

IS CULTURE REALLY DEGENERATING?

I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known,
so I created the creation in order that I might be known.

Sacred *hadith*, God's Revelation to the Prophet Mohammed.

Ell'è quel mare al qual tutto si move

Par. III, 86

The issue between "Mechanism" and "Teleology" -- for that, again, is the issue involved in the question about the relation of God's "Will" to his "Wisdom and Goodness" -- is not one to be settled by logical thinkers, but by moral agents. Logical thinkers, it seems to me, must decide in favour of "Mechanism"; moral agents will always decide in favour of "Teleology". And they are right, because "Teleology" is the working hypothesis of Life, whereas the doctrine of "Mechanism" damps the vital energy on which Life, including the logical understanding itself, depends for its continuance.

J.A.Stewart, *The Myths of Plato* (1905)
2nd ed. Arundel 1960, p.457.

"The new poetry reasserts the primacy of the Imagination in poetry, having come to see the imagination not, as did the previous generation, as part of the dark force of modern history (Hitler, Hiroshima, the Nazi and Soviet camps) but as a potential source of tenderness and renewal."

Introduction to The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry
edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, Harmondsworth 1987, p.12.

Check it out! -- P.R.

In the current issue of AGENDA, Professor Michael Alexander of St. Andrews University, reviewing Donald Davie's *Studies in Ezra Pound* (Manchester, Carcanet), writes: "Donald Davie's own culture is much wider than that of any Poundian I can think of except Hugh Kenner. He knows his English literature, for a start, and his Bible."

My, but these Poundians must be ignorant!

ARE POETS HUMAN?

"In the lower stages of civilization, Imagination, more than Reason, distinguishes men from animals; and to banish art would be to banish thought, to banish language, to banish the expression of all truth."

Benjamin Jowett, *Dialogues of Plato*, Introduction to *Republic*, p. clixiv.

FEW PRESUMABLY WOULD DISPUTE THIS, and we must surely conclude that we today are more similar to the brutes than our remote prehistoric ancestors. One of recent biology's most illustrious and illogical productions, Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press 1976) certainly bears this out.

ON THE OTHER HAND, one of the most "primitive" of recently surviving tribes, (presumably now wiped out by land speculators, loggers, missionaries, narcotics dealers and the C.I.A.), the Uitoto of Bolivia and Colombia, had as their basic cosmogonic myth: "In the beginning there was a Word, and the word created the Father God". (Theodor Preuss, *Religion und Mythologie der Uitoto*, Leipzig 1921, Vol.1, p.25).

If you still have any doubts on this little matter try re-reading Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* and P.B.Shelley's reply to it, *The Defence of Poetry*. Or perhaps a glance at any anthology of recent British or American poetry will demonstrate the thesis quite conclusively.

*Of what use are we singers
what good we cuckoo-callers
if no fire spurts from our mouths
no brand from beneath our tongues
and no smoke after our words!*

Ingrian bard (1858) quoted by Keith Bosley in his translation of *The Kalevala* (Oxford, World's Classics, 1990), p. liv.

"...Johnson, we are taught to think, held to an inadequate because rhetorical theory of literature; the truth is surely that an age which thinks poetry not essentially different from advertiser's copy is far more rhetorical in its expectations of poetry than Johnson's ever was."

Donald Davie, "Poetic Theory" from *Under Trigg Flats* (1989, Carcanet), p.85.

I particularly recommend this excellent book on recent poetry, especially the chapter on "Poetic Theory".

THREE POEMS

reprinted from *Chronicles* (Rockford, Illinois), September 1991

LE TRUCHEMAN DES BOULIMIES

Her face dawns through the jet of tresses
 Like a white sail coming into view
 In ebony clouds of night's seascape.
 First glimpse of her beauty is born in pain,
 A storm of sobs, a rain of tears.
 Black jonquil drenches a petulant rose,
 All other beauties in her shadow quenched.
 Thought itself denigrates the order of her perfection.
 Thought is a coarse seine for catching sparks.
 How can such subtlety be netted
 In the crude mesh of the eye?
 Persisting marvel escapes the lattice of thought,
 In eyes' diapositive cannot be caught.
 She is above description. Each attempt
 Circumscribes not her but her descriptions'
 Pale. If someone, intent on a more profound study,
 Would lower his sight and talk
 In the natural Sanskrit of ordinary love
 Science would sprout from delight and the eye
 Change to a jonquil gifted with sight.
 Others, blind scholars, will think about it
 And do nothing. People think that the Shaykh
 Should work miracles and have illuminations.
 What's needed in the teacher is only
 That he be possessed of the pupils' need.

AMORE MISTICO PALESE

Everyone admires the beauty of the Stars.
 When have the stars known Love as we know
 Whose bodies to each other reveal
 Bodies as radiant veiling inner worlds
 Secretly manifest between the veils?

Children at school we were taught literal truths
 We took for granted like the outer forms...

There comes a time though when the moon
 Rises and the stars are dimmed
 And hidden worlds light up in silver light...

The old world's nothing but smoky bonfires
 And ugly shouts from end to end the earth.

When She reveals her golden breasts and drops
 Silken and glistening her black mass
 Of jet on the luminous bloom
 Of waxen ivory shoulders,
 In the thoughtful amazing shadow
 Starlight and moonlight fade,
 And brighter light from darkness that is golden
 Issues precipitous in talking silences

SERUM SUBLUMINA FRIMA

Move softly, cold moonlight,
 Why disturb a stone?
 Blood ran once in pride,
 Bright the living zone, --
 Life wherever is its own.

Often now the stream runs dry,
 Pebbles catch crystal beams;
 The torrent's rush a stifled sigh, --
 Past is past and only seems.

What were once Enna's meadows,
 Multicoloured, dazzling, wide,
 Now is but a waste of shadows,
 Drooping leaves and buds too late,
 Faded colours, petals dyed, --
 A world of flowers by candlelight,
 And dying embers in the grate.

LA TURBINA

In the cold damp night I walk up the hill
 Past the ruined brick cages crumbling and flaked
 On the slope of the hill above the mill-race

And the ghosts of the beavers move by moonlight
 From the steep hill with the majestic oak
 Down to the water's edge

Silver-gray in the moonlight
 Brown-green under the stars

Padding the matted turf
 Swinging their massive tails
 Friendly, without resentment

A half-century in their cages
 Stripped of their skins

Free now, glad
 On my little lake
 They have come to build

Pratomagno,
 17th February 1992

JUNE IRISES ON THE PRATOMAGNO

The rain has sopped the irises. Just look!
 Great drops are clinging to the blooms,
 Weighting them down

Blue lanterns with a yellow flame
 Rinsing the summer air

Pratomagno,
 18th May 1988

SIX SONNETS

Silence in Heaven, my heart stood still at length.
 A Psalm of David fifty years ago!
 Echoes of Schütz with Luther's fortress-strength
 Arose like morning clouds transformed and slow.
 Advance adagio memory! Time though is swift --
 My Rubicon, am I not in retreat?
 Eunoe's Voices, benediction, lift
 Measure and weight up to the Judgment Seat.

Gates on their hinges in the Psalmist's mind,
 Dull Chaos' waters rise and flow in streams.
 Out of the Dark, a Voice; from Voice, a Light,
 And the first ligatures not far behind;
 Disjunction and conjunction of the beams,
 Hearing transformed, the hills heave into sight.

The loves and the illusions all are gone,
 Vanished the graces and dear vanities,
 Old energies converted to disease
 And lassitude, and simply holding on.
 You who would climb the slopes of Helicon,
 Know that the nymphs and the sonorous bees
 Are elemental speaking deities, --
 Th'wild cyclamens eclipse oblivion.

The senses dwindle as the air gets thin.
 It is the heart that hears the angelic voices,
 And knows the lay of phoenix and of swan.
 The music of the world's disordered din
 That loads the air with its malignant noises, --
 Here one clear note can blot out Babylon.

A small thing done for love, a little gesture,
 A throb of sentiment, -- you come alive, --
 A revolution in the heart. Revive,
 Tall Zion of the body, cast your vesture
 Into the polluted waters and arrest your
 Gadarene career. Survive! Survive!
 Leave strife to the impassible. But strive
 As though the man upon the cross had blest your

Axle-tree against the grain this day.
 Sweeten your Lebanon with sacrifice.
 Do as She would! What is a stone to please?
 True metal's malleable, -- She's wax, you say.
 Bend to her rushes, kindle to her icel
 You are the sap that's rising in the trees.

I've planned my life in an eternity
 Where every day's a life -- unlimited.
 Strict hours revolve the globe, and spin my bed
 Around the pole, a soft cocoon for me
 In which intoxicated sleep, a sea
 Of instant histories, occupies my head
 With all the sages and the heroes said
 And did, to weave the world's entelechy.

The world's within me, quickened by the dream,
 The silken hangings lull the wilful breeze
 That builds the scaffold of eternity
 From top to bottom, like the weaver's beam.
 Ass-ears has quit his golden palaces
 And stepped out into Athens glad and free.

Wonder reborn, a miracle in act,
 A repetition in the sluggish mind
 Of lightning vision printed in the blind
 Obliquity of childhood's matter-of-fact
 Struck like a flint, dull stone with fire compact.
 But was this trudging snail-like age confined,
 Barren as rock the unfeeling North winds grind,
 In all its unresponsiveness, intact?

The king cups and the celandines this day,
 The violets, hid by nettles, at this hour,
 The marguerites, this instant, in my heart
 Have opened veins that none could ever say
 Swelled in an old man's mind long since gone sour,
 Unbending to the magic wand of art.

I've made my thought-road through forgotten past
 Into a future that is always Now;
 It's been an expedition to the last
 And first I AM, who equally is Thou.
 It was the Wolf first suckled me, then Bear
 Brought sweetest honey-combs for me to taste;
 And then the Falcon swooped down from the air
 And bore me up through stallion clouds that raced.

Ravens escorted us upon our way
 Holding the nuts the squirrels had put by
 Winter by winter for us, back in time.
 Once at the moon these mourning birds of prey
 Changing to Doves quit the white lunar sky:
 And then, a Butterfly, -- the next stage of the climb.

AUTUMN

The leaves are falling, earth is getting darker,
 The twilight overcomes the daytime hours,
 But other rays illuminate my heart,
 That's set on fire by the hue of your eyes.

Look at me now with your tender glance,
 Brush my cheek with your soft hair.
 Let me hear the living voice from your mouth --
 So that for once at least I shall have had the illusion.

Afterwards, let winter come if it will,
 And frost and ice descend upon the world:
 I shall have seen the Rose in the Mirror,
 And in your image always shall see it.

translated from the Italian of
 Pier-Franco Donovan
 by Peter Russell

AUTUNNO

Cadon le foglie, la terra imbrunisce,
 l'oscurità supera l'ore diurne,
 m'altri raggi illuminano 'l cuore mio
 infuocato dal color degl'occhi tuoi.

Posa su di me il dolce tuo sguardo,
 coi tuoi morbidi capelli sfiorami,
 fammi sentire viva la tua voce --
 ch'almeno una volta l'illusione sia.

E dopo che l'inverno venga pure,
 che 'l ghiaccio e 'l gelo scendano sul mondo:
 la Rosa nello Specchio avrò io vista
 e vedrò sempre nell'immagine tua.

Pier-Franco Donovan

PIER-FRANCO DONOVAN is a young Italo-American poet. He studied physics and *informatics* at the University of Rome and Comparative Literature at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He has the great virtue of realising that at 27 years old he is still very much an apprentice, and that you should write simple and sweet before you write complex and pseudo-intellectual.

He is also responsible for setting up on the page MARGINALIA Nos. 3 and 5. He also had the modesty to decline being nominated Assistant Editor of MARGINALIA, but that's what he is in reality.

POLUDJELA PTICA
 (*A bird gone crazy*)

What are these cries upon the darkness
 At night above the fields, high in the air?
 Who is it singing? O it's nothing, -- just
 A bird gone crazy, in its flight.

It flies above the sluggish clouds,
 And plays above the wind and sings of it.
 Trusting completely to its wings --
 Where is it flying to, what is its goal?

Is it not time it sought its nest?
 Time to keep warm when winter comes?
 Who sent you out to twitter above in the gloom?
 Come down here to the earth, where fate is kinder!

It does not fret -- this bird gone crazy.
 It sings of the wind that sears it through and through.
 But once exhaustion comes it will be the end for it, --
 There will not be a single tree to rest upon.

translated from the Serbo-Croatian
 of Dobriša Cesarić (born 1902), by
 Peter Russell

Kakvi to glasi čuju se u mraku,
 Nad noćnim poljem, visoko u zraku?
 Ko li to pjeva? Ah, ništa, sitnica:
 Jedna u letu poludjela ptica.

Nadlijeće sebe i oblake trome,
 S vjetrom se igra i pjeva o tome.
 Svu svoju vjeru u krilima noseći,
 Kuda to leti, što bi htjela dõseći?

Nije li vrijeme da gnijèzdo vije?
 Kad bude hladno da se u njem grije.
 Ko li te posla pjevati u tminu?
 Sleti u nižu, u bolju sudbinu.

Ne mari za to poludjela ptica.
 Pjeva o vjetru što je svu golica.
 A kad je umor jednom bude srvo,
 Neće za odmor nać nijedno drvo.

*MRTVA LUKA**(The dead harbour)*

I know, -- there's a dead harbour,
 And whoever finds himself there
 Will hear the barn-owl's cry in the morning
 And will see the tired boats.

The ships there dream eternally
 That they must put to sea;
 But their anchors lie at rest
 In the shallow water.

And so in dreams they contemplate their fortune
 But are afraid to sail.
 Bright-coloured flags are hoisted on the masts,
 But even they hang still.

translated from the Serbo-Croatian
 of Dobriša Cesarić (born 1902), by
 Peter Russell.

Znam: ima jedna mrtva luka,
 I ko se u njoj nađe
 Čuti će ujutro pjevanje ćuka
 I vidjet će umorne lađe.

Brodovi u njoj vječito snivaju
 Kako se brodi,
 Al njihova sidra mirno počivaju
 U plitkoj vodi.

I tako u snovima gledaju sreću,
 A plovit se boje.
 Na jarbole šarene zastave meću
 I -- stoje.

reprinted from: *Chronicles*, The Rockford Institute (Chicago), September 1991

Ishmael Among the Scriveners

by Thomas Fleming

Teorie e Altre Liriche

by Peter Russell

Rome: Carlo Mancosu

The heroic age of modern poetry has been over for some time. The learned reactionaries who shaped it for two generations have all been dead for many years: Eliot (1965) and Pound (1972), Valéry (1945) and Claudel (1955), Ungaretti (1970) and Montale (1981). Diverse in style and technique, the great modernists were all ambitious in straining at the limits of expression, in finding the principles that underlie formal conventions, in bringing to bear the weight of human learning upon the inhuman conditions of the 20th century. The poets who have followed, even when they are good, have had neither the erudition nor the ambition to take up their challenge.

There is, however, one outstanding exception to this generalization, Peter Russell. Born in Bristol in 1920, Russell served in the British army in Europe and in the Indian army in the East. He has lived virtually everywhere — Malaya, Berlin, Venice, Tehran, and British Columbia, and at one time or another has studied much of what is worth studying. He can translate from Latin and write in Serbo-Croatian, and the range of his allusions is almost as broad (although by no means as bewildering) as that of Ezra Pound. Russell's connection with Pound goes deeper than style, since it was Peter Russell who worked for years to secure Pound's release from St. Elizabeth's. (Why is it that exile and madness are the two destinies most frequently enjoyed by American poets?)

Quite apart from a long list of volumes of verse and criticism, Peter Russell has, over the years, involved himself in a number of literary projects, as editor of the arts review *Nine* in the 1950's, and more recently of his own newsletter *Marginalia*, which is like a personal letter from a brilliant and learned friend. His work is also to be found in *Temenos*, an unusual journal of "Imagination."

These days Mr. Russell is living in rural Tuscany, from which he continues to make lecturing forays, and is regarded with considerable respect in Italian literary circles. His newest volume, a selection of his recent verse accompanied by translations into Italian, might serve as an introduction to readers unfamiliar with Russell's work.

Here we find examples of his hard-edged lyricism put into forms whose rules he manages to twist and bend to his own convenience:

Would I could find the magic arrow
To shoot up in the seamless blue
My house of earth is narrow, narrow
How should I welcome you?

It's ruined too O make it wide
Strike down these ruins and rebuild
What if the bolt transfix my side
If my empty cup be filled?

The following lines begin his poem "By the Lake," which also illustrates Russell's metaphysical bent:

Primordial silence on the lake
The coots and grebes seem painted there
The alder boughs' reflections make
No ripple on the flood or air

Russell prefaces the poem with a line from Luke's Gospel, which he quotes in Anglo-Saxon, partly because he finds it beautiful and partly because he is contemptuous of the pseudo-literary culture of an England that has cut itself off from its past in order to embrace television and comic books.

Russell is no conservative — whatever that term means any more. Sometimes he sounds the mystical note of charity, and at other times he is the embittered reactionary. In the nightmarish "A Ballad" the wandering king describes a kingdom that could be the modern West:

In my old kingdom now they say
The people rule, the nobles dead;
The women whores, the men all gay,
And the black flag changed for red.

A race of lawyers rules the land,
There's no fresh fruit, no game;
The milk is powdered, meat's all canned
And the sour wine's all the same.

Peter Russell will probably bewilder readers of poetry whose sensibilities have been formed on what Conrad Aiken called the "vin Audenaire" of postwar verse. Writing sometimes with the almost Mother Goose simplicity of Blake, he can proceed rapidly to the highest "hermeticism" (a term frequently applied to the great modern Italians). In this volume, however, his verse is never perplexing and rarely as extravagant as Russell has been elsewhere.

The hawk-moth sucks the rosemary
Whose pale blue flowers are my heart;
The long scroll of his tongue is me,
A glowing filament of Art...

Finally, to appreciate Russell's art, consider his fine poem on old age, "Anziano":

I'm going deaf, I'm going blind,
Scales forming on my eyes;
Where delicate labyrinths wind --
A hammer, -- in a vise...

Almost insensitive to pain,
My finger-tips mere bone --
Stumps that must knock, to feign
The well-tempered virginal's tone;

The perfume of the rose or musk,
Dusky and vague like memories --
The body's house a dried-up husk,
An old blanket full of fleas;

Trout broiled on a fire of wood,
Delicious odours of the past!
Succulent meat! -- surely 'twas good? --
I'm "No Man" now -- could feed on mast!

Deprived then of the boon of senses,
Say I'm a wretched shell, -- decrepit!
Young limbs that vaulted towering fences --
Blood watered down now barely tepid:

Yet in the brain-box there's a fire
Burns like a blood-red June geranium;
Let wrinkled skin get drier and drier --
A world of wonders fills this cranium!

There is not that much great verse on old age -- Sophocles,
Shakespeare, W.S. Landor, Yeats; but Russell manages to
echo much of it. (The "towering fences," for example,
recall Landor's "five bar gate.") The smell of trout cooking

on an open fire leads into the great outdoorsman, Odysseus
(No Man), who fought the primitive Cyclops, and an
allusion to the Golden Age stories of men who lived on
an acorn mast. But while these echoes and allusions add layers
of richness to the poem, no one can escape either the
detailed realism of the opening lines or the defiant passion
of the conclusion, with its brilliant image of a red summer
flower inside an old man's skull. (Does Russell, I wonder,
intend a play on "geranium" -- as if derived from the Greek
word for old?)

When I first began to be aware of Peter Russell, I
wondered vaguely why an English poet was living, cut off
from his language, in Italy. The more I read, however, the
more I realized that the state of Anglo-American culture,
our language as well as our literature, would make Britain
and America uncongenial places for the last of great mod-
ernists.

Thomas Fleming is the editor of Chronicles.

The Milanese poet, FRANCO LOI, recently wrote in the Italian national daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* (31st July 1991). "In these poems of Russell, I recognize the style of that highest tradition which unites intensity of thought, simplicity of language, musical quality and the sacrality of imagery, with a profound general culture. He seems to continue that ancient dialogue, the troubled terrible discoursing of poetry which spans the generations and reaches out to the peoples of the world in the mirror of human folly and of renewed hope [...] and like Homer, wrings from the darkness of the self and of the world, greater realities and hidden truths."

THE TIMES of London in 1985 described Russell as a "poet of the high romantic tradition" and the creator of a "supreme fiction".

JOHN MATTHEWS, in *Labrys* No.11, described Peter Russell as "a word-smith of the highest order."

QUINTILIANA

from QUINTILII APOCALYPSEÛS FRAGMENTA

As Quintilius returned along the way from the great Victory,
The Triumph, the oak-leaves on his brow, his golden greaves
Loosened, the gold collar unclasped from round his neck,
He heard a maiden's feeble voice that crooned then faded
Like the last weak lamp that challenges the dawn.

It went:

*O chestnut leaf, blowing alone across the street,
Where are your fellows, the sands, the stars, the dead?
Merciless History invents a legendary elite,
Mythologems in constellations at her feet.
The living have no name, wanly parade, --
Vanishing has become a speciality.
They say, King Orpheus, your singing was so sweet,
It cheered Persephone. Now we shall never meet.*

This was the song Queen Chaerosene sang
The winter long. Her wax heart burned with flickering orange flame,
And on a windy night of March vanished in clouds of smoke.

translated from an Aramaic targum.

(*Codex Discv* 85186)

Time back when I was garrisoned
 In Caesarea Philippi
 Some friends of mine fled into the desert.
 Some king or other wanted their skins,
 He could hardly have wanted their money

They had their three-month-old with them,
 A fine boy

An ass carried the mother all the way
 From Jerusalem or Nabataea or somewhere
 To Sotinen in Egypt. A tedious journey
 Even in spring,
 Stony, and not much to drink

On the third day out that lovely lady
 Thirsted incontinently

Sitting beneath a palm-tree she longed for the fruit
 But the old man said that the tree
 Was much too tall
 And he too old and stiff

Well, you won't believe me if I say
 That the Child upped and said:
 Palm-tree, lower your branches.
 Succour my Mother!
 And it did.

At the sound of his Voice the palm-tree
 Lowered its branches into
 The lap of the Lady

And next day the Child
 Called up one of the Djinns
 And he said: Djinni,
 Take up this palm-branch
 And plant it in Heaven

Odd thing is,
 When I come to think of it,
 They told me afterwards
 It wasn't a palm-tree at all
 But a peach-tree in the desert

It doesn't happen in every generation...

QUINTILIUS.

Some items now available.

Of the 1975 Anvil Press edition of *ELEGIES OF QUINTILIUS* Robert Nye, in the Times of London, wrote "Russell's *Quintilius* offers at once a translation and a criticism, and must in the end be reckoned as neither, but as something rarer: a poem, a *supreme fiction*. It has the quality of authority that comes when a man achieves his own tone and pitch after a lifetime learning the craft of verse." Roger Sharrock (The Tablet, 13 Oct 1984) said: "The first of the Elegies of Quintilius must be the best English imitation of the Latin love elegy." "You can't help liking Quintilius – grumpy, arrogant, stylish..." Stuart Henson in *OUTPOSTS*.

Prices, post free.

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(QUINTILII APOCALYPSEÛS FRAGMENTA is a collection of several hundred poems of Quintilius, commissioned in 1985 by Anvil Press).

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WOMEN

drive
crazy

Women
drive cars
crazy

Women
not only
drive their cars
crazy

Women
drive their
husbands
crazy

QUINTILIUS

is reputed to
have made an
improper
suggestion
to Medusa

He received
a stony
reception

Medusa
was however
impotent
to harm him

Since he was
stoned already

I.M. NOSMO KING

Ye mighty ones who soil the whole of nature,
And fill once-sparkling rivers full of shit,
You are of course the top-brass nomenclature,
And yet your legislature's less than fit.
The factory chimneys belch out sulphur, chlorine, phosphorus
"To make the country and the proletariat prosperous".
Hypocrisy run wild! Are you joking?
"For the protection of your health -- NO SMOKING".
As for the barman in our local bar who tells me not to --
I ask to what extreme fanaticism's got to?
It's not his business to tell me that I oughtn't, --
The trouble is the little man's so bloody self-important.

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