

*Sliver of  
Silver*

*Monographs: 2000*



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I

There are the depths within my soul that elude articulation; there are the longings and buried memories that roam silently in the subterranean primordial soup of my being.

Occasionally, I hear them speaking to me, but very often it is in a language as inexplicable as the night; still, there is usually a strange familiarity about them, a sense of déjàvu as if I've been through and experienced all these before.

Perhaps that is as close as I'll ever get to those unfathomable depths, at least for the most part of my conscious life...

Once in a while, however, a window opens to reveal (albeit briefly) another dimension that transcends time and space. I cannot articulate it; yet I sense an incomprehensible kinship with it, as though my life is an integral part of it, or at least linked to it at an elemental level.

It is not really something to 'arrive' at; it is more like a 'state' of being. There is beauty and sublimity, enigma and mystery beyond explication. There is enchantment and epiphany, and simultaneously a vague sense of muted futility at not being able to express it meaningfully or sustain it temporally.

There is life in every sense of the word...

## II

How do I articulate the thoughts that arise deep within me? Like the distant strains of Elgar's sublime "Nimrod" from his *Enigma Variations* or Ravel's *Adagio Assai* from his *Piano Concerto in G*, those hazy impressions drift lazily in semi-conscious nonchalance. Content to remain quietly enigmatic, they leave me with feelings of incomprehensible dimensions of existence, as though there are layers within layers of unexplored (and probably unexplorable) mysteries in life.

Yet, once in a while, they surface occasionally - sometimes bewilderingly and terrifyingly so, sometimes reassuringly comforting in their affirmation of the presence of greater depth and meaning in life. Most of the little epiphanies I have experienced (that sense of some wondrous jewel or genuine nobility in human existence) have been prompted by seemingly insignificant encounters or moments: the sincere smile of a stranger; the distant glow of a star whose light has taken 2.2 million years to reach my eyes; the singularly desperate cry for redemption of Ophelia or the Lady of Shallot over yearnings unattainable; the transcendental song of other-worldly proportions of the nuns as they walk to the guillotine in Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*; the appreciative words of a student who has been touched in some way or other by what I have to

share; the deeply moved and beautiful gaze of a friend who genuinely appreciates a painting or poem of mine... There are so many more of such instances; I cannot do justice to them.

There are also the darker promptings from within which move my soul to profound melancholy. There is the strong sense of the unfinished or incomplete in life. Often it hurts in ways that cannot be explicated because it cannot be pinned down. After all, what I want in life seems so simple: to experience the beauty of life and share it with others positively. By beauty, I do not just mean aesthetic beauty; I refer to that sense of sublimity offering a glimpse into other layers and dimensions of existence that will enrich our lives. Yet I sense that within those other dimensions are deep-seated yearnings, longings and needs which call for attention.

Hence my anxious and obsessive nature: that striving for utter perfection of form and content in an outwardly imperfect world.

What does the melancholia say to me? Does it speak of past hurts and imperfect genes that I have inherited? Does it cry for attention and care? Does it call for forgiveness and a complete surrender of my being? I hear and I try to listen. Still, perhaps I have not been listening enough. I have slowly forged and moulded my reality but the soul still yearns for love and attention. How do I love what I am and what I have been and what I will be?



***That striving for utter perfection of form and content in  
an outwardly imperfect world***

### III

Is it pretentious idealism on my part to imagine that I can truly make a difference in this world? Is it pueristic naïvety to believe that each word, thought, action (or non-action) has some meaning, however small or insignificant, that will somehow or other enrich humanity? There is a deep mystery, I sense, behind the jaded nonchalance of modernist cynicism: a mystery that transcends the slippery attempts at articulating "the meaning of it all" - for there is not one meaning by many, many meanings. Each of our realities seem to co-exist (and often clash) in a precarious counterpoint of values juxtaposed (or sometimes superimposed?) upon each other.

What do my neuroses say to me? How much more do I have to forgive or relinquish? Sometimes I feel as though I have given all that I am, but I am trapped within my physical being and the illusion of time.

We are rich and complicated, with profound depths which we rarely get glimpses of in those utterly brief moments of being. I would like to think of them as minor epiphanies in life which occasionally illuminate an aspect of the mystery of creation. But they are not always pleasant or reassuring. Sometimes they terrify with their incomprehensibility. Sometimes they do not illuminate but cast an impenetrable shadow on existence. Sometimes they seem to

obliterate all sense of beauty and meaning in life like a spell that lies heavily and immovable on one's life.

At times like these I do not know what to do. I am stopped in my tracks and am unable to see beyond the shadowy eclipse. And I often feel alone and inarticulate because it is not sadness that I can identify with (perhaps that is not the right word) but an unfathomable perplexity and degree of frustration at not being able to draw them out from the depths of my being and surrendering them.



***Sometimes they do not illuminate but cast an impenetrable shadow on existence***

## IV

Shadows are everywhere; there can be no light without them. That Pythagorean dualism ubiquitously permeates every aspect of life.

It is a mystery, but one that is as clear as night and day!

Like all mysteries, it harbours with it truths about our natures that lie deep beneath surface masks. This is not to deny the value of masks; they still are a dimension of our personality - one which we would like the public to see and yet simultaneously one which we may occasionally drop to reveal even more complex depths and shadows to our personalities.

I do not think that masks are necessarily negative means of hiding our true selves or hiding behind the seemingly harsher realities of existence. Masks have mysteries of their own which reveal further complexities to our natures and reflect a part of our souls. They speak to us if we are willing to listen. Masks themselves are multilayered and characterful. They may speak to us in rituals and rites of communal living. They may be means by which we assume or aspire toward being able to transcend the limitations of our humanity. Yet they are human and contribute to who we are. They are and will always be a part of us the way shadows will always follow us. We can't run away from them; nor can we deny their

value. But we can learn to appreciate and listen to what they have to say to us.

My neuroses are dark, deep shadows, but they certainly do not try to hide! They call for attention, but often I do not know what to do about them. Perhaps I needn't do anything but just listen and reflect upon their mysteries. They seem to speak of needs for security, comfort and reassurance which I may lack. My father's leaving and my ambiguous feelings (loss, frustration, love, betrayal and acceptance all incoherently muddled up into a ball of inexplicable emotions) are shadows that silently trail behind me everywhere I go. My sense of identity and who I really am and am meant to be in this variegated world are immediate concerns which, although not particularly disturbing, sometimes creep up from behind and throw me off balance every once in a while!



***A pastel golden mist that slowly warms to the glow of the morning sun***

## V

Listening to Saint-Saëns' *Piano Concerto in G Minor* is like waking up to the early call of Spring, with the yellow-green leaves rustling in the cool, moist breeze carelessly sweeping across the Golden Gate in San Francisco, still partially enveloped by a pastel golden mist that slowly warms to the glow of the morning sun.

The crisp clarity of the opening bars with their melodious chromaticism and lyrical trills is like the sudden awakening of the senses after a deep, silent slumber. Alert with a heightened sensitivity to the spirit of the music, I am drawn by the purity of the soloist's articulation of Saint-Saëns' intimately Romantic and simultaneously Classical vision.

Although my impressions of San Francisco are fragmented and tinted with the nostalgia of a Romantic sentimentality that is receding into the nebulous depths of memory, the immediacy of the music lifts them to the surface of the present, albeit only momentarily.

The rich, deep sonorosity of the orchestra in dialogue with the soloist adds layers upon layers of colour - at first a warm shade of maroon which deepens and then suddenly bursts forth in a spectacular spectrum of gold and silver and bronze and violet and

turquoise all simultaneously. It is briefly dazzling - only briefly so - and all subside to a warm yellow glow, like the golden mist at sunrise.

There is, quaintly, a hint of sadness in this experience: a sadness which deepens the soul as it reveals the awesome beauty of God's creation that is at once so intimate and at the same time inexplicably detached from day-to-day life. Perhaps, to paraphrase Browning, this yearning for the sublime and the seeming impossibility of it all is what Heaven is for: we have to reach for the unattainable, trapped as we apparently are in the constraints of time and place. Yet Saint-Saëns' music, like that of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, and countless others, have shown that Heaven is here and now, while simultaneously timeless.

Oh, how moved I was, almost to tears, when the choir's voice, like approaching angels from Heaven, soared above in a rapturous moment of pure ecstatic beauty towards the end of the performance of Mahler's second symphony in the Melbourne Town Hall! That brief moment of being was like experiencing the whole world in a grain of sand! How right Blake is, yet how often do we sensitively enough perceive this spiritual otherness? How much attention do we pay to the transcendental elements of the ordinary?

Perhaps, after all, nature does not want the "stuff to vie strange forms with (our) fancy". It is all around us. Eternity is here in the moment: this moment; any moment. It is in this 360 million-year-old fossilised coral before me; it is in the fragment of M. Bellin's original map published in 1757 that I, in a moment of awe and nostalgic wonderment, decided to purchase because it seems to draw me to my roots in Southeast Asia and beyond, as well as remind me of my humanity and connections with the rest of the world; it is in the imaginary landscape paintings of Friedrich; it is the daffodils and irises you see in Spring...



***The transcendental elements of the ordinary***

## VI

Listening to Andrea Bocelli's rendition of Eric Levi's "I Believe", I am moved by the call of the puer in all its innocent naïvety, which is counterpoised against that Post-Lapsarian sense of a paradise that seems to have been lost amidst the nihilistic cynicism of the Modernist experience.

To me, the beauty and power of the music is not so much in the positive hope that is expressed; rather, it is a powerfully moving reminder of the duality of the human experience: one that is at once heroic and noble with faith that is able to genuinely experience epiphanic transcendence (not unlike Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Theresa*, a statue in which the rigidity of the marble simply melts into a fluid creation expressing what it is like when humanity is touched by the Divine), and simultaneously lost in its muddled and fragile myopism.



***A paradise that seems to have been lost amidst the nihilistic cynicism of the Modernist experience***

## VII

Anxious and fearful neuroses seem to inhabit the unfathomable depths of my soul; deep, deep down in a place where no light penetrates, they move silently like mythical sea monsters of legends long forgotten. What language do they speak? What dreams do they give birth to? What prompts them to surface occasionally from the primordial depths of the unconscious, disrupting the otherwise calm surface of a comfortable existence? Perhaps they know the secrets of darkness, and are drawn to the vision of light? Perhaps they are tired of blindness, and the prospect of vision attracts them?

Ironically, the glare of shadowless daylight is blinding to them, and they quickly retreat to the depths of the underworld. Even so, such brief visits are enough to create troughs of turbulent whirlpools as water rushes to fill the enormous pockets of vacuum they leave behind. Like the sinking Titanic, they drag down with them fragments of the day; pieces of my consciousness disappear with them and are buried by the darkness below.

I find the loss troubling, and yet relieving; the prospect of drowning beneath the shadows is simultaneously terrifying and inexplicably attractive.

Oh, how inarticulate I am to express the mysteries of these experiences! How can I put it? The terror they engender is at once stifling and liberating; the emptiness they leave in their wake is also like a heaviness that has been lifted! Their brief appearances are like momentary glimpses into the nature of the unconscious; it is as if some light has been shed on the secrets of darkness!



***Such brief visits are enough to create troughs of turbulent whirlpools***

## VIII

People are poetry disguised very often as banal mortality. Sometimes, however, a brief glimmer of their poetic beauty shines through to reveal a veritable profundity of noble virtues: love, compassion, respect, hope, courage, perseverance, and a deep, genuine sincerity. The prosaic rigidity of the masks we often try to hide behind simply melts away to reveal a fluid, inner core of complex, often inexplicable, beauty that words simply cannot articulate. I am reminded once again of Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Theresa* where the hard, rigid marble seems to melt into a fluid, almost diaphanous cornucopia of organic life; that brief moment of epiphany as mere mortality is touched by the Divine is immortalised in that awesome work of art. These words often seem like futile intimations which hint - with inadequate, sometimes incoherent, metaphors - at the mysteries of humanity's soul.



***That brief moment of epiphany as mere mortality is touched  
by the Divine***

## IX

Listening to the opening chords of Beethoven's dramatic and powerfully evocative *Missa Solemnis*, I am moved by the genius of his art. The three-fold vocal pleas for God's mercy, *Kyrie Eleison*, is at once positively affirmative in its faith and simultaneously profoundly full of anima in the depth and sincerity of its almost anguished imploratory cries to God.

The contrapuntal juxtaposition of these pronounced tones (which are at the same time inextricably related) reflects the complexity of the human experience and its relationship with the Divine. At times heroic in our solid, deep-rooted belief in the sacred nobility and reassuring Grace of God, at times pathetic in the seemingly futile and desperate yearning for that Pre-Lapsarian paradise, our dualistic and paradoxical experiences are played out against the backdrop of Beethoven's multilayered composition as the choral and orchestral elements of the music complement and compete with each other.

Therein lies the mystery of existence: that rich, multifarious and profoundly complex interplay of noble heroism and pathetic baseness, sacredness and profanity, enchantment and disillusionment, purity and adulteration, innocence and the burden of knowledge. That duality ubiquitously permeates every aspect of

life, like the ether that constitutes the (illusory) fabric of the universe.

## X

Often have I wondered: where do I go from here? It is so ingrained in our "progressive" culture that we should have goals and objectives, and a plan which would enable them. So we set our targets, do our calculations, estimate our abilities, and attempt to map a coherent and meaningful "blueprint" of our lives.

So often, however, have these attempts been in vain: Shakespeare puts it, "as flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods/ They take us for their sport". Perhaps that perspective may seem too pessimistic; still, it reflects the fragility (and even vanity) of human ambition. Desperately do we cling on to every glimmer of hope - that thin sliver of silver that occasionally appears (albeit momentarily) to line the masses of clouds that loom above us - such that our noble heroism (although often fraught with futility) have led us to the most amazing of achievements, as though we briefly transcended the constraints of human existence and, in a joyous moment of epiphany, had a glimpse of Heaven.

Such moments, although few and far between, are to me justification of existence. To paraphrase Peppermint Patty (of Schulz's *Peanuts*), they are like the little precious gems interspersed on a bracelet: as we move along in the ordinariness of

our daily lives, we occasionally come across these jewels in our paths.

History teaches us, if anything, two things: firstly, it often tends to repeat itself, and secondly, we often do not learn from it! Thus, despite the futile vanity of many of our "plans", we continue to make them and believe in them.

Perhaps that is not a bad thing after all: the very belief in hope and the possibility of sublimation is what makes us human, and, despite the nihilistic pessimism of the Modern experience, there is an element of nobility in that.