ORALITY, LITERACY AND THE IDEA OF THE SPIRITUAL

Stephen Prickett

"Of the making of books there is no end."

In a literate society we take it for granted that the transmission of our culture, knowledge, and methods of innovation – not to mention the basic processes of socialisation that underlie it – are done by means of writing and reading. So much so that we scarcely consider the wider implications of this assumption. Even in an era of radio, television and the telephone, for all but an increasingly marginalised minority of unfortunates, most of the business and even the collective awareness of our society is conducted through a highly stylised system of written symbols.

One reason why we tend to ignore this very obvious point is because, though it is not impossible, we find it very difficult and inconvenient to operate at more than one level of consciousness at a time. As anyone who has done proof-reading knows very well, in so far as we are conscious of the actual marks on the paper or screen in front of us, we cannot concentrate on their meaning; in so far as we concentrate on what is being communicated, we are largely unaware of the letters themselves. Similarly, when writing or reading we are very rarely aware of being literate; indeed, to be conscious of reading is very likely to inhibit our understanding of the meaning of what is being read! Yet once we do become aware of our basic dependence on literacy, we suddenly become aware of certain very important corollaries.

Again, this is a matter of levels – and their largely unconscious interaction. Literacy itself is dependent upon a further process of symbolism: that of language. The written word is thus at two removes from immediate experience: a symbolisation of a symbolisation. But, as we all know, such symbolisation is always a two-way process. If, in one sense, language describes and mediates the basic impressions of our senses, in another – and

perhaps more important sense – it also so organises our senses that it is very difficult to think of what non-linguistic perception might feel like. Thus when we see a tree, or a house, a jet airliner, or some animal, the visual perception is virtually indistinguishable from the (unconscious) verbalisation. Only occasionally, when we see something that we do not recognise or cannot label, do we realise what non-verbal perception involves. Even the question "is that a house ?" or "a tree ?" confers verbal meaning of a kind on the sense impression. An object for which we can find no label at all, whether descriptive, collective, functional or even interrogative, is oddly unsettling – and we go to great lengths to avoid it. It seems to be a psychological truth that there is no perception without interpretation. Indeed, Gombrich has pointed out, there is a sense in which we do not see things we cannot identify; we see in "wholes" even if they are mistaken wholes which subsequently must be corrected.[1]

I am not arguing that all interpretation is verbal – though much of it undoubtedly is. But just as interpretation influences – or, more positively – controls perception, so verbalisation clearly influences and often controls interpretation. If we needed illustration of this, we only have to consider how differently different languages symbolise the world. If, as Stephen Pinker has claimed, the story that the Eskimos have forty different words for "snow" is a myth,[2] on the other hand they do, it seems, perceive and articulate the qualities of snow with an accuracy that leaves other cultures illiterate in such "readings" – as Stephen Hoeg, for instance, shows so dramatically in his prise-winning novel, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow.*[3]

Similarly, and this is the point I am driving at, this "top-down" process is a normal (though, of course, not invariable) part of our discovery of the world. Though my observations of my own children's language acquisitions were (in the process described above) no doubt influenced by my prior reading of Piaget, it seems to me that children are natural platonists. They begin with platonic "forms" ('house", "tree", "ball" etc) and move from there to more subtle sub-divisions. At the next level of symbolism, for instance, adult verbalisation is more often influenced and controlled by the

processes of writing than *vice versa*. What we say, and the words we use, are more likely to come from our reading than from our sense experience. Just as our vocabulary and syntax shape our apprehension of the world around us, so our vocabulary and syntax are themselves shaped by our reading.

This leads me to the first main thesis in this paper: that what we mean by the "spiritual" is essentially a written and literary concept in precisely this sense, and that any meaningful discussion of what we mean by spirituality in our present age must therefore engage with the implications of this. The best way to explain what I mean by this is to turn to Walter J. Ong's ground-breaking book, *Orality and Literacy*. In it Ong makes a number of crucial distinctions between an oral and a literate culture.

Oral cultures are essentially *static*. This does not mean, of course, that they do not change at all – all literate cultures were once oral ones, after all. What it does mean is that oral cultures find it very difficult to *think* about change. When change comes it is either so gradual as to be unnoticeable over a single living memory, or unplanned, contingent, and bewildering – often with randomly Darwinian consequences, that can involve the decimation or extinction of the village, group, or tribe. The primary task in such a society is not innovation but remembering. Bruce Chatwin's fascinating book, *The Songlines*, vividly portrays the way in which Aboriginal peoples must learn their tribal songs in order to survive in their particular area. Encoded in the songs for each area is vital information concerning the location of water-holes, food, or possible dangers. If you have to travel over the territory of another tribe, it is not just a matter of courtesy but of survival to learn their songs first. In other areas of the world specific elders are charged with the task of acting as the tribal memory-bank, recalling vital genealogies, medicines, emergency diets in times of famine, etc. In West Africa the collective knowledge of the tribe can be stored not so much in songs as in proverbs. To be a respected elder means to know the proverbs of the village, clan, or tribe. In such cases the whole structure and syntax of the language can be essentially proverbial. Among the Mende of Sierra Leone, the English words "I'm hungry" are translated "An empty sack

can't stand by itself." Moreover the phrase "I have eaten" refers only to the staple diet of rice and palm-oil. Someone who tells you he has "not eaten for three days" may (or may not) have been eating something else. Rather than being poetic, such linguistic structures are, by definition, time-tested and functional, but they do not necessarily facilitate accurate dietary discussions.

In such a context the idea of "tradition" is profoundly different from that of our own Judeo-Christian culture. Where oral tradition represents the collected wisdom of all time – the equivalent, remember, of all the contents of all our libraries combined – the idea of "change" makes no sense at all – indeed, it is often suicidally dangerous. A mistake in the songlines could kill. Accuracy of repetition is paramount. This concept of tradition can, of course, persist even in semi-literate societies, and for very similar reasons: one thinks of Koranic schools in the Near East where students are obliged to learn by heart (though in written form) passages of the seventh-century Arabic of the Koran. Rabbinic schools teaching Hebrew to Jews who may speak anything from first-century Aramaic to modern American, or the medieval memorising of the Vulgate by peoples who had never spoken Latin present very similar concepts of tradition as blind repetition. Alongside such activities, however, a very different concept of tradition has existed for thousands of years, where *midrash* , or an ongoing tradition of exegesis and comment has always accompanied the teaching of the sacred texts. "What is the Torah ?" runs one Jewish catechism, with its answer, "It is midrash Torah" – it is the Law *and* its associated tradition. [4] The Law, sacred as it is, is incomplete without its ongoing tradition of comment and discussion that should accompany it. Here, of course, is the origin of what T. S. Eliot was to see as the distinctive quality of the great European literary tradition: its capacity for innovation and change. For him, only the new could truly be traditional.[5] But such a notion of tradition as change presupposes a firm grasp on what is being changed. A commentary on the Jewish dietary prescriptions – even the progressive rejections of it in the New Testament by Jesus, Peter and Paul – would be without meaning or use if we did not have the original texts themselves. Such a record of debate and

change is only possible in a literate and textually-based society.

In other words, literacy has permanently changed the way we think about tradition. Associated with this new meaning of tradition made possible by writing are two other key innovations. The first is the movement from "outer" to "inner". Reading was once quite as noisy a process as consulting the tribal memory-man. To read was to read aloud. In some early English manuscripts the injunction to the reader to "rede" can mean either to read for one's own personal edification, or to recite for the benefit of all present. The difference between the two interpretations is not so much one of vocalisation as of volume. At what point people started reading silently, to themselves, and therefore, in that sense at least, "internalising" what they were reading is unclear, but we do know that it was associated with devotional and religious exercises. St Augustine records his astonishment as a young man when, on paying an unexpected visit to St Ambrose studying in his cell, he found the holy bishop of Milan poring over a book *without moving his lips.* The fact that Augustine, who had moved in literate and educated circles all his life had never seen such a phenomenon before tells us much – as does his immediate conviction that this was a product of the most advanced spirituality.[6] At what point such internalising became the norm is difficult to determine, but we have sufficient records of the noise created by hard-working school classes to suggest that it persisted well into the eighteenth century, and we have records of so-called "blab schools" in the United States still going strong in the early nineteenth.

In the meantime, a second source of internalisation had transformed both author and readership: the invention of the movable-type printing-press. Protestantism was the product of advanced technology: not for nothing was the first book published by Gutenberg in Mainz a Bible. Whilst one should not exaggerate the spread of either printing or literacy across Europe, within two hundred years – by the middle of the seventeenth century – it was possible to assume that the Protestant faithful could, and did read the Bible in the privacy of their own homes even if, as so often, they read virtually nothing else. By becoming a commercial artefact, the Bible had

passed for ever beyond the institutional control of the Church (whether Protestant or Catholic) and just as readers were free to read it directly in terms of their own contexts and circumstances, so too were they free, and even encouraged, to internalise its message as speaking directly to them.

It is with this distinction in mind between orality and literacy – however crudely sketched here – that I want to distinguish between the "sacred" and the "spiritual". Though the former is common to societies the world over, whether oral or literate, it is essentially pre-literate in form; while the latter may indeed exist, and has no doubt existed, in oral societies, the mere fact that we have – by definition – no record of it until we come to written textual sources means that it was, more often than not, isolated, sporadic, and unable to constitute the kind of tradition across time and space that we now almost invariably associate with it. If we take the "sacred" in Rudolf Otto's classic sense of the "holy",[7] it involves fear of a semi-magical, numinous, even ghostly quality that is probably common to us all at some level, but is often below, or beyond, the threshold of articulation. It adheres to places, to rituals, even sometimes to beliefs that cannot be challenged. To dismiss it as "primitive" begs the question; it is almost certainly universal; but to the cry of the modern conservative, "is nothing sacred ?" the answer is probably – and perhaps regretfully – "less and less", at least in a literal sense. If it is to survive it may be that its explicitly metaphorical form, as in bonds of friendship, love, honour etc., may serve to remind us that it was always a metaphor for something "other" than ourselves, and our immediate self-interest.

If the "sacred" has always had about it something of an encounter with the alien and the other, the "spiritual" was, by contrast, always something to be internalised and made our own. It adheres less to particular places and rituals, than to people, ideas, and written texts. A tradition of spirituality is at once communal, and personal, commonly associated with the reading of particular holy books, whether Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, or Islamic, and often within the kind of discipline provided by a religious movement or monastic order: one thinks of Essenes, of Tibetan

mystics, and Christian organisations as diverse as the Benedictines, the Jesuits, the Quakers and the Confessing Church of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. To the degree that it is psychological, internal, and literary, it is also essentially dynamic. Spirituality is usually described by initiates not in terms of objects, nor even of states of mind, but in *metaphors of travel,* as a "way", a "path", and as a "journey".

Though the word "spirit" is, of course, a very ancient one, with roots in both Greek and Hebrew thought, "spirituality", as we now use it, is a comparatively modern word. Apart from one, slightly odd, use by the Scottish poet, William Dunbar, in the early sixteenth century, the earliest uses of the word cited by the OED come from the mid-seventeenth century. Such a meaning is itself the product of a long evolutionary process. In his fascinating and seminal article, "The Meaning of *Literal*",[8] Owen Barfield has pointed out that most of our words for inward and especially moral qualities were originally derived, as metaphors, from material things. Thus, for instance, the word "scruple" is a metaphor from the Latin *scrupulus,* a small sharp stone that might get into your sandal and so prevent you walking uprightly and evenly. "Noble" was originally a coin of high value; we now speak of "feelings" almost exclusively in terms of emotions; and so on. Since the root words from which our modern idea of "spirit" evolved (the Hebrew *ruach,* the Greek *pneumos,* or the Latin *spiritus*) all originally referred to wind, it would be easy to conclude that the word spirit was similarly originally a metaphorical construction of this kind. However, Barfield continues, to say that "spirit" is a metaphor in this sense would imply that there was already an idea of what it meant already present in the language, and this, of course, is not so. We have, therefore, to think of the wind as *always* having had a ghostly, numinous, and magical quality about it, and it was only when the notions of wind and spirit had finally been separated that the literal (and scientific) meaning of "wind" could finally emerge sometime around the seventeenth century. Similarly, it was only then that the idea of the "spirit" as a purely abstract, moral, and inward phenomenon, purged of all material associations could finally make its

appearance – which coincides with the coming into use of derivative terms such as "spirituality".

Whether in this process of what Coleridge called "desynonymy" other qualities may have been lost is beside the point – though if we were to have clear evidence that this was so, there would be nothing to stop those who wished to retrieve such a lost meaning, coining (or desynonymising) yet another term that would cover it. What is clear is that such an evolution of meaning was only possible in a literate and textually-orientated society. Desynonymy doubtless occurred thousands of times in oral societies, and, incidentally, we also know a little of some oral societies where the reverse seems to have happened, and a once-rich and complex language "degenerated" into a much cruder and more simplistic one.[9] There is no law of inevitable linguistic progress. My point is rather that, except in very rare (and usually highly debatable) instances, there is, by definition, no record of the process, and therefore no sense of it as constituting an ongoing and dynamic tradition. It is in this power to hold past and present in simultaneous focus that a literate society possesses, at least potentially, powers of spirituality and a sense of unfolding tradition almost impossible for an oral one.

By the way, let us have no clichés about "history being written by the victors". History is much more often the construct of the vanquished. If the Old Testament is not sufficient evidence, consider the development of Christianity itself – arising from the apparent final defeat of the Crucifixion. In more recent times we need only look at the romance of the defeated cavaliers in the English Civil War, the French Napoleonic legend, the oppression of the Irish Catholics, the Highland Clearances, Scarlet O'Hara and the Old South from the American Civil War, the Eureka Stockade, and now, even in the last few weeks, the flood of reminiscences of the stolen generation. What all these tales of the vanquished, the oppressed, and the exiled have in common, of course, is a written tradition, handed down and elaborated on from generation to generation. They embody the knowledge that there has been a change; that things were once different, that the

memory of these events must be told and re-told to coming generations.

If I am arguing that history, told and re-told in such an ongoing tradition, turns itself into a spiritual tradition, just as Jurassic greenstuff slowly over the ages transformed itself into coal, please note that this is *not* a moral judgement. We tend to see spirituality only as the antithesis of materialism, and to forget that there can be evil spirituality as well as good. The murderous hatreds of Ireland and the Balkans have been nurtured by powerful, but warped spiritual traditions, whether Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or Muslim. One of the strangest and most difficult things for us to understand, hearing the reminiscences of former Nazis and even former SS officers talking about their experiences in Germany of the 1930s, is that so many were genuinely motivated by a selfless idealism. We must always remember that the evil idealist is much more dangerous than the evil materialist.

My conclusion should, I think, be obvious – and deeply relevant to this particular enquiry. Not merely are writing and spirituality so historically intertwined, that separation of the two is virtually impossible, but it is to literature (in its broadest, post-romantic sense)[10] that we must look for the exploration and future development of this encounter between the human and whatever we may mean by the divine in the twenty-first century. Indeed, such a quest is vital, too, for the future of literature itself – and it is with this in mind that I want to elaborate my second thesis, that there is an innate connection between spirituality and exile.

The West is founded upon the mythology of exile. It was the experience of exile in Babylon that turned the Hebrews into the Jews, and laid the foundations both of modern Rabbinic Judaism and of its sister, Christianity. Indeed, we may argue that what in the end divided the two religions which had so much in common was their response to exile. Whether one views Christianity as an appropriation of Judaism depends on the model one uses to describe the separation between the two religions. Recent scholarship has tended to see early Christianity more in terms of a "party" or perhaps more

formally, even a sect, within Judaism, rather than being a initially new religion.[11] Some have even argued that Christianity was, and indeed still is, a form of Judaism.[12] According to this view, there eventually emerged from a highly pluralistic phase in the first century two dominant "Judaisms": Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. However much they might vary in the way they interpreted their tenets, we can find in both groups four so-called "pillars" of belief which constituted in effect a sufficient common core for us to speak of them as belonging essentially to the same religion: the ideas of monotheism, election, the Torah, and the Temple.[13] Whereas Rabbinic Judaism inclined towards a more literalistic view of them, Christianity was to develop an elaborate metaphorical interpretation of all four. Thus Hebrew monotheism was eventually to be expanded into the doctrine of the Trinity; the idea of the election of a "chosen people" was made to include the whole human race "called" to the Church; and the body of law and ritual contained in the Torah was reread in terms of the "spirit" as pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah. Perhaps most significant, however, in the light of later developments, was the idea of the Temple – from whence the metaphor of the four pillars was, of course, originally derived. There is evidence to suggest that until A.D. 70 the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem under James continued, unopposed, to participate in the worship of the Temple, although the prominence given in all four Gospels to Jesus's prophecy of its destruction might suggest that they saw it as already doomed. At the same time the imagery of the New Testament hammers home the message that the nascent Church was itself to be seen as the new eschatological Temple of God. Once the Second Temple had been destroyed in A.D. 70, this metaphorical reading of the Jewish tradition in terms of the Church was so reinforced that Christians felt no need to participate in the efforts of Rabbinic Judaism to rebuild the Temple or to take part in the final Jewish revolt early in the Second Century. Thus we find Irenaeus, for instance, at the end of the second century condemning the Ebionites, a surviving Jewish Christian sect, for still continuing to revere Jerusalem "as if it were the house of God".

Australia is unique in being founded in a spirit of exile. Not for us the faith of the Pilgrim Fathers sailing away from persecution to found a new society in God's image; not for us – at that stage – even the lure of gold or the prospect of honour and fame. Our coins do not bear slogans such as *In God we Trust* but, as if to socialise us into our inverted context where swans are black, Christmas falls at midsummer, and icy winds blow from the South, they carry wordless images of the echidna, the platypus, the kangaroo, and, most alien of all, an aboriginal warrior gazing at the stars of the Southern Cross. These and other unconscious ironies of exile have bitten deeper into the Australian psyche than many recognise. Yet its results are there for all to see. They have become enshrined in the language Australians speak and the books they write. Why is the vast and almost uninhabited interior called "the outback"? Because an exiled and sea-borne people have huddled together along the sea coast, creating the most urbanised society in the world, facing the ocean, metaphorically *with their backs to the land.* Why is a farm called "a station", if not to suggest that it is only a temporary resting-place, and that "home" – that peculiarly domestic Anglo-Saxon notion – is always to be found somewhere else? It has become a commonplace of Australian literary studies to recognise that we are essentially afraid of our vast and beautiful landscape, and remain uneasily, if unconsciously, aware that it is alien and disturbing.

It is also, I suspect, one of the reasons why twentieth-century Australian literature is one of the richest national literatures of the English-speaking world (what I once heard described by a Frenchman as *Les Pays Anglo-Saxophone).* But that is not my thesis here. It is rather that this ambivalence, this tension between alienation and attraction, between exile and belonging, so inescapable in Australian literature is not something peculiar to Australia, nor even to colonial literatures, but is fundamentally inherent in *all* literary evocations of landscape.

There is, I think, no need to elaborate to an audience such as this reasons for upholding the thesis that "landscape" as we understand the word is created by literature: that it is, to an astonishing degree, the product

of the written and above all, the printed word. Those who, for instance, have read Marjorie Hope Nicolson's seminal study *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*[14] will know the astonishing story of the transformation of our sensibilities towards mountains from loathing to awe in the last few hundred years. The earliest recorded mountaineer was St Bernard, whose holiness and powers of self-mortification were established for all time when he climbed a major Alpine peak – thereby performing, as a supreme act of penance, the most unpleasant act it was possible to conceive of. Even the poet Gray, visiting the Lake District only a few years before Wordsworth settled there, was overwhelmed by sensations of "horror"; though by that time, of course, a person with any pretence to real feeling could be expected to submit to a great deal of inconvenience to get a properly aesthetic sensation of horror.

Part of the peculiar power that Wordsworth's best landscape poetry has exercised on later generations is due to precisely that tension between pleasure and repulsion. In The Prelude he describes himself as "fostered alike by beauty and fear", and, as the more sensitive critics have often noted, a sense of fear, or depression is a concomitant of much of his best writing. Many would date the beginning of Wordsworth's poetic decline from the time that he lost that feeling of exile he describes in his "Immortality Ode" and first began to feel himself truly at home in his native landscape.

The more one looks at the great celebrations of the spirit of place and the writers and the works that have transformed a particular locality to a universal myth, the more one is struck by the close association of these two poles of attraction and alienation. In other words, there seems to be a close, if paradoxical, connection between the spirit of place and the spirit of exile. This is most obvious, of course, with those writers or artists who have come upon their "place", wherever it may be, from the outside. Anyone who has seen "New Worlds for Old", the recent exhibition of early American and Australian landscape painters at the Australian National Gallery, will recognise immediately what I mean. Perhaps the most striking literary example of this is Kipling, who, after leaving India, and failing to find

himself on the banks of the Connecticut River with his new American wife, moved to England, to Sussex, first to Rottingdean, near Brighton, and then finally to Batemans, a Tudor manor house in the Weald at Burwash. It is this landscape in and immediately around Burwash that, through his two great volumes of children's stories, *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and Faries,* we have come to think of as the Kipling country, an area with as distinct a flavour and atmosphere as Wordsworth's Lake District or Hardy's Wessex. What is significant here, of course, is that Kipling chose his landscape. He was not, like Wordsworth and Hardy, a native of it.

Though similar acts of literary appropriation were necessary to those expatriate Americans Henry James at Rye, and T. S. Eliot in London (not to mention Canterbury), Kipling's appropriation of Burwash was perhaps one of the most spectacular appropriations of a landscape ever attempted by an exile. The two volumes of Puck stories are not just an attempt to teach children a sense of history (though they have indeed done that for many children, including myself); they are also peculiarly about the spirit of a particular place. Because the landscape of England is intensely familiar it must be, in effect, defamiliarised for us before it can be "read" and understood – decoded as an exercise in hermeneutics. Puck's own song sets the theme:

> See you the dimpled track that runs,
> All hollow through the wheat?
> O that was where they hauled the guns
> That smote King Philip's fleet.
>
> See you our little mill that clacks,
> So busy by the brook?
> She has ground her corn and paid her tax
> Ever since Doomsday Book.
>
> See you our stilly woods of oak,
> And the dread ditch beside?
> O that was where the Saxons broke,
> On that day that Harold died...

Not surprisingly, those lines formed the motto for W. H. Hoskins' book, *The Making of the English Landscape,* which almost by itself

established a new academic discipline. He demonstrated as never before the degree to which that particular landscape contained within itself the still decipherable signs of its own past. Hedges and field boundaries in the Weald are often over a thousand years old, and frequently mark the boundaries between one Romano-British estate and the next. One of his most dramatic television programmes on this same theme had him standing in a grassy field surrounded by sheep on the Kent/Sussex borders with what looked like a large half-timbered manor house in the background. To the left were some low wooded mounds. "This looks a pleasant rural scene," he commented, "but in fact it's slag"; a point he proved simply by digging his heel into the black grit under his feet:

> Those wooded mounds are Roman slag heaps from the iron-works they established here. The splendid-looking house behind me is that of a wealthy Elizabethan arms-manufacturer. In the valley over there are the hammer-ponds where the cannon were forged to defeat the Spanish Armada...

Similarly Kipling himself records how in digging a well on his land his workmen found "a Jacobean tobacco-pipe, a worn Cromwellian latten spoon and, at the bottom of all, the bronze cheek of a Roman horse-bit."

> In cleaning out an old pond which might have been an ancient marl-pit or mine-head, we dredged two intact Elizabethan "sealed quarts" that Christopher Sly affected, all pearly with the patina of centuries. Its deepest mud yielded us a perfectly polished Neolithic axe-head with but one chip on its still venomous edge.[15]

But Kipling is not just concerned to appropriate artefacts, or even just a literary tradition: he wants to take over history itself. "England," he wrote in delight just after moving to Burwash, "is a wonderful land. It is the most marvellous of all foreign countries I have ever been in."[16] Right at the heart of his saga of the domestic landscape is the insistent but muted refrain of the outsider: it is not the natives who have made England what she is, but the new-comers, the invaders, the settlers, the exiles. Thus in *Cold Iron*, the stone-age Neolithic men are driven back and subdued by the Celtic iron-age men. In the Roman stories civilisation is upheld by the discipline and

loyalty of the young Centurion, Parnessius, who, though he is actually born in Vectis, the Isle of Wight, is a Roman by breeding and by training. And so it goes on. Even the old Gods must give way to the conquering new ones; Woden becomes Wayland the Smith, himself caught up in the Sussex iron-working – grateful for a job shoeing a horse. Hugh the Saxon is conquered by Richard the Norman. The tension between stasis and change forms a constant dialectic. On the surface, England is ancient and unchanging; at the same time that timeless quality is actually the product of constant innovation and change – with constant renewal from outside. Thus, though the story does not go so far, we must not forget that it is being told by the latest lord of the manor, a Bombay-born interloper with an American wife whose Anglo-American children will in turn one day inherit this land. The cruelest confirmation of Kipling's dialectic was, of course, reserved for the future. His only son, the so-called "Dan" of the story, was to be killed in the First World War, and Batemans was eventually to be taken over by the organisation meanwhile being funded by Beatrix Potter and others at the far end of the country: the National Trust.

Such reversals would not have surprised another of the great creators of place whom we have already mentioned: Joseph Conrad. He was, you will recall, born in the Ukraine of Polish parents (Poland then being under Russian domination) and only learned English at the age of twenty – having already mastered Russian, French, and Spanish. If ever there was a dramatic choice of a venue and language by a novelist, it was Conrad's. Having eventually left the sea, he bought a house at Barham, just south of Canterbury, and he is in fact buried in a churchyard in Canterbury. Nevertheless, if we think of Conrad and the spirit of place, we would normally think, I suspect, of the South China Sea rather than the South East of England; but that is because, of course, we unconsciously tend to think of "place" in terms of dry land. But Conrad's greatest evocation of place, is of course, of a waterway – the Thames estuary – at the beginning of *The Heart of Darkness*.[17]

So great and splendid is that rhetorical drum-roll of achievement that

generations of students have been caught out by the famous question: Where *is* the Heart of Darkness? The answer, of course, is not the Congo, but London. Conrad, like Kipling, never loses his sense that "this, too, has been one of the dark places of the earth" – and that between the centre of power and the colonial system that supports it there is a close and intimate link – but whereas for Kipling this is in the end a creative tension, for Conrad the layers of irony are so dense and ambiguous that we cannot in the end be sure. Cook, for instance, is not mentioned. Drake was, but he, after all, was a pirate; Franklin's men ended with cannibalism.

Here, at least, the spirit of exile led not towards the discovery of a more abiding city in England's green and pleasant land, but to a vision of the city of dreadful night – the exile of the spirit. But let me be clear: just as spirituality can be good or bad, exile is not in itself a guarantee either of spirituality or of aesthetic success. It was left to another outsider to try and spell out in detail on the same landscape what Conrad had merely implied. Russell Hoban is one of what has now become a great tradition of American writers settling in England and rewriting the English landscape in the image of their own exile. In *The Medusa Frequency* , for instance, he retells the myth of Orpheus and Euridice in London, and, with an inspired touch, makes his Underworld out of the London Underground. In the 1980s his novel *Riddley Walker* attracted considerable critical attention, and some praise for its bold attempt to show a post-nuclear world of South-East England.

The darkness and savagery of Conrad's Congo has been brought home to the familiar countryside of East Kent, from the Isle of Sheppey in the north, to Thanet in the east, and Dover and Folkstone in the south; a ring of towns and historic places linked for two thousand years by a radial network of Roman roads around their centre point, Canterbury. It is a bold setting. Canterbury has been a town of crucial importance in English history for more than two thousand years. The oval shape of its Roman walls – almost unique in Europe – indicates that it was already too large and populous a centre by the time of the Roman conquest to be re-formed into the standard

rectangular pattern of a Roman city. In the dark Ages it was a Royal Capital; it was the place where Christianity was introduced into England, and it has been the ecclesiastical capital ever since. At the Norman Conquest the Bayeux Tapestry was almost certainly made there – probably designed by a Saxon Monk.[18] Even the railways came early: the Whitstable and Canterbury railway is as old as the more famous Liverpool and Manchester – and even had its own tunnel. In literary terms, Canterbury is the place of Chaucer, of Becket, of the Ingoldsby Legends – and, of another anglicised American, T. S. Eliot. Hoban's story, however, is set in the distant future, some two thousand years after an unimaginable nuclear catastrophe – almost certainly a war – which has reduced the few inhabitants to a state of almost total barbarism. The survivors – if we ignore the mutants – live in stockaded villages with the heads of their enemies stuck on poles after the manner of Traitor's Gate in London, or, more in keeping with the general imagery, Kurtz's house in *The Heart of Darkness.* Like the slaves in the Conrad novel they have to work together on great projects to do with reclaiming scrap metal whose purpose is only dimly understood, if at all – but at the end of the day, there seems to be no colonial power in charge. All they have to cling to are a few fragments of legend and poetry welded together in a religious ritual based upon a Punch and Judy show.

The concept is an excellent one, and Hoban's own position as the outsider, appropriating for himself a landscape at once familiar and alien, is so like what we have begun to see as a general pattern in such cases that I think it is worth while pausing to see why this particular novel should be the failure that it seems to me to be.

The first point is that Hoban simply does not know his landscape. He has not walked over it, breathed it, lived in it as Kipling and Conrad in their own ways had done. He gives any reader who, like myself, knows the area well, the impression that he visited Canterbury on a day-trip; was interested by the legend of St Eustace, and bought himself an inch-to-a-mile ordnance survey map to read on the train back to London. He has Riddley, for instance, walking impossible distances overnight – especially given that we

are told there are no roads. Having got him finally to Canterbury the best he can do with the situation is to make him find the odd carved fragment of the cathedral. There is no tension with this landscape – no stubbornly intractable spirit of place.

The second point to make is that Hoban has broken the most fundamental boundary that divides the place-fiction from science-fiction: he has seen fit to alter human nature itself. These post-nuclear humans are not the natives of Kipling's England: Hal-o'the Draft, old Hobden, and their ancestors. They are stuck in a time-warp, totally alienated from their landscape and unable to accommodate themselves to it. Two thousand years is the span of *Puck of Pook's Hill*, yet in that time *these* people have done nothing, invented nothing, created nothing. That, to put it bluntly, is not to be human as we know it. It is as if the people of modern-day Kent still felt themselves to be survivors of the Fall of the Roman Empire, speaking a version of dog-Latin and remembering in garbled phrases and meaningless rituals the glories of Classical civilisation. There was indeed such a period: a local Saxon warlord at Horsham, in the Sussex Weald, in the sixth or seventh century did turn out some crude coins with the words "Dux Britanicum" upon then – either a vainglorious boast, or perhaps, more pathetically, a piece of folk-memory of something that had once nearly been: what Geoffrey of Monmouth was to call "the matter of Britain". But culture-shock, even of the end of civilisation as we know it, does not last for ever. The only people we know of so far to have been bombed back into the stone-age by nuclear weapons have been the Japanese, and, even without American aid to rebuild, any fiction that had them still gazing forlornly at the ruins of Hiroshima in the year four thousand would be demanding a willing suspension of disbelief beyond most of us. Once you have altered human nature that radically you have cut the string that ties us to our landscape. Hoban's is a real landscape, but we do not believe it; Tolkein's Shire is entirely fictional, and inhabited by creatures with furry toes called Hobbits, but readers believe in it and know it intimately because it is inhabited by creatures like ourselves.

Equally curious is the fact that over this same period of time the language of these non-humans has not changed either. It is the orally-transmitted language of the street-wise urban ghetto, not the language of a country people who would be able to name every species of tree and kind of soil, whatever they might or might not know about "savrering gallack seas". Whatever dog-Latin they spoke around Kent in the fourth century, four hundred years later, even if the technology had declined, the richness of Anglo-Saxon art and poetry gives us evidence of a brilliant new civilisation that was centred upon the Saxon city of Canterburgh.

The third, perhaps the most serious charge of all, and my main theme today, is that Hoban has failed to appropriate the necessary literature to command his setting. This follows from what I was saying earlier about the literary nature of the spirit of place. Kipling and Conrad were careful on entering a space to recognise the ghosts of the place and to propitiate them and their memories. This is not, as it were, a matter of literary courtesy; it is in the end a matter of fictional literacy. Hoban chose for his setting a space filled with ghosts, and because he cannot apparently see them, they return to haunt and crowd him out. Conrad he knows, and, as I have said, I believe he uses to good effect. But did Hoban ever hear of someone called Jane Austen, I wonder? The place where Granser and Goodparley reinvent gunpowder and so promptly kill themselves, you will recall, with somewhat heavy-handed irony, is named in the story, "Good Mercy". Here they are arriving:

> Time we come over the Brundel Downs it wer broad in the day. Stil raining it wer. Looking down from the hy groun in to the aulders you cud see in to the chard coal berners fents. Smoak and steam coming up in the rain from the harts and huts all huddelt they were crouching in the wood like girt old shaggy wet naminals sleaping. The harts with roun backs and the huts with humps. Beyont them you cud see the rivver you cud hear it running hy in the col grey rainy morning.[19]

Like the other places names in the novel, the name "Good Mercy", with its possible ironic reference to the merciful effects of the failure to reinvent the weapons of mass destruction, is also a play on the real name of the village: Godmersham. But Godmersham has other associations. The name is Saxon:

Godmaer's Ham, or Godmaer's "river meadow" on the banks of the river Stour ('Sour" to Riddley's people). It had belonged in the middle ages to the Canterbury Benedictines who had built the church there. In the early eighteenth century Godmersham Park had been built: a superb, if somewhat eccentric Palladian House, looking south over fine parkland, and north, across the river, to the sweep of the Downs, along the crest of which runs the Pilgrim's Way: a ridgeway track immeasurably older than Chaucer's pilgrims or the two Roman roads that traverse the park below, which was used for exporting Cornish tin for the European bronze founderies twelve thousand years ago. In 1797 Godmersham Park was inherited by Edward Knight, Jane Austen's elder brother who had been made his uncle Thomas Knight's heir on condition he changed his name. From then on the Park, together with the other Knight estate at Chawton in Hampshire, was one of his sister's favourite places – and according to her most recent biographer, almost certainly the principal model for Mansfield Park – with all its carefully cultivated paradisical associations.[20] Indeed, according to some critics, it represents for Jane Austen the "earthly paradise': exclusion from which first gave humanity its archetypal experience of exile. (Edward's daughter, who became mistress of Godmersham Park, was, incidentally, called Fanny.)

"Granser and Goodparley at Mansfield Park" sounds like the name of a mad Ph.D. Thesis, but the point is a complex one. Hoban, like Kipling, is trying to evoke the spirit of a place; but whereas Kipling's technique depends on appropriation, Hoban's depends on sterilisation. He has deliberately taken a familiar landscape in order to de-familiarise it so that we can see just how strange is the tale his narrator is trying to tell us. Now there is nothing new or necessarily flawed about such a technique. Conrad and Kipling are both masters of the art. Hoban fails, I believe, not because he does not manage to evoke the spirit of a place, but because he does not convince us that it is *that* place rather than some other. Conrad's vision of the Thames estuary is a defamiliarised one, but it could only be there, and nowhere else. Prove that it is really the mouth of the Hudson or Botany Bay, and the story has lost its meaning. H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* similarly depends for

much of its impact on placing the horrific improbability of the Martians in a recognisably familiar London landscape. It might be possible to argue that the siting of Hoban's "Good Mercy" at Mansfield Park is a superb, if savage, example of conscious literary irony. But I can find no textual evidence whatsoever that Hoban's story *does* depend upon it being Jane Austen's Godmersham. Indeed, since it is unrecognisable were it not for that map, I must assume it is not.

In fact, I think we do know perfectly well where it is. The novel belongs to a very popular tradition of apocalyptic American fiction – more films than novels – in which the immediate survivors of a post nuclear holocaust eke out a precarious living from a fundamentally inhospitable landscape; for, with its continental seasons and lawless frontier traditions, the American landscape, the landscape of Hoban's own Pennsylvania childhood untempered by central-heating and air-conditioning, is a much harsher one than the soft muted greenness of gulf-stream Europe. The racial struggle between the people and the mutants or Outlanders is also a familiar one, but it belongs to the urban jungles of America's twentieth-century cities, and not the Kentish countryside of Jane Austen. The fear of civilisation breaking down and reverting to anarchy is, interestingly, a peculiarly American nightmare; the Europeans have experienced it – more than once in their long history – and know that whatever happens to the people, the place has a more enduring spirit. Besides, cities don't break down like that. Look at Leningrad in 1943; Berlin in 1945; Beirut in 1989.

"The world," wrote D. H. Lawrence his essay on "The Spirit of Place" in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, "is a great dodger, and the Americans the greatest. Because they dodge their very own selves."[21] Hoban's dodging has taken him all the way across the Atlantic, but he has, like all genuine travellers, brought his own self with him. Lawrence continues:

> The artist sets out – or used to – to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist's and the tale's. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the

tale from the artist who created it.[22]

Though I share neither Lawrence's hubris, nor his proclaimed distrust of the artist (which incidentally, I do not believe), I hope today that I have been performing something of the critic's proper function.

Exile and spirituality are themes deeply interwoven into Australian literature: one thinks of just the resonances of the name Xanadu in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*. More recently, I think of the extraordinary effectiveness of Peter Carey's image of the floating iron and glass church on the Bellingen River, in the film of *Oscar and Lucinda*. Are both these images of immigrant nostalgia and inappropriateness, or do they in their own, more than slightly grotesque way, only re-enact what Romans, Saxons, and Normans did with the religions they brought in and laid in turn upon the equally inappropriate landscape of England? Working in Glasgow, I never cease to marvel at the way in which the wholly indigenous Wee Free Kirk has internalised the three-thousand year-old songs of an exiled semitic people in a semi-desert land far to the South, and rejoice in their native cultural tradition of the Scottish metrical psalms.

Spirituality is not merely a two-edged sword, it is a peculiarly sharp one: the sharpest we have. If exile is not an anomaly, but for us, the people of the book, the normal condition of our lives, that is no guarantee either of our superior spirituality nor of our heightened sensitivity to landscape and its history. As all the great artists and spiritual leaders have always known, its price is always living dangerously, with few certainties, the constant possibility of failure, and, in this world, no abiding city.

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[2] Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, Penguin Books.
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[4] See Michael Wadsworth, "Making and Interpreting Scripture", *Ways of Reading the Bible*, ed. Michael Wadsworth, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981.
[5] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays*, Faber, 1933.
[6] "When he read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were

not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud." (*Confessions*, vi. 3). See also Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, HarperCollins 1996. p. 42.

[7] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

[8] Owen Barfield, "The Meaning of *Literal*", *Metaphor and Symbol*, eds. Basil Cottle and L. C Knights, Bristol: Butterfield, 1960 (reprinted in *The Rediscovery of Meaning*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1977).

[9] The Mayan language and mathematical notation, a written system that was unknown to the later people living in the area (who may or may not be their descendants), has been cited as one example; another possible example has been the loss of vocabulary and technology among the Tasmanians prior to white settlement – who had apparently lost the arts of navigation and fishing which archaeology confirms they once possessed.

[10] There is an extensive body of work available on this history of the word "literature". Apart from my own *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, and *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, I would call attention to *The Literary Absolute: the Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, trs. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, and *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, by Andrew Bowie, Routledge, 1997.

[11] I am indebted here, and in the rest of this paragraph, to Professor Richard Bauckham's paper "Christianity within Judaism" delivered to the Scottish-Scandinavian Conference on "Growth Points in Biblical Studies", in Glasgow, April 1993.

[12] See, for instance, G. Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism: Jewish Thought 300 B.C.E to 200 C. E.*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63* B.C.E. to 66 C. E., S.C.M. Press, 1992; M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology*, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991; and J. D. G. Dunn, ed., Jews and Christians: The Parting of the ways, A.D. 70 to 135, Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1993.

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[18] See David J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986.

[19] Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker*, Cape, 1980. p. 184.

[20] Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988. ch. 17.

[21] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Penguin, 1971. p. 7.

[22] ibid., p. 8.