

SECRET EXCHANGES

BY

JOHN O'LOUGHLIN

OF CENTRETRUTHS DIGITAL MEDIA



CDM Prose

This edition of *Secret Exchanges* published 2012 by
Centretruths Digital Media

Copyright © 2012 **John O'Loughlin**

All rights reserved. No part of this e-book may be reproduced in any form or
by any means without the prior written permission of the author/publisher

CHAPTER ONE

He was so very pleased to be sitting in such close proximity to the paintings he had specifically brought Gwendolyn Evans along to the Tate Gallery to view; to have them all round him in a dazzling profusion of light and colour.

Yes, it was fundamentally here, with these largely abstract-looking canvases, that modern art began. Here, with *Peace, Burial at Sea, Norham Castle, Sunrise, Mountain Scene with Lake and Hut, Mountain in Landscape*, and *Sunrise with a boat between headlands*, all painted between 1835-40 in a manner which, to Turner's contemporaries, could hardly have been expected to win widespread understanding, let alone critical adulation! Yet here they were, exhibited on the wall in front of Matthew Pearce, painter and sculptor, together with his latest girlfriend, who had never seen them before. Here for the eye to behold was the revolutionary break with tradition which, not altogether surprisingly, had caused such a scandal in Turner's day, obliging the great painter to keep so much of his later work largely to and for himself. In these and similar paintings, matter had been broken down, virtually erased from the canvas in order that light and colour could come shining out of it with a brilliance and importance scarcely dreamed of by earlier painters. Here form, if and where it still existed, had been subordinated to content, the material displaced by the spiritual, and the resulting impression was so nebulous ... that one might have taken it for pure abstraction - devoid of the even slightest reference to external reality. No artist before Turner had dared to be so biased on the side of the spirit. More exactly, no artist before Turner could have conceived of the possibility or legitimacy of being so spiritually biased, especially prior to the nineteenth century. It wouldn't have been relevant to the age, an age, at least from approximately the 14-18th centuries, of what Spengler would have called 'great art', or art that reflected Western man in his egocentric prime - balanced, in varying degrees, between his subconscious and superconscious minds in the ego at its dualistic height. Torn between the sensual and the spiritual, the mundane and the transcendent.

Around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in particular, when Western man was in full-flower, there could not have been the slightest possibility of an art arising which betrayed a distinct predilection for the

spirit - for light and colour over form and substance. Had, by any quirk of evolutionary fate, something approximating to a late Turner been produced then, it would have struck people as a mess, not art but rather something akin to an artist's palette - one that had taken a number of diverse paints and suffered them to be experimentally blended. With the nineteenth century, however, a great change came over the Western mind, a change initiated by the Industrial Revolution, itself a product in part of the Napoleonic Wars, and the subsequent growth of towns and cities to a size quite unprecedented in the entire history of mankind. No longer was civilized man finely balanced between the sensual and the spiritual, the subconscious and the superconscious minds, but in the process of becoming increasingly biased on the side of the transcendent - in short, to whatever reflected his growing isolation from nature in the artificial urban and industrial environments he had created for himself in response to evolutionary necessity. From the nineteenth century, it was becoming increasingly evident that Western man had passed his prime as an egocentric being, a recipient of dualistic tension, and accordingly entered a post-egocentric epoch of transcendental lopsidedness, in which the influence of the superconscious came to play an ever-more decisive role in shaping his destiny. Hence Turner's late canvases, which reflected the imbalance that was characterizing modern man. And hence, too, their great importance and significance to such eyes as could be expected, at this more evolved juncture in post-egocentric time, to appreciate them - a greater number of minds, it should be evident, than would have done so shortly after they were first painted.

Yet, despite the eulogistic comments which Matthew Pearce was making on behalf of the half-dozen or so brightly painted canvases in front of him, Gwen's eyes weren't all that appreciative, her mind remaining rather unmoved by them, even though, thanks in large measure to the esoteric information being imparted to her by Matthew with regard to the general direction of human evolution, she was now in a better position than ever before to understand them. Had she been honest with her boyfriend, instead of trying to please him by feigning enthusiasm for the works, she would have confessed, there and then, to the sad fact that a majority of the paintings on display in this particular section of the Turner bequest left her stone cold, absolutely failed, for one reason or another, to interest her. But from feminine tact, which embraced a certain fear of what Matthew would think of her if she disappointed him in this way, she did her best to appear sympathetic, to share his unquestionable admiration for those exhibits upon which he specifically chose to comment.

However, it was far from easy! For even with the best will in the

world, she couldn't bring herself to view paintings like *Mountain in Landscape* and *Sunrise with a boat between headlands* through the same pair of eyes as him. To her, they seemed a mess. Too indistinct to be worth taking seriously. There was the suggestion of a certain scrappiness about them which violently conflicted with her own classical predilection for neat, clear, well-defined works, such as she had seen in some of the other rooms. One might have thought the artist had gone mad, lost contact with reality to the extent of being incapable of reproducing coherent forms, so vague was the resultant impression! Such, at any rate, was how she secretly felt at the sight of the more abstract-looking paintings, not least those which she had seen in the previous room - like, for example, *Scene in Venice* and *Venice from the Salute*, which had been painted 1840-45. And partly because of this subjective doubt concerning Turner's sanity, she found herself incapable of entering into the spirit of the paintings, unwilling to commit herself to an enthusiastic acceptance of them from fear that she might compromise her aesthetic integrity and become reduced, in her own estimation, to the unenviable level of a bigoted crank. With one part of her mind she remained defiantly aloof, self-consciously superior to what she saw all around her, while with the other part she played along with Matthew, responding to various of his pronouncements with an appropriately complaisant nod, smile, or gentle grunt - a policy she was subsequently obliged to adopt as much for exhibits like *Shade and Darkness - the Evening of the Deluge*, *Yacht approaching the coast*, *Light and Colour (Goethe's theory) - the Morning after the Deluge - Moses writing the Book of Genesis*, which were hung on the large picture support at right-angles to the wall they had been sitting in front of, as for exhibits like *Sun Setting over a Lake*, *Stormy sea with dolphins*, and *Snow Storm - Steam Boat off a harbour's mouth and making signals in shallow water, and going by the lead* on the opposite wall, the extended title of which both baffled and privately amused her.

Not that Matthew Pearce was unduly garrulous or imposing, and therefore necessitated one's constant attention on his conversation. Yet he was certainly not a man to allow himself to be led from painting to painting at a rate corresponding to the disinterestedness of his partner! On the contrary, standing or sitting in front of a Turner from 3-5 minutes, as he devotedly did in a number of instances, it was obligatory for her to fix her attention on the relevant painting for a corresponding period of time, even when it wasn't of any particular interest to her. A sign of impatience would almost certainly have offended him, a cursory inspection of the other occupants of the room no less than a tendency to flit from one painting to

another independently of his guidance and running commentary. Feminine tact was enough to tell her this - now no less than previously!

Yet it wasn't enough to tell her that, after a couple of minutes' silent inspection of *Stormy sea with dolphins*, Matthew would suddenly change mental track and, for the first time since setting eyes on the Turners, launch out on a swift stream of criticism concerning the manifest turbulence of the scene portrayed, which he considered the worst aspect of Romanticism and the one he could least abide. For, to his way of thinking, the turbulent was by nature Satanic, opposed to evolutionary progress towards blissful passivity, and, for that reason, something to be condemned. "God knows," he continued, speaking in a fairly quiet though firm tone-of-voice, "Delacroix and Gericault were worse offenders against 'the peace that passes all understanding' than ever Turner was! Yet that doesn't mean to say that he wasn't guilty, from time to time, of following suit and producing works which, in their Romantic turbulence, correspond to the demonic. That and the one next to it, the *Snow Storm*, are typically Romantic in this respect. They seethe with negativity, with horribly tortuous activity. Not my favourite Turner, by any means!"

He broke away from the canvas in question, as though from an evil spell, and briskly led Gwen towards the next room, which contained works by other English painters. He looked quite stylish in his tight black denims and puffy zipper-jacket, stylish enough, at any rate, to attract the passing attention of two young women, who caused Gwen to look at him from a broadly personal viewpoint herself and reflect upon his tidy, if informal, appearance. His dark-brown hair, gathered into a short pigtail that gently curved down from the back of his head to his neck, had been washed only the night before and looked perfectly docile. With his aquiline profile and large blue eyes, he was certainly more handsome than the previous men in her life, which was of some consolation. He was also more intelligent, though not perhaps more highly-sexed. As yet, it was still too soon for her to get him into proper sexual perspective, since she hadn't known him long enough. But time would doubtless tell, and thus enable her to extend her assessment of him to such matters as were of specific importance to her as a woman, not simply as an intellectual.

Before entering the next room, however, Matthew halted near the exist in front of one last Turner, a relatively small work entitled *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, for which he confessed a special fondness, deeming it one of the master's most spiritually noble productions - a shedder of dazzling light. "Admittedly, not one of his most abstract-tending works," he softly remarked. "Yet the whole concept of angelic transcendence and

light is really too beautiful. Not altogether surprisingly, it was one of his last works, dated 1846. I can't help but admire its mystical symbolism. It is virtually an epitome of the coming post-human millennium, of man become superman, or angelic being, surrounded by spiritual light in blissful self-realization. For, of course, the essential light of the post-human millennium won't be the sun, though that will doubtless continue to exist in heathen selflessness for some time thereafter, but the light of spirit in the superconscious - the clear, as opposed to unclear or chemical, light. Yet before his death, Turner left us this magnificently paradoxical symbol of mankind's future destiny, one which will continue to shine in the hearts of men throughout the coming decades."

He looked sideways at Gwen to gauge her response, which, as before, appeared to be fairly sympathetic. She smiled back at him but remained silent. She didn't have much to say, since it was all rather bewildering to her, and he sensed as much from her reticence. He sensed, too, that she was probably too shy or reserved to talk in art galleries and was slightly embarrassed by his speech. Nevertheless he felt that he had to say something, if only to justify being in her company. It would have seemed stranger to him had they gone through the rooms without exchanging a word, as some couples evidently did. Hitherto he had always gone along to the Tate Gallery alone and had remained wrapped-up in himself, enshrouded in silence and thoughtful contemplation of the paintings. Now that he was accompanied by a woman, however, he considered it his duty to speak, to offer comments on several of the exhibits which particularly impressed or even depressed him. And, besides, he had a burning desire to instruct, to enlighten, to expatiate. He hoped he wouldn't be wasting his breath on Gwen who, after all, was an intelligent young woman - intelligent enough to have gone to college, at any rate, and got herself a teaching diploma in French, which she was currently justifying in her capacity as French teacher in a south London comprehensive. So, if that was anything to judge by, she ought to be appreciative of the merits of a great painter when she saw one, and accessible, moreover, to such evolutionary theories as he was only too keen to impress upon her for her own good.

Leaving the last room of the Turner bequest, they stepped across the threshold of the next room, which was divided into two sections, one small and the other large, and were immediately confronted by the turbulence of a huge canvas by Francis Danby entitled *The Deluge*, at which Matthew quickly took umbrage for its Romantic ferocity - the sight of so many twisted, struggling nude or semi-nude bodies endeavouring to climb to safety from the rushing flood-waters onto the rocks and trees that lay to-

hand, offering the victims of the deluge a temporary shelter from the waters of death. Not a particularly agreeable spectacle, by any means; though a work of undoubted ingenuity, reminiscent of the turbulent waterscapes favoured by Gericault, Delacroix, and, on occasion, the great Turner himself. Compared with John Martin's *The Plains of Heaven*, which was exhibited, curiously, in the same section of the room, it was indeed a hellish context, its violence in complete contrast to the blissful serenity of one of Martin's greatest works, the only work on view of which the latter-day artist would allow himself to think highly. In fact, the three canvases by this artist on display here could be assessed, according to him, on the basis of a descending order of merit, *The Plains of Heaven*, being wholly transcendent, signifying the apex of tranquil spirituality, *The Last Judgement*, with the Saved blissfully to one side of the canvas and the Damned agonizingly to the other, presided over by Christ and His angels, signifying a compromise between Heaven and Hell, and, finally, *The Great Day of His Wrath*, focusing on a cataclysmic upheaval in which numerous naked bodies were hurled with the falling, lightning-cleft rocks into a dark abyss of raging hell, signifying virtually the furthest possible remove from blissful tranquillity. One shuddered at the sight of it, of so many panic-stricken people plunging helplessly to their doom in the ugly black abyss between the sundered rocks! Romantic pessimism could go no further. The great evil at the root of life was indubitably manifest.

"So far as I'm concerned," said Matthew, suddenly breaking the horrified silence into which he had fallen in the presence of this gruesome work, "the scene before us is positively primeval in its cataclysmic turbulence, a record, one might argue, of pagan man, or man tyrannized over by the moral darkness of his subconscious and living in fear of a wrathful and largely materialistic deity. It seethes with negativity, it knows no compromise. Unlike the scene depicted in *The Last Judgement*, which could be said to signify the mentality of Christian man, or man torn between the hell of materialistic damnation and the heaven of idealistic salvation, half-way up the ladder of human evolution in some egocentric compromise. And there, at the apex of evolution, one finds not a trace of Hell. For the compromise has been superseded, and instead of seething negativity one has blissful positivity, instead of death - life!"

He was of course referring Gwen's attention to *The Plains of Heaven*, which he considered significant of the culmination of transcendental man's spiritual aspirations. As yet, we were still too close to the dualistic compromise for comfort; we still had a long way to go before attaining to a life of transcendent bliss. Yet we were certainly heading in the right

direction, our spiritual bias on the side of the superconscious was becoming more evident all the time and would doubtless continue to develop over the coming decades ... until such time as not a trace of egocentric dualism remained, and we entered the post-human millennium - the heaven that John Martin had ingeniously symbolized through a tranquil, otherworldly landscape peopled by the Blessed.

Oh yes, there could be little doubt that we were now closer to that heavenly culmination than Western society had ever been in the past! We were no longer as dualistic, thank goodness, as our egocentric forebears in the heyday of Christianity. We didn't give much credence to Hell. We didn't like the concept of compromise. Still less what had preceded it. *The Great Day of His Wrath* could hardly be expected to attract all that many enthusiastic admirers these days, least of all for its cataclysmic subject-matter! No, it was to *The Plains of Heaven* that the enlightened modern man instinctively turned, eager to see there the goal of human evolution. This painting had relevance to him. The others didn't. This was John Martin's highest conceptual achievement, a fact which Matthew was keen to impress upon his girlfriend as they stood in front of the large canvas for about three minutes, admiring and studying. And he was no less keen to impress upon her the fact that, taken together, the three canvases in the vicinity of where they were standing signified a summary of human evolution, beginning with the pre-Christian, progressing to the Christian, and culminating in the post-Christian - the wholly transcendent. A journey, as it were, from agony to bliss via a dualistic compromise.

"Yes, I see your point," Gwen admitted, smiling coyly. "Psychologically, one could argue that *The Deluge* is on a similar plane to *The Great Day of His Wrath*," she added, turning back towards the Danby, plunging from the heights of Heaven to the depths of Hell in a split second.

"Indeed!" concurred Matthew, following her across the room. "Although Danby does at least provide one with an angel weeping over the death, it would appear, of a flood victim. Yet that's psychologically inept, in my opinion, since angels shouldn't weep. As symbolic representatives of transcendent spirituality, they should be incapable of indulging in negative emotions. They should pertain to the blissful tranquillity of Heaven, not weep like poor wretches from a more mundane realm. They should be spiritually consistent - bringers of love and joy. A weeping or angry angel would seem to be a contradiction in terms."

"Well, Francis Danby evidently considered it symbolically apt to have a representative from the divine realm saddened by all the evil afoot," Gwen declared pithily.

"So it would seem," Matthew conceded, smiling wryly. "Yet is still strikes me as rather surreal, if you see what I mean. An angel in Hell? Very unlikely! Unless, of course, it was a fallen angel. But, then, fallen angels aren't really angels in the true sense, are they?"

Gwen couldn't very well argue with that! She simply moved on a few paces to a canvas by Samuel Colman entitled *The Destruction of the Temple (c. 1830)* which, with its lightening-stricken crumbling stone and panic-stricken inhabitants, appeared unequivocally hellish, unequivocally on a psychological level with the pre-Christian. Undoubtedly a very imaginative work, but hardly one guaranteed to inspire one with any great confidence in the coming post-human millennium! Nevertheless, as they were about to take their leave of it for the larger section of Room 16, Matthew elected to say a few words in praise of the transparency of a majority of the figures therein portrayed which, so he maintained, was agreeably transcendent.

No such comment, however, could he allot to the Pre-Raphaelite and associated paintings which now confronted his weary gaze as, reluctantly, he shuffled after Gwen and stepped into a world of late Victorianism. Ugh, how he had come to loathe the Pre-Raphaelites! How reactionary they seemed to him these days, in light of what the Impressionists had been doing in France at approximately the same time! How awful that, instead of reflecting and justifying Western man's advance towards the superconscious, they should have turned their back on the age to the extent they appeared to have done, and consequently indulged in such fanciful illusions as were ordinarily to be encountered in their works! Pre-Raphael indeed! As if salvation were to come through reverting to some largely medieval context of rural simplicity! No, the medievalism of the Brotherhood was indeed a chimera, a sham solution even by their standards, a skimming off the cream of medieval mythology, romance, and sentimentality, a nostalgia for things past without the knowledge or experience of true medievalism, with its innumerable horrors and limitations.

Not that the Middle Ages were as black or bleak as was sometimes thought by contemporary liberals. Yet they were by no means as agreeable as a spell in the fanciful illusions of Pre-Raphaelitism might have led one to suppose! Nor would they have offered one much consolation for the upheavals of modern life. There was nothing particularly heavenly about an age of mounting dualism. Nothing charitable about the great castles which had been erected to protect the nobility from fellow noblemen, popular unrest, and foreign invasion. Compared with the present, it was

undoubtedly closer to Hell, even given all the horrors and limitations which beset the modern world. Yet the Pre-Raphaelites didn't want to see that. They preferred to turn their back on industrial progress and large-scale urbanization for the sake of a comforting illusion which medievalism seemed to offer them. They preferred to think in terms of an illusory Golden Age of the English past in which chivalrous knights came to the timely rescue of beautiful damsels in distress, and people lived in harmony with nature. They had no desire to learn from Constable or Turner and follow in their progressive footsteps by adopting a transcendental approach to painting. That was left, on the contrary, to the Impressionists, those glorifiers of spirituality in light and colour, those disintegrators of matter. The Pre-Raphaelites, by contrast, appear to have had scant taste for spiritual leadership - assuming they would have known how to recognize it in the first place. Instead, they preferred to thematically regress not merely to the previous century but some five or six centuries, and to paradoxically pretend that such a regression was effectively a kind of progress. To them, an aristocratic society would have made more sense than a proletarian one. It would have corresponded to a Golden Age, whereas what was going on around them in the industrial world signified a tarnishing of the mean, a societal 'fall' from natural grace, which no right-thinking person could possibly condone. Therefore back to the days of old when knights were bold and England not yet ruined by industrialism. Yet not as far back, it has to be admitted, as the ages favoured by Poynter, Alma-Tadema, and Lord Leighton, to name but three historical painters. No, let us give them some credit. They weren't *that* reactionary. Five or six hundred years merely - not a couple of millennia!

It was with some psychological displeasure that Matthew Pearce observed the titles and subject-matter of the paintings on display here, in the larger section of Room 16. He was not at all resigned to what seemed like an enthusiasm for them on the part of Gwen, who peered eagerly into the canvases, let fall a whispered "too beautiful!" or a respectful "so choice!" every now and then, as though to assure him that she had a fairly developed aesthetic sense and was confident he would agree with her as a matter of course - a thing which, to some extent, he was superficially prepared to do, since the paintings here, as elsewhere, of the leading Pre-Raphaelites were of course generally quite beautiful and obviously the work of highly skilled artists. Yes, naturally! No-one with an ounce of culture could possibly deny that such exhibits had beauty and were accordingly deserving of some respect. Yet all that was somehow beside-the-point, painfully irrelevant to the evolution of modern art, and he was

disappointed with Gwen, after all he had said to her, that she couldn't see it. To her, they were skilfully painted representational works with noble subject-matter. To him, by contrast, they were traitors to the age, down-dragging influences in an age of mounting transcendentalism.

Yes, of course *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*, *The Lady of Shalott*, and *The Knight Errant*, painted by Bourne-Jones, Waterhouse, and Millais respectively, were accomplished works, done with loving care and an eye for detail. One couldn't doubt that! Yet how frightfully anachronistic they seemed, how devoid of contemporary significance when compared with Turner's most revolutionary works - works, for example, like *Scene in Venice*, *Venice from the Salute*, or even *Interior at Petworth*, the abstract impression of which was to set the tone for the next century and influence all or most of the leading painters of the age! Could one say the same of the Pre-Raphaelites? Not if one knew anything about modern art! Theirs was a lost cause, as lost as that of the French Symbolists, with their fin-de-siècle decadence. From Turner, the torch of modernism had passed to the Impressionists, especially to Monet, Sisley, and Pissarro, and from them it was handed down more diversified to the twentieth century via the Post-Impressionists, Nabis, and Divisionists who, in their various ways, were to keep the belief in progress alive and weather the storms of decadence and reaction which swept all about them. But *The Lady of Shalott*, in front of which Gwen was now standing, rapt, it appeared, in wholehearted admiration, had very little faith in progress and nothing to say to modernity. The stream which bore its heroine away from Camelot was only a variant on the current of reactionary sentimentality which enabled Waterhouse, its Tennysonian creator, to be borne away from the nineteenth century towards an imaginary realm of medieval romance. There was little about the work to suggest that a new era of human evolution had recently got under way, superior to anything in the past. Strictly speaking, it wasn't an integral part of late-nineteenth-century art. It had no real relevance to the age. It had simply been imposed upon it out of a longing for mythical escape. To Matthew Pearce, however, it was something to be escaped from! He had no desire to tally there any longer in the world of the reactionaries. He couldn't share Gwen's respect for Pre-Raphaelitis.

"But don't you like it?" she protested, as he tugged her away from the Waterhouse, as though from a bedbug, and made for the room's nearest exit.

"No, I bloody well don't!" he firmly and almost categorically asseverated, not bothering to look at her. "I've no respect for down-

draggers!"

She didn't quite understand him, but said no more. She was disappointed that he didn't share her tastes in art, yet in no way anxious to quarrel with him. She knew that he had his reasons and wouldn't be diverted from them by anything she said on behalf of her own. She had to accept him. Yet she was conscious, as they walked back through the earlier rooms again and on towards the main exit, that an apocalyptic-like rift had opened-up between them - one doubtless born of their dissimilar wavelengths - into which they were now tumbling, as into a hell of their own contrivance. No matter how hard she tried to learn from him and accept his views as her own, she couldn't surmount her previous conditioning overnight, so to speak, and thereby climb straight onto his level of awareness. The words she heard him speak made no real impression on her soul. She wasn't ready for them. Her pretence of complicity in awareness had been exposed in Room 16, and she knew he resented it. Now she was secretly angry with herself for having allowed her natural response to the genius of the Pre-Raphaelites to be aired in such obviously eulogistic terms, completely overlooking the fact that Matthew might not think so highly of it. Instead of continuing to play second-fiddle to him, she had suddenly taken the lead, and it was not one that he had any intentions of following. It had been a foolish miscalculation on her part!

CHAPTER TWO

"Any sign of them yet?" Thomas Evans casually inquired of his wife, as she peered out through the sitting-room's large front windows onto the driveway leading up from the wooden gateposts, some thirty yards away, to their front door.

"Yes, I didn't think my ears were deceiving me," Deirdre Evans replied, automatically turning away from the windows. "They're half-way up the drive." She hesitated a moment, looked back over her shoulder, and smiled to herself. "I must say, Gwendolyn appears to have found herself quite a good-looking boyfriend at last! Neatly dressed and handsome with it! That's not a combination one sees that often these days."

"You saw it often enough in my day," Mr Evans declared, putting down his newspaper and casting an exploratory glance through the front windows - a glance, alas, which was too late to catch the approaching figures outside. For they had already reached the front door and disappeared from view. The driveway was once again empty and silent, its copious gravel no longer responding to the regular clump of purposeful feet. The afternoon August sun shone down brightly into the house, illuminating a patch of carpet and part of the tea table to one side of the seated man. At the sound of the doorbell, his wife had swiftly passed in front of him, leaving, in her excited wake, a trail of patchouli perfume which tickled his nostrils and, in conjunction with the swishing sound of her nylon stockings, aroused him to a momentary lasciviousness. There was an expectant pause while the door opened and then, characteristically, a gush of exuberant greetings, as mother and daughter spontaneously embraced in the watchful presence of their guest, whom Gwen duly introduced.

"So glad to meet you, Matthew," announced Mrs Evans, extending to the artist a small graceful hand. "My daughter has already told me all about you in one of her recent letters to me, so I wasn't altogether unprepared for you." She let go of his hand and gently smiled into his face. "How did the journey go?" she asked, in due course.

"Oh, quite well, thanks," he replied. "The train ran on time anyway."

"Yes, and thanks to the fine weather, it was a pleasure to gaze at the passing countryside," said Gwen.

"Or such of it as is left between London and Northampton," Mrs

Evans remarked light-heartedly.

"Quite."

Glancing from the one to the other, Matthew discovered that Gwen's face had very little in common with her mother's, other than a slightly retroussé nose. For the eyes and hair of both women were of different colours and the chins of different shape - Mrs Evans' curved, Gwen's quite straight. One would hardly have taken them for mother and daughter at first glance; though a more lingering comparison might have led to one's discovering similarities here and there, the most pronounced of which undoubtedly being the type of nose. Yet Deirdre Evans seemed further to elude the status of Gwen's mother by dint of an appearance at once youthful and seductively attractive, which suggested not so much motherhood as elder sisterhood. In fact, Matthew was somewhat surprised to find her so youthful-looking, though he assumed from Gwen, who had just turned twenty-two, that she must be at least forty. In point of fact, she was thirty-nine, having conceived her daughter at the tender age of seventeen, a mere six months into her marriage. But such information wasn't to be imparted to the artist there and then, as he stood next to his girlfriend and endeavoured to compare the two women while they talked. He would have to content himself with guesswork, which, in any case, had been pretty close.

Turning away from her daughter, Mrs Evans suddenly said: "Now then, Matthew, come and meet my husband, whom I'm sure will be delighted to see you."

"Yes, I'd almost forgotten about dad," Gwen murmured, catching hold of her boyfriend's sleeve and well-nigh dragging him in her mother's turbulent wake. "He's evidently in the sitting room."

Which of course he was, and still seated in his favourite armchair with pipe in mouth and the daily paper on his lap. He rose unsteadily to shake hands with the visitor, cast his daughter a welcoming nod, and, no sooner than these social obligations had been perfunctorily dispatched, gratefully relapsed into his chair again, pipe still in mouth. One might have supposed from his behaviour that the reception of a stranger into his house was nothing out-of-the-ordinary, even if that stranger did happen to be his daughter's latest boyfriend. At any moment, disdainful ceremony or curiosity, he might have picked up his paper again and carried on reading as though nothing had happened. But that was only a surface impression. For, in reality, he welcomed the prospect of finding out what kind of a young man Gwen had got herself involved with this time.

It wasn't therefore long before, having taken the chair offered him

shortly after entering the room, Matthew found himself drawn into conversation with Mr Evans on the subject of Gwen, which of course was common to them both, if from rather different angles. "She told me you wrote to her a few weeks ago," Mr Evans stated, by way of an opening gambit, "and invited her to meet you somewhere in north London, if that was possible."

"That's right," Matthew admitted, blushing slightly in the presence of the two women. He wondered whether he hadn't let himself in for some kind of interrogation on the subject. "Hampstead Heath, to be precise," he added, for Mr Evans' benefit.

"And you apparently hadn't written to her for well over two years prior to that?"

"No, quite true. The previous letter I'd sent to her didn't receive an answer, so I assumed she had no desire to contact me. I'd also written one even earlier than that ... about three-and-a-half years ago, but she didn't respond to that either. I didn't realize, at the time, that she might have changed address beforehand and not had the letters forwarded-on to her. Since they weren't returned to me, I had no way of knowing. Indeed, it didn't even occur to me to use the second address she had given me that day we first met, namely yours - not, at any rate, until quite recently, when I began to consider the possibility of writing to her again. I must have been too pessimistic about the fate of the earlier letters."

"Which, presumably, had simply gone to an address she was no longer resident at?"

"Yes, precisely! But I didn't discover that until we got into correspondence quite recently, I having decided, after all, to send a letter to her care of you, a letter which I must thank you for having forwarded-on to her London address."

Mr Evans vaguely waved a hand in the direction of the women, who were seated together on a nearby couch, before saying: "Don't thank me, dear boy, thank my wife. It was she who re-addressed it."

Matthew deferred to Mrs Evans with a polite smile. He was still feeling embarrassed by the turn of conversation, but did his best not to show it.

"I hear you first met my daughter outside Kenwood House in Highgate, north London," she remarked, taking advantage of the artist's attention.

"Yes, a Sunday afternoon about four years ago," he obliged. It was so hateful to be reminded of the fact. Obviously Gwen had spoken to her mother on the subject!

"And that was the last you saw of her until a couple of weeks ago, when she met you in London in response to your letter?" It could have been Mr Evans again but, curiously, it wasn't.

"Unfortunately so," Matthew confessed, feeling more than a shade disgruntled by this further example of parental curiosity concerning his relations with their daughter. "Had she not changed address, a few months after we met, I might have received a reply sooner. But she decided against notifying me, so I continued to send futile letters to her old one instead. Since I didn't get around to writing to her until some five months after our brief acquaintance, she imagined, in the meantime, that I'd lost interest in her and that it therefore wasn't desirable or necessary for her to notify me of any change of address. However, by the time I finally got round to writing - and writing letters, alas, has never been my forte - she had already moved house over a month previously, which is why I didn't receive a reply."

"You ought to have written to her care of us after that," Mr Evans commented, pipe in hand.

"Yes, so I realize," the artist admitted, feeling still more disgruntled with himself. But he hadn't and that was that! He had ignored their address and preferred to concentrate on the Norwich one instead. It hadn't been a matter of life-and-death for him to contact her, in any case. He had simply written out of curiosity, with a vague hope of furthering their relationship in due course.

"Well, at least he wrote to me care of you eventually," said Gwen, offering her admirer some moral support.

"Better late than never, I suppose," Mr Evans conceded. "Though you could well have been deeply attached to someone else at the time and therefore not in a position to answer it in quite the way Mr Pearce would have hoped."

This was hardly the kind of suggestion to win the latter's approval. Yet he retained a discreet silence, in spite of its essentially baleful effect on him. He was beginning to regret that he had ever written the damn letter at all and wasn't still in London, miles away from this rather cantankerous individual who sat opposite him with an evil-smelling pipe in his mouth and an even more evil-looking newspaper on his lap. Better, perhaps, to have forgotten about Gwen than to have dragged her into his life again after so long. Yet, deep down, he knew that his recent letter to her was virtually inevitable, insofar as he had no other woman to write to and was still desperately searching for love. Gwen had not been his first and truest love. As yet, she was scarcely even his second. But she possessed the dubious

distinction of being the only woman he had met, during the past four years, who bore a strong physical resemblance to his first love, and it was primarily for this reason that he had written to her in the hope of establishing some degree of intimate contact. His judgement had told him that if he couldn't find his first love again - and he had no way of contacting her since she disappeared from his life one sad August afternoon several years before - he would be well-advised to find someone like her, someone with whom it would be possible to form a deep and lasting relationship. Hence Gwen, being the nearest thing to her, had gradually acquired a special significance in this respect, despite the relative brevity of his prior meeting with her and the subsequent time-lag in their correspondence. Had someone else come along in the meantime, to fill the void in his love-life, he would never have dreamt of contacting her. Unfortunately for him, however, no-one else had, so the void had remained unfilled.

Even now that he had established close contact with Gwen and made her his girlfriend, he was far from convinced it was being filled. For, as already noted, he hadn't yet succeeded in falling in love with her and was privately disappointed by the fact that, in a number of respects, she existed on a completely different wavelength from himself, not, by any means, as spiritually close to him as he had imagined, on the dubious basis of their first meeting, that she would be.

That day, outside Kenwood House, they had talked for ages about art and travel and religion and other substantial subjects of mutual interest, and Matthew had come away with the impression that he had at last met a kindred spirit - a person with whom intimate conversation was possible. Yet now, all these years later, it seemed to him that he may have been mistaken in his initial impression or, alternatively, inclined to modify it in his imagination in the meantime, since his recent relations with Gwen had exposed numerous disparities between them and accordingly caused him to cast suspicion upon his previous assumptions.

For instance, that afternoon at the Tate, a few days ago, he had become gravely disillusioned by her manifest admiration for and enjoyment of the Pre-Raphaelites, which seriously conflicted with his own attitude, based on radically post-Raphaelite taste. She had only come to cultural life, it seemed to him, when they entered the Pre-Raphaelite section of Room 16. Her responses to Turner, on the other hand, had been decidedly cool, especially where the more abstract-looking works were concerned. It was as though she didn't comprehend the creative significance of what Turner had done and was consequently all-too-inclined to undervalue his work, to see in the gradual reduction of concrete representation a mess and

incompetence rather than a radical breakthrough to a higher level of spiritual awareness. Only with the more conventional early works did she appear to have any spontaneous interest, to stand in front of them with any degree of pleasure and occasionally make some eulogistic comment. With the later and less conventional ones, on the other hand, it didn't take Matthew long to realize that she wasn't really there, didn't really appreciate what they signified in the development of modern art. She appeared to withdraw into herself and clam-up, to respond but weakly to his enthusiasm. Even *The Angel Standing in the Sun* didn't appear to make any great impression on her, no matter what he said on its behalf.

Yes, it was evident that Gwen wasn't quite as kindred a spirit as Matthew had initially imagined, or that if, by any chance, she had once been closer to him, she had evolved in a different way during the course of the past four years. Of the two possibilities, he wasn't quite sure which one to attribute more importance to, though he had a growing suspicion that the first was probably nearer the truth. For time could only be subordinate to essence, since people who were essentially alike in their spiritual predilections remained so, no matter how long separated by time. Still, it was perhaps too early, as yet, for Matthew to dismiss Gwen as a mistake on his part, and he was grateful, in spite of the cultural differences which existed between them, for the friendship she had granted him. At least that was something to be pleased about!

Meanwhile, the conversation had switched, much to Matthew's relief, to the subject of art, and specifically to his art, which Mr Evans seemed anxious to investigate after a rather cynical fashion. "I mean, you're not one of these abstract artists, are you?" he fairly snorted, momentarily removing pipe from mouth. "One who throws or flicks paint over the canvas and calls the deplorable result a work of art?"

"Not quite; though I do indulge in a form of Post-Painterly Abstraction on occasion," the artist confessed in a slightly defensive tone-of-voice.

"What-on-earth's that?" Mr Evans asked condescendingly.

"Well, it's a kind of simple, geometrical abstraction employing only a few colours to create a predominantly classical as opposed to, say, romantic type of modern art," Matthew informed him. "One might argue that it generally looks neater than Abstract Expressionism, since primarily a matter of form rather than feeling. Essentially an American phenomenon of the 'forties, it's now somewhat out-of-date, which is why I don't indulge in it very often.... Art styles change very rapidly these days, you know."

"Perhaps that's just as well," Mr Evans averred sarcastically. "So what *do* you generally indulge in, if that's not too sweeping a question?"

"Well, I work in a variety of styles actually, sometimes veering in the direction of Op Art, with the use of closely knit wavy or angular strips of paint to create an illusion of movement, like one finds in Bridget Riley. Sometimes veering in the direction of still life influenced by Pop Art, with the use of simple outlines painted in bright or matt tones of pure paint, like one finds in Patrick Caulfield. Sometimes even veering in the direction of Computer Art, with the use of more complex geometrical shapes which reflect the influence of technology, like one finds in Eduardo Paolozzi. And sometimes making use of minimalist techniques, in which only a few lines or dots or other simple forms are painted onto the canvas, and the result is extremely simplistic, suggestive of a greater degree of abstraction than had been achieved by most of the earlier abstract artists ... with the notable exceptions of the Italian, Fontana, and the Frenchman, Klein, who preferred to leave the canvas blank or to paint it white."

"And you call all that art?" Mr Evans exclaimed, almost choking on his pipe. "A blank or monochromatic canvas - art?"

"Certainly modern art," Matthew admitted as calmly as possible. He had anticipated some such outburst on his interlocutor's part. "The general tendency being towards increased abstraction in one form or another, the most radical modern art completely breaking away from the traditional three-dimensional, representational concept of art."

"But why-on-earth does it have to do that?" Mr Evans objected obdurately.

"Because it does," the artist matter-of-factly stated, instinctively shying away from the immense abyss of dissimilar awareness which had suddenly opened up, hell-like, between them. He didn't have the nerve, at present, to attempt bridging it, nor much confidence that such an attempt would meet with any success. It was obvious that the reactionary philistine in front of him had no real desire to find out why modern art had to be modern. If he had, he would have found out long ago! No, it was perfectly clear that he was more interested in discrediting it than in seeking to justify its radicalism in the light of industrial and environmental change.

"But surely an artist should put something recognizably artistic onto a canvas," Gwen's father protested, before Matthew could add anything to his initial reply. "I mean, what's the point of a monochromatic canvas or, alternatively, of a canvas covered in geometrical patterns, zigzag lines, or whatever? How can that have any relationship to genuine art?" He stared sternly, almost offensively so, at his guest, as though wholly confident of the fact that he represented the voice of sanity and the artist, if not insanity, then certainly folly.

"I don't know whether it has any relationship to conventional art as such," Matthew replied, endeavouring not to show his impatience. "But it definitely has one to modern art. So far as Western art is concerned, there are essentially three kinds, viz. the pre-Christian, the Christian, and the post-Christian, each of which follows its own rules within carefully prescribed boundaries."

"That may well be," the pipe-smoker countered with an air of exasperation. "But the way I see it, a lot of modern art simply isn't art."

"It isn't Christian art, so it can't be judged by exactly the same standards as an art which was largely representational," Matthew averred. "You have to judge it from a post-Christian viewpoint - from the viewpoint, namely, of twentieth-century transcendentalism. Then it will make some sense to you. But if you think that there's only one kind of art, viz. Christian, and that all art should correspond to it and be judged by it, then I'm afraid you're very much mistaken."

Mr Evans appeared to be taken-aback, much as though he hadn't expected Matthew to rebut his criticism so confidently. And he appeared baffled moreover, evidently uncertain of what the artist meant by 'Christian art'. On the face of it the term seemed to imply crucifixions, visitations, resurrections, and the like, with strictly Christian associations. Was this so? He put the question to his guest.

"No, by 'Christian' I don't just mean religious art," Matthew declared, "but any art, no matter how secular its subject-matter, which was painted from approximately the 12-18th centuries, during the period, one might say, of strong Christian influence. In other words, an art which is dualistic, reflecting Western man's compromise position between the subconscious and the superconscious, rather than an art reflecting one or other of the psychic extremes, like one finds in the pre- and post-Christian periods. Therefore Christian art is balanced between illusion and truth, the sensual and the spiritual, Hell and Heaven, etc., through whichever dualities you care to name. It's largely a consequence of the environmental position of Western man during the time he lived in a more-or-less balanced condition between nature and civilization in his towns. As soon as the balance began to tip in favour of civilization and the superconscious, however, Christian art started to decline and continued to decline the more tipped the balance, so that only a post-Christian, non-representational art was possible or, at any rate, truly representative of the age."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you," Mr Evans confessed, not bothering to disguise his bewilderment. "I mean, what-on-earth is the superconscious? I haven't heard of such a term before."

No, he hadn't. And it was almost as though one should congratulate him for it, congratulate him for his ignorance and average middle-class mediocrity! Matthew was fairly annoyed for having allowed himself to get drawn into an explication of art in relation to environmental transformations, for having given way to his penchant for high-flown didacticism in this patently philistine sitting-room. Yet, protest as he might, it had been forced upon him by the necessity of justifying modern art and, through that, his own work in the face of unenlightened opinion. He had no option but to continue, to respond to Mr Evans' ignorance.

"Well, to put it as simply as possible, the superconscious is the highest part of the psyche, the intellectually- and spiritually-biased part of the mind as opposed to its emotionally- and sensuously-biased part," he obliged. "It's that part signifying moral light as opposed to moral darkness, good as opposed to evil, positivity as opposed to negativity - in short, love as opposed to hate. It is spirit at its lowest and highest, the spirit of intellectuality and the spirit, more importantly, of pure awareness, of timeless bliss. The former on the lower level, the latter higher up ... at the apex, one might say, of mystical beatitude. Indeed, it has been contended - and not without justification - that its topmost level is capable of identification with the Infinite; that, through it, man can come to a direct if partial knowledge of the Godhead; that the inner light is indeed commensurate with the essence of spirit *per se*, and thus equivalent to the truth beyond all appearances. For one can experience an intimation of ultimate reality through the superconscious mind if one so desires or, to put it more accurately, if one is in a position to, that's to say, if one has the time, patience, inclination, and determination to dedicate oneself to the cultivation of pure awareness. It won't come to one who hasn't properly prepared himself in advance, who hasn't dedicated his life to regular and sustained bouts of mystical concentration. It has to be earned."

"Presumably as the fruit of Transcendental Meditation," Mr Evans observed in an impatient tone-of-voice. "Frankly, I'm afraid I can't accept what you say about the superconscious being capable of identification, partial or otherwise, with God. It has never convinced me, this mystical theory of God as a state-of-mind, 'a being withdrawn', or whatever the quotation is, with which one can get into direct contact. It all sounds too arbitrary. The fact of a superconscious mind may be true, but I don't see that one should be led to infer the existence of God from it. After all, there have been other concepts of God as well, so what is there about this one that should single it out for special commendation?"

"Simply the fact that it's true and corresponds to ultimate reality,"

Matthew insisted.

"Oh, come now!" Mr Evans protested. "Just because some people - mystics or whatever they're called - believe it to be true, that doesn't mean to say it really is so! Some people believe Jesus Christ to be God, but so what? Does that mean that, ultimately, Christ really is God? I've never thought so, anyway, and I'm nominally a Christian, not a Jew, a Moslem, a Hindu, or whatever. To me, Christ is simply a man who happened to get himself taken for God in some parts of the world while the legitimacy of an anthropomorphic viewpoint prevailed."

"In a sense, He's that for me too," Matthew confessed, blushing deeply in spite of himself. For he was aware of the relativity of the term under discussion and felt that, while Christ wasn't exactly ultimate divinity, He was still divine to the degree of signifying a compromise between one level of divinity and another, the Father and the Holy Ghost, and thus had as much right, within relative terms, to be regarded as God as the other and more extreme parts of the Trinity. "Yet I don't see why one should therefore disbelieve in a spiritually achieved intimation of God as the mystics conceive of Him," he went on. "I don't see why a lower concept of God, founded as much on illusion as on truth, should prevent one from taking a higher concept of divinity seriously. After all, there are plenty of people, these days, who are too enlightened to believe in God when conceived, say, as either Jesus Christ or some white-bearded Creator lording it over the Universe. In other words, when conceived in traditional anthropomorphic terms, and who therefore consider themselves atheist."

"I, for one!" Mr Evans declared.

"Yes, well, such people often imagine they're above belief in God simply because what has hitherto been taken for divinity fails to convince them," Matthew continued. "They come to a halt two-thirds of the way up the ladder of religious evolution under the delusion that they've actually reached the top or, rather, gone beyond it, transcended religion altogether, and then flatter themselves that they're too intelligent to believe in God. For it's a taken-for-granted tenet of their philosophy that God, of whatever conception, is an illusion, a figment of the imagination which a less-enlightened ancestry were inclined to take too seriously. To them, religion is a system of illusions or superstitions, beneath the dignity of an atheistic mind."

"Well, isn't that what it essentially is?" Mr Evans countered, his face turning red with consternation.

"No, no more than art is or must inevitably be," Matthew confidently retorted. "Like art, religion can be divided into roughly three stages,

corresponding to the nature of the environment and the degree of evolution manifested in it at any given time. There's a religious sense largely founded on the subconscious, which is dark and fearsome, involving propitiatory sacrifice to a cruelly vengeful deity. It's the equivalent of Creator-worship and is totally illusory, having no basis in reality whatsoever. It isn't necessary to slay animals or people to win the favours of this Creator-God for the simple reason that such a deity, conceived in anthropomorphic terms, is largely if not purely a figment of the imagination. Yet those who exist in this pre-Christian context can't be expected to realize that, since they're victims of the subconscious, unable to transcend its dominion to any appreciable extent - least of all to an extent which would enable them to see through their illusions. They're too primitive, too much under nature's sway, and consequently too sensual to have any qualms about worshipping or, rather, fearing and propitiating a deity who corresponds to their subconscious enslavement. Being predominantly sensual, they project their sensuality on to their deity, and accordingly endeavour to appease him in an appropriately sensual manner, usually through blood sacrifices though also, as in the case of the ancient Greeks - a slightly less fearful and generally more egocentric people on the whole - through sexual orgies ..."

A titter of laughter erupted from the direction of the couch to Matthew's right, though Mrs Evans, less amused than her daughter, merely smiled her tacit acknowledgement of ancient Greek religiosity or, at any rate, to such of it as their guest had alluded.

"Well, if these pre-Christian or pagan peoples are more under the sway of the subconscious than of the superconscious," Matthew continued, ignoring as best he could Gwen's non-verbal interruption, "then Christians represent an evolutionary development which signifies a balance between the two parts of the psyche, between the sensuous illusion-forming part and the spiritual truth-forming part, and are consequently more dualistic. They aren't a people under the dominion of nature, but a people, on the contrary, who have evolved, thanks in large measure to the gradual expansion of their villages into towns, towards a position midway between nature and civilization. To them, Heaven is as much a fact of life or religion as Hell. For they're no longer under the dominion of evil, but balanced between evil and good in what I like to regard as the ego in its prime, that's to say, the twilight fusion-point of the two main parts of the psyche. Christianity, you see, is really a twilight religion between the darkness of Creator-worship and the light of Holy Ghost experience, between the sensual and the spiritual. Thus it's a religion half-illusion and half-truth - Jesus Christ, the

actual deity of the Christians, having actually lived and been a man, religious requirement having endowed Him with supernatural significance, attributed all manner of miracles to Him which, though valid from a theological viewpoint, appear less than plausible from a rational one, and accordingly fail to impress us or, at any rate, those of us who are rational."

"Here, here!" exclaimed Mr Evans, banging the hand holding his pipe down on the arm of his armchair so violently ... that some of its still-smouldering contents spilled out onto the carpet. "I've never been able to accept the divinity of Christ. To me, the idea of God as man or of man as God seems intrinsically suspect."

"Yes, well that doesn't mean to say that the idea of God as spirit should also be so," Matthew calmly responded. "For it's from Christianity, with its illusion/truth dichotomy, that we progress to the post-Christian context, largely brought about by the expansion of towns into cities and our growing independence from the sensuous influence of nature, in which the balance between the two parts of the psyche no longer holds sway and we find ourselves becoming progressively biased on the side of the superconscious, on the side of truth, goodness, peace, spirituality - all those attributes of life, in short, which stand at the opposite pole to those worshipped by the pre-Christians, or pagans. No longer can God be conceived in terms of a dualistic compromise between illusion and truth, still less in terms of illusion alone, but only as truth, as God *per se*, which corresponds, in traditional terminology, to the Holy Ghost, the third and highest part of the so-called Blessed Trinity.

"Here, at last, is the spiritual as opposed to anthropomorphic awareness of God," Matthew went on, warming to his thesis, "the religious sense commensurate with ultimate divinity. No longer is it necessary to fear as well as love God, but simply to experience and understand God as love, light, bliss, peace, etc. Nor need one conceive of this God in terms of 'He', as an anthropomorphic projection of the ego, for the simple reason that one has transcended the balance between the subconscious and superconscious parts of the psyche, and thus evolved beyond egocentric projections. No longer 'He' but 'it', no longer Jesus Christ but the Holy Spirit of Universal Consciousness or whatever else you prefer to term this manifestation of true divinity, which is one with the superconscious mind.

"Thus religion, becoming at last a question of truth, evolves to its third and final stage," Matthew continued, by now considerably fired-up, "beyond which it cannot change. For once one has arrived at a true conception of God, one cannot return to an earlier illusory or part-illusory concept. It's no good, once one has seen through the nature of prayer - that

mental activity founded on egocentric projection - pretending that one can return to a religious framework endorsing it in due course. One can't! A society growing increasingly under the sway of the superconscious can only respond to that influence in an appropriately transpersonal way - by transcending egocentric selfhood. For God, conceived in any ultimate sense, isn't there to be petitioned or thanked, praised or cursed, but simply experienced, as the heavenly side of Last Judgement paintings has generally shown. Bliss, peace, love - this is compatible with ultimate divinity, not action! Only an illusory or partly illusory concept of God leads one to believe that He is a being capable of exerting Himself on one's behalf, or even against one. And to assume it isn't possible to believe in God because there's so much evil in the world ... is simply to betray the fact that one would have a rather simplistic and outmoded concept of God in mind to equate Him with such evil. For this higher divinity is certainly not responsible for all the evil in the world. How can it be when it has nothing to do with evil, since a state-of-mind, a peace which 'surpasses all understanding'? No, it's highly unlikely that bliss can be held responsible for agony. Only a dualist might think so, a man, in other words, who signifies but a phase of human evolution, when evil and good seem to be balanced in the world and it's possible to assume that the one must necessarily be dependent on the other. Yet just as human evolution is a journey from the subconscious to the superconscious, from sensuality to spirituality, illusion to truth, so it's a journey from evil to good - from Hell to Heaven. It's only a combination of Hell and Heaven, so to speak, during the Christian twilight era of human evolution, when the darkness seems to be balanced by the light."

Thomas Evans wasn't particularly impressed by this line of argument, since he had suffered a great deal in life from poor health (he currently had a smoke-fuelled weak heart), financial and business worries, personal anxieties of one kind or another, etc., and was therefore unconvinced that life, however one conceived of it, was becoming progressively more heavenly. To him, it was pretty evident that dualistic considerations still had to be borne in mind, and he wasted no time in saying so.

"Oh, I quite agree," said Matthew by way of a deferential response. "There is still a large amount of evil in life. For we haven't yet transcended the egocentric balance to any appreciable extent, and accordingly still have a fair way to go before we get completely beyond dualism, since the subconscious hasn't been completely triumphed over at present. It may take decades or even centuries before we evolve to a context where Heaven becomes more of a reality than at present. But there's no way that you or

anyone else can disprove the fact that we're evolving in the right direction for spiritual transformation, and it seems quite probable that if we persist long enough we'll eventually attain to our goal - attain, in other words, to what I am wont to call a post-human millennium, which, as the terms suggests, is more than merely post-humanist, being properly divine."

"No, I can't believe that for one moment, any more than I can believe most of what you say!" Mr Evans obdurately retorted. "I expect you'll be telling us, before long, that we're destined to turn into angels or supermen or something equally preposterous at this post-human millennium of your fanciful imagination."

"Thomas!" interposed Mrs Evans, somewhat annoyed by her husband's impertinence. "It isn't necessarily as preposterous as you, in your bourgeois short-sightedness, would seem to think."

Mr Evans glared ferociously at his wife, as though she had just committed a sacrilege in his house. What right had *she* to interfere, least of all in a way which drew attention to the limitations of his ideological views? But he didn't say anything to her. Instead, he turned his attention back to Matthew Pearce and glared at him awhile. The atmosphere in the room was by no means pleasant. "And I don't quite see," he confessed, picking up the thread of his retort again, "exactly what all this has to do with modern art, which I recall we were discussing prior to religion. Am I to take it that such art generally signifies a superconscious bias, too?"

"Yes, that would be helpful," said Matthew. "For I was saying that Christian art was essentially a matter of dualism, not just religious subjects, and that post-Christian art couldn't be judged by the same standards, but had to be viewed in its own context of lopsided spirituality, had to be seen from the viewpoint of superconsciousness instead of mere egocentricity. For, compared with traditional art, modern art is largely a transpersonal phenomenon, transpersonal in its abstraction and transpersonal in what often appears as scrappiness or simplicity - a refusal to appear figuratively great, profound, overly objective, technically brilliant, or whatever else may be associated with an art form centred on the ego, which is to say, the dualistic fusion-point between subconscious and superconscious minds. Thus when it really *is* modern, and accordingly reflects the most advanced creative tendencies of the day, art is essentially an abstract rather than a representational phenomenon, a product of the city environment.

"Most of Salvador Dali's art, on the other hand, isn't truly modern at all," he went on, "because too egocentric to signify a more transpersonal or transcendental approach to painting. It's technically closer to Christian art.... Now when one remembers that Dali was the son of a notary, and thus

hailed from a conservative upper-middle-class background, it needn't surprise one if much of his work should reflect a representational standpoint in an age of mounting abstraction. Yet not all of his art can be so described, especially that part of it which focuses on Christian mysticism and utilizes a nuclear technique - a particle technique symptomatic of the nuclear disintegration of matter.

"However that may be, it's still fair to say that modern art is better characterized by transcendental abstraction than by surrealist representation," Matthew continued, "that a painting intimating of the Holy Ghost is more relevant to and indicative of the age than one with Christian associations, even if those associations happen to be radicalized by a nuclear or mystical technique."

"I'm afraid I know very little about Salvador Dali," remarked Mr Evans complacently. "Though I've seen one or two of his canvases, which were quite intriguing if somewhat perversely obscure. Yet at least they could be recognized as works of art, even if not as convincingly so as those of old masters like Raphael, Rembrandt, and Rubens."

If anything was guaranteed to make Matthew lose patience with the man, it was this kind of attitude. For it was evident that Mr Evans couldn't think of art in other than traditionally objective terms, and therefore automatically referred the present back to the past, regarding modern works as art only if they could be compared, to some extent, with those of the old masters, and considering all the rest, that is to say the bulk of twentieth-century art, as anti-art or even as no art at all. A typically philistine viewpoint, but scarcely one to be wondered at, in the circumstances! After all, Thomas Evans was the manager of an insurance company in Northampton and, as such, one couldn't very well expect him to be particularly aware of what was happening in the world of modern art, or why it had to happen. In a sense, it didn't matter what he thought, his views were of scant consequence, since those of a businessman, not an artist.

It was therefore important for Matthew to keep this in mind and thus make a determined effort not to be impressed by the reactionary opposition Mr Evans chose to offer, on the contentious subject of modern art. No, instead of losing patience with him on account of his virtually inevitable unenlightened viewpoint, Matthew resolved to keep Mr Evans in perspective as a perfectly ordinary middle-class citizen whom it was unwise to expect to behave or talk like an artist, least of all a radical one. If his viewpoint was somewhat limited, then so be it! There could be no real reason, given his critical temperament and occupational habits, why it should be otherwise.

Yet to some extent it was nonetheless necessary for the artist to continue his defence and explication of modern art, if only because his own reputation and self-respect were personally at stake, and this he proceeded to do, albeit without any conviction that what he had to say would be appreciated.

The fact that art had once primarily served the emotions was perfectly true. Just as it had also served, albeit at a later and more evolved epoch, both the will and intellect combined, and was now primarily serving the spirit. It had passed, like religion, from the realm of illusion to the realm of truth, and would continue to evolve in accordance with the contemporary imbalance on the side of truth. To claim, therefore, that art should only serve illusion would be as ridiculous, in Matthew's view, as to claim that religion was only a matter of illusion and would cease to exist as religion if it wasn't. No, art hadn't ceased to exist simply because the old criterion of dualistic balance had been superseded. On the contrary, what now existed was simply a different kind of art - more truthful and rational than hitherto. If, from a traditional viewpoint, it appeared to be a lesser art than that relative to an egocentric age, it nonetheless existed on a higher level of evolution and had to be respected on its own terms. This much, at any rate, the artist endeavoured to assure his sceptical host.

"Yes, but I still don't see the artistic significance of either a monochromatic or nearly blank canvas," Mr Evans objected, unwilling to accept Matthew's attempted vindication at face-value. "You call it minimalism, or some such term, and regard the result as an advanced or extreme form of abstraction. But, really, it doesn't make any sense to me. I mean, is that the ultimate truth in modern art?"

Matthew had to smile, in spite of his seriousness. "I don't know whether it's the ultimate truth," he replied, "but it can certainly be equated with spirit, light, and thus the truth of the superconscious mind. Indeed, I incline to view abstraction as a mode of religious art, the religious art of transcendental man. It signifies the victory of the spiritual over the material, the transpersonal over the impersonal, subjectivity over objectivity. A thing which also applies, I believe, to most light art, especially where neon tubing is involved. And, of course, to a large quantity of modern sculpture, or sculpture emphasizing light and space as opposed to the secular, to whatever reflects materialism, technology, urbanization, scientific progress, and so on, in the world at large. It's the difference, if you like, between that which emphasizes the influence of the Holy Ghost and that, by contrast, which emphasizes the influence of contemporary science and industry. Both kinds of art, now as previously,

are equally justified, but they aren't on the same level. The religious, now as before, signifies a superior tendency, one dealing with the more-than-human, dealing, in short, with the principal concern of human evolution - namely, the attainment to salvation in the millennial Beyond, the transformation of man into the superhuman being which lies transpersonally beyond him."

"Bah! I cannot accept that interpretation of human evolution," Mr Evans confessed, glowering defiantly.

"No? Well, maybe that's because you're essentially a materialist and therefore have no use for spiritual salvation," Matthew retorted. "Yet, to me, a person who is indisposed to reconcile himself to the notion that science and technology are ends in themselves, it seems indisputably evident that evolution must be conceived primarily in terms of man's changing relationships to divinity and only secondarily in terms of how he sustains himself during the course of those changes. To see technological and industrial progress as ends in themselves would seem to me a kind of insanity. Yet neither would it be entirely sane if one were to dismiss the secular and materialistic side of evolution altogether, as though it were of small account. For it's only through our ever-changing environments that we come to attain to a better and more truthful relationship with divinity. Only with the aid of our materialistic progress in respect of new technologies."

"So that is presumably why you sometimes work in a genre or format in which complex geometrical shapes, suggestive of the influence of contemporary technology, play an important role, is it?" Mr Evans deduced, recalling to mind an earlier facet of their conversation.

Matthew nodded affirmatively. "Yes, though not very often, least of all these days," he admitted. "For I like to think of myself as a predominantly religious painter, in the service of the Holy Ghost. In point of fact, I abandoned the impersonality of geometrical concerns some time ago for a kind of transcendental, symbolic art which sometimes makes use of a dove and at other times of an intensely luminous globe of light-suggesting paint."

"How d'you mean?" asked Mr Evans, looking slightly puzzled, as well he might.

"Well, as you doubtless know, the dove is symbolic of the Holy Ghost, so I use it to signify our age's growing allegiance, via the superconscious mind, to transcendentalism, and thus to the spirit. Painted in white on a silver background, or occasionally on a pale-blue one, the dove becomes for me a symbol of contemporary religion, equivalent to Teilhard de

Chardin's Omega Point. Now as the Omega Point is also a symbol, a concept for Ultimate Godhead in pure spirit, I make use of that as well, and so paint canvases in which an intensely pure light, turned-in upon itself in blissful self-contemplation, exists at the centre of a silver ground. But more recently, within the past couple of months, I've begun to paint, in very minimalist outlines reminiscent of Matisse's graphics and Caulfield's still-lives, figures meditating, seated cross-legged in upright postures on a flat plane with a kind of seraphic glow about them."

"Oh, really?" Mr Evans responded in a mockingly indifferent tone-of-voice. He had never meditated in his life, nor did he know anyone who had. "And are they supposed to represent the Buddha, or what?" he almost sarcastically inquired.

"No, nothing of the kind," Matthew maintained, ignoring, as best he could, the air of flippancy attending his host's sarcastic curiosity. "The figures used in the compositions in question are perfectly Western, designed to reflect the mounting relevance of meditation to a post-Christian society. They're not so much emissaries of Eastern religion or traitors to their cultural heritage ... as intelligent Westerners for whom the 'Third Person' of the Trinity has come to have more significance than the 'Second'. They pertain to spirituality in a modern industrialized and urbanized society, to a spirituality which reflects our severance from nature and consequent post-dualistic bias. To them, sin and fear of God are alike irrelevant. For they are too ascetic to be unduly exposed to sin, and can only conceive of God in terms of grace. They're not Buddhists but transcendentalists. And when they meditate, it's effectively with a view to fulfilling Christian prophecy and bringing the Christian aspiration towards salvation closer to fruition. In other words, to entering the 'Kingdom of Heaven' wherein only peace, bliss, love, and light reign. Being post-dualistic, they have no use for Hell."

Thomas Evans inflicted a short, sharp snort on the artist in supercilious response. "I wish I could say the same," he caustically declared. "But, as it happens, I have to live in this world, which, to the best of my knowledge, is decidedly dualistic. Your meditating figures seem far too complacent for me, too much a figment of your self-serving imagination. They suggest a greater degree of optimism concerning this life than ever I would wish to entertain. They seem to me to have turned their backs on reality and to be living in a kind of dream world."

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you," said Matthew.

"No, I don't suppose you can," Mr Evans retorted sarcastically, after which, to Matthew's relief, he relapsed into a silence disturbed only by the

lighting and puffing of his pipe.

CHAPTER THREE

Following dinner early that evening, Gwen and Matthew went out into the large back garden to get some air and soak up a little of the sun which was now bathing it in a pool of soft light. They took a couple of deck chairs and found a pleasant spot over by an imposing cluster of rhododendrons, which stood to the right of the garden at a distance of some thirty yards from the house. It was really Gwen's decision to sit there, for she hated to sit in the centre of the garden, where there was a total absence of plant life and one felt exposed to prying eyes all around one. Only by its edges, where the flowers and bushes were reposing in loosely arranged beds, did she feel any degree of complacency, born of the privacy they appeared to provide. Besides, she liked the scent of the plants, which was particularly pleasant where they were now sitting. The centre of the garden, about which only pale grass grew, seemed to her relatively barren and devoid of life.

"I trust you didn't find dad too trying during dinner?" she gently inquired of Matthew, after a few minutes' respectful silence had fallen between them in the refreshing presence of temperate nature.

"No, not really," he replied, more out of a mechanical response to her probing statement than an honest answer. He looked at her half-humorously, as though in ironic deference to the fact that Mr Evans had been more upsetting *before* dinner than during it. Indeed, it might have been truer to imply that Mr Evans was pretty upsetting whether or not he was talking. But he had no real desire to compromise her over the thorny issue of her father, limiting himself, instead, to a good-natured dismissal of the matter, as though it were of small account. For anything more serious would probably have led him to get up and make his way back to the station there and then, in order to be free not only of Gwen's father but of Gwen herself, who wasn't exactly the most kindred of spirits, either. Yet he didn't want to make a scene of it, to treat this experience too seriously. Better, on second thoughts, to treat it with a kind of scientific detachment, as though one had been entrusted with the responsibility of studying, at relatively close-quarters, a species of life which, though personally abhorrent to one, it was nevertheless necessary to treat with a modicum of respect, if only to complete one's studies. It might, after all, lead to some as-yet unimagined revelation. At least it had already led to a better

understanding of Gwen, which was something.

"I really ought to have warned you, in advance, of what my father was like," she remarked sympathetically. "But I wasn't altogether sure of how he would react to you. Besides, I was afraid that you might not have agreed to come here, had I given you prior warning about him."

Matthew smiled dismissively. "Oh, don't worry yourself about it," he advised her. "I didn't exactly expect him to be an exact replica of myself. He's entitled to his views, after all, even if I can't share them."

There ensued a further short period of silence, before Gwen asked: "What d'you think of my mother?"

It was a question Matthew had half-expected, but he still blushed slightly as he replied: "She seems quite pleasant really, quite polite and friendly; though I haven't yet had a chance to form a clear impression of her. Like you, she tends to keep quiet when Mr Evans is speaking."

"Yes, that's true enough," Gwen admitted. "She's not a particularly talkative person anyway, even given the fact that dad doesn't exactly encourage conversation. He mostly keeps to himself in the house."

"Don't your parents get on very well together?" Matthew asked, partly in response to this remark and partly from a vague premonition to the contrary.

"No, not for the past five or six years," Gwen revealed, blushing slightly. "Largely in consequence of dad's poor health - his fits of depression and bad heart, his liver and bronchial trouble - which seems to have come between them and isolated them from each other to a certain extent. Not that mum's health is entirely good. But she does at least fare better than him, as a rule."

"She certainly looks well," Matthew candidly opined. "And young, too. Indeed, I was more than a little surprised to learn that the woman who answered the door to us was in fact your mother. She seemed more like an elder sister."

Gwen smiled faintly and then said: "Yes, she's only seventeen years older than me actually. But that, too, is one of the reasons why my parents don't get on as well as they formerly did. For dad is ten years her senior and tends to behave as if he were a member of an older generation ... which, when you consider the nature of his health, effectively appears to be the case. It's as though he has already crossed the threshold into old age, while she has hardly entered middle age."

Matthew couldn't argue with that observation! "And you're their only child?" he conjectured.

"Yes, though mum lost two children prematurely, and I had a brother

who died of pneumonia at six," Gwen answered on a note of sadness. "He was two years younger than me."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said Matthew, respectfully deferring to convention. "It must have been rather upsetting for you."

"Yes, for a while," Gwen admitted. "But more so for mum, who was very fond of him. She had always wanted a boy." There was a tinge of self-pity in her voice, as though indicative of the fact that, as a girl, she had rated lower in her mother's estimation and grown to resent it. But she didn't say anything else about the subject, and Matthew tactfully refrained from further inquiry.

Indeed, he was secretly gratified when, instead of continuing the conversation along other lines, his girlfriend relapsed into one of her characteristic silences, abandoning her face to the sunlight, which caused it to take on an almost angelic aura of transcendent spirituality, like Rossetti's Beatrice. To be sure, there was certainly something Pre-Raphaelite about her at this moment, something ethereal and not-quite-there. Yet such an illusion was quickly dispelled from Matthew's mind as she turned her face to one side and caught some shadow from the nearby rhododendrons. Now she was simply Gwendolyn Evans again, devoid of spiritual nobility, the daughter of a provincial bourgeois. Her attractiveness, suddenly released from transcendent pretensions, assumed more earthly proportions. But for her delicacy of build, one might have taken her for an average sensualist. Instead of which, one had no option but to acknowledge her for the dualistic compromise she was - both sensual and spiritual in approximately equal degrees.

Turning his gaze away from her impassive face, Matthew focused his attention on the detached house in front of them, the rear windows of which glinted in the soft sunlight. Its perfectly conventional middle-class respectability suddenly became a source of annoyance to him as he recalled, not without a pang of regret, that he had allowed himself to be drawn into a context for which he had no real sympathy and absolutely no desire to emulate in his own life - namely, the context of bourgeois compromise. For the fairly large house that his vision now embraced stood as a symbol to him of most of the things he was in rebellion against and preferred not to see. It stood, above all, as a symbol of the class which had come to power after the aristocracy and now prospered on the sweat of the proletariat. Yet it also stood as a symbol, in large measure, of the class which took the middle road between the aristocracy and the proletariat, and signified a kind of midway stage of human evolution. Not as materialistic as the former nor as spiritualistic as the latter, the bourgeoisie were

resigned to a compromise formula which, while leaving them cognizant of the fact that excessive wealth was a grave obstacle to spiritual enlightenment, precluded them from relinquishing the benefits of materialism to any appreciable extent, least of all to an extent which made them candidates for spiritual enlightenment personally!

Quite the contrary, the bourgeois was very firmly, now as before, a creature of the middle road, the dualistic material/spiritual compromise which found its religious home in Christianity and its political home in parliamentary democracy. If his house wasn't as grand as an aristocrat's, well and good! He had no great difficulty living with that fact. But to suggest to him that he should go one stage further up the ladder of human evolution and relinquish private property altogether, resigning himself to life in a comparatively small council house or flat, would be tantamount to depriving him of his very existence, and such a suggestion would meet with very little approval! Indeed, it would probably meet with none! For the bourgeois was not an animal which could turn itself into a proletarian, any more than an aristocrat was an animal which could turn itself into a bourgeois. If a bourgeois was spiritually superior to an aristocrat, he was yet spiritually inferior to a proletarian, and could never alter himself one way or the other. By his very compromise nature, he was condemned to the twilight stage of human evolution in between the darkness and the light - a perfectly legitimate position while the twilight was inevitable, but an increasingly questionable, not to say untenable, one the more the twilight changed to light and society accordingly progressed away from its former dualistic compromise towards a stage of life that transcended dualism, a stage in which only proletarian criteria were relevant. As a creature who signified a kind of dovetailed combination of aristocratic and proletarian elements within himself, the bourgeois could never emerge from the moral twilight. If it came to an end under the sway of an increasingly strong barrage of light, the bourgeois would perish too. He wasn't capable of living solely in the light, for it would be a refutation of his other half, an abnegation of his dualism. No, he could only flourish and perpetuate himself while the twilight prevailed. Once it had gone - whoosh, no more bourgeois!

Whatever pertained to the light was proletarian; was man become wary of materialism and living in smaller houses, smaller apartments, or flats because he was too evolved to require large-scale property, because, in other words, his superconscious predominated over his subconscious rather than existed in a balanced compromise with it; was man born and bred in the city, away from the sensuous influence of nature; was transcendental

man. Yes, but not the bourgeois, not Christian man. There could be no question of *his* transformation. This house, sparkling in the sunlight, was destined to be superseded world-wide - and in a sense already had been - by a less materialistic scale-of-values.

In the overall progression of evolution through approximately three stages ... from a dominating materialistic class to a liberated spiritualistic class via a worldly compromise class, this house undoubtedly signified something morally better, higher, and more humane than the typical aristocratic dwellings which had preceded it. It was certainly less glaringly materialistic than the huge castles, palaces, and country houses favoured by the nobility. It was not the repository of so many possessions, and such possessions as it housed were generally of a less-ornate and expensive variety than those favoured by the overtly materialistic class. They were unlikely to distract the eye from spiritual preoccupations to anything like the same extent as those possessions which had been specifically designed to glorify matter. The library, for instance, would not be nearly so large or contain as many weighty and expensively-tooled, leather-backed books. On the contrary, it would be of moderate proportions, containing, at most, a few thousand books, and most if not all of those less-expensive hardbacks would have been read, not simply owned for the mere sake of collecting or signifying the extent of one's wealth and/or materialistic power.

Indeed, there may even be, among the ranks of such bourgeois tomes, a few paperbacks, as befitting an age in which the spiritual predominates over the material and a book is accordingly judged more by what it contains by way of intellectual or cultural nourishment than with what care or materials it was made. Yet it was highly unlikely that such a library would house any great number of paperbacks. For the bourgeois would not want to deprive himself of hardbacks to an extent which made his collection lack a certain amount of materialistic elegance. Oh, no! If he instinctively looks down on the extensive materialism of an aristocrat's library, he yet shies away from the prospect of relinquishing his taste for hardbacks to the extent required by a proletarian library, in which, one may surmise, only paperbacks would exist. Furthermore, he would not wish to reduce the number of books in his collection, either. For the few thousand he owns seems to him more becoming than the mere 500-odd books to be found in the average ...