrates well enough the close relationship between dogmatic scientific materialism (scientism) and reductionist philosophy: “In any event, even after man does take a stand, his act is without significance, because we are still impossible nullities.”

The Miracle of Man

Faced with such a bleak, de-humanizing materialism, it becomes evident that an attempt must be made, in the words of Camus, to “negate the negation.” May I, therefore, offer the following alternative view of man and of his place in the universal order.

Most scientists agree that “in the beginning” there was a molten fiery ball destined to become man’s habitat—the earth. Over countless millions of years a cooling process took place, eventually leading to that state when waters covered the “face of the deep.” Through a process imperfectly understood, eventually tiny single cells

appeared in this water and by a seemingly inexorable process began to join and to complexify. This process of complexification, additivity, continued unabated until finally and miraculously appeared a creature capable of the rudiments of thought—ancestral man. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, “thought is born.”

Now since it is axiomatic that nothing can come from nothing, such thoughts must have been latent or embryonic in that original molten ball. To quote Teilhard again: “In the world, nothing could ever burst forth as final across the different thresholds successively traversed by evolution (however critical they may be) which has not already existed in an obscure and primordial way.” Henri Bergson has said that the life force sleeps in the mineral, dreams in the plant, stirs in the animal, and wakes in the human. The genesis of thought, however, remains the greatest mystery of them all, a miracle far transcending any others performed on this earth.

A materialist may suggest that what is here called “thought” is simply a highly complex interaction of electrical impulses, but this in no way reduces the mystery, for the very brain which he uses to invalidate or diminish the theory is itself only a similar collection of electrical impulses and it does not greatly matter whether that collection is styled “thought” or not. It is what I am using at this moment to create these words and what the reader is using to absorb and interpret them.

Although, as Teilhard points out, man is physically very much an animal “so little separable anatomically from the anthropoids that the modern classifications made by zoologists return to the position of Linnaeus and include him with them in the same super-family, the hominidae,” yet he is a being filled with qualities which set him dramatically apart from all other creatures. Man alone (and of course, the term is used generically: “male and female created He them”) has developed the capacity for sympathy and empathy; the ability to communicate abstract ideas and theories; to delight in small creatures such as puppies or kittens which would be merely prey for most other carnivores; to appreciate a sunset or a sonnet; to frame laws that regulate social intercourse and forbid violence, theft and murder.

Man alone has evolved mathematical formulae and stepped on the surface of the moon. His powers of invention have produced telescopes capable of detecting stars

and nebulae so distant that his lagging imagination can conceive of them only in light-years, and microscopes which reveal a world so infinitely small that he has to fall back on metaphoric language to describe it. All of this, and so much more, is the product of his thought-processes, latent in that molten fiery ball.

Obedience to the Unenforceable

So far as we are able to ascertain man is, apart from the Deity, the sole custodian of conceptual thought in the universe. This surely confers upon him a responsibility and a very special sort of dignity. The responsibility, if truly comprehended, demands that his thoughts and actions measure up to the uniqueness of his position, exercising, in a benevolent fashion, the consequent power which he enjoys, and recognizing that any enhancement of his own life or enlargement of his material aspirations if obtained immoderately—at the expense of other forms of life—is defeating not only of self, but ultimately of his evolutionary mission.

Sir Thomas Taylor, speaking at Aberdeen University in 1958, outlined a credo which not only summarizes the basis for civilized behavior but also provides an ethic for the problematical survival of humanity:

There are, of course, moral duties which the law will enforce. But beyond the sphere of duty which is legally enforceable there is a vast range of significant behavior in which, for various good reasons, law does not and ought not to intervene.... The whole tone of a society, indeed the very possibility of a free civilized society, depends on the obedience which men are willing to give to the unwritten laws whose transgression brings admitted shame.... Now this feeling of *obedience to the unenforceable* is the very opposite of the attitude, which is common enough, that whatever is technically possible is allowable.... This power of self-discipline, whereby men deliberately refrain from doing everything that is in their power to do, all along the range of human possibilities, is the very opposite of the fatal arrogance which asserts, whether in government, science, industry, or personal behavior, that whatever is technically possible is licit.

Such obedience to the unenforceable is, by definition, not easy to practice or inculcate, particularly in an age characterized by escalating violence, intemperance, and social and ideological polarization. But it appears to be the sole hope for man's continuing existence on this planet—a fertile but delicate oasis in the deserts of space—and, as yet, our only individual and collective home.



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