

SUBLIMATED RELATIONS

OR

THE VOICE MUSEUM

BY

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OF CENTRETRUTHS DIGITAL MEDIA



CDM Prose

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CHAPTER ONE

He gently closed the front door of his parents' house behind him and, pulling his scarf more tightly round his neck, set off at a brisk pace for home. It was a rather cold night and, as he hurried along, great plumes of escaping breath were quickly dispersed into the chill air. He was somewhat relieved that the once-yearly obligation to visit his parents for Christmas had been successfully dispatched and that he was once more a free man - free, that is, to please himself.

Not that their company unduly oppressed him! On the contrary, they did their best to make his stay a merry one, having provided a copious roast lunch and a sufficiency of wine and/or sherry. But, even so, it was a relief that the social pressure to be on one's best behaviour had if not entirely vanished then, at any rate, been temporarily relaxed, and he was accordingly free to be his usual informal self.

One's best behaviour? No, that wasn't entirely true! More accurately, the pressure to tune-in, as it were, to one's parents' standard of Christmas and behave in a manner which suggested that no alternative standard was either possible or indeed desirable. Yes, that was it! He was escaping from the pressure of that, as also, if the truth were known, from the even worse pressure of having been in close proximity to his stepfather's wretched cold and of having had to pretend that it didn't really inconvenience him in any way. But, really, what a gross inconvenience it *had* been! It was quite a stinker the man was suffering from, a most objectionable stinker!

For a moment Timothy Byrne was on the verge of cursing his stepfather for having had the untimely misfortune to catch a rotten cold at Christmas, but, mindful of the festive spirit, he stifled the thought as best he could and replaced it with a charitable commiseration towards Richard Briley for the rotten luck he'd had ... to fall victim to such a sordid fate at so inopportune a time. In fact, he forced himself to feel sorry for the man and to offer him, in retrospect, what private sympathy he could. Yet even then it wasn't possible for Timothy to ignore the self-pity which suddenly welled up, like flood waters, inside him at the recollection of his having had to sit in uncomfortably close proximity to Mr Briley on a number of occasions over Christmas and not only risk being infected with the stinker himself, but, no less distastefully, listen to the incessant snivelling which issued from the old man's snot-laden nose. Really, it was enough to make one

weep!

Crossing over one of the busy main roads which prominently divided his part of Haringey from theirs, he hurried his steps along the north London streets still faster, as much, in effect, to escape the memory of his stepfather's threatening germs ... as to get back to his flat as quickly as possible, lest additional threats from unseen quarters lay in sordid wait for him! Poor Mr Briley, it was really most unkind of nature to have inflicted such a bad cold on him during that brief period in the year when, birthdays notwithstanding, one least wished to suffer germs. Most unkind! Yet, unfortunately, that was generally the way with nature, which was unconcerned with human wishes and the sporadic attempts man might make to approximate to a heavenly condition. Mindful, one might almost say, of its own wayward interests. Ignorant of Christmas.

For what was Christmas, after all, but a concerted attempt by man to approximate to Heaven in the face, if needs be, of natural opposition? A time when one remembered the birth of Christ and gave thanks for the spiritual example He was to set. A time when one endeavoured to live more closely in Christ's light and refrain from sin. But what did nature care about that? Not a frigging jot! It made no specific effort to emulate man and call a truce for a few days. On the contrary, one was just as likely to catch a cold on Christmas day, if germs were in the air, as at any other time. And if the weather had been particularly inclement before Christmas, it wasn't likely to improve just to suit men. It could even get worse!

Fortunately that had not been the case this year, and, as he continued on his brooding way, Timothy felt gratitude for the fact that the weather had remained comparatively dry and mild these past few days, thus discouraging the rapid spread of harmful germs. Yet the fact of Mr Briley's cold was still bad enough, and even if he, Timothy John Byrne, hadn't caught it, nevertheless he had suffered from it in a certain sense, both psychologically and physically, and that was no joke! His Christmas hadn't exactly proved to be the most congenial of experiences, even if it could have been a damn sight worse. Still, his parents had generally been kind to him, and together, in spite of their temperamental differences, they had endeavoured to maintain an atmosphere of peace and joy whilst in one-another's persevering company.

Yes, a kind of crude approximation to the heavenly Beyond had been achieved, in spite of whatever opposition the temporal world had contrived to place in their way. Even with Mr Briley's constant snivelling and the consequent risk of infection, these past few days had retained a seasonal quality which, on the whole, was fairly pleasant, if a little lacking in

excitement. For there could be no question that Timothy had eaten well and, despite his customary abstinence, imbibed a bottle or two of quality sherry, not to mention sat in front of some interesting films on television and spent an hour or so profitably reading philosophy in one of his parents' spare rooms. And, of course, there had been some conversation with his mother - Mr Briley being a rather laconic bloke who preferred not to enter into conversation with him even when he wasn't ill - which had proved more the exception than the rule, and passed the time quite pleasantly.

Yet even as he hurried across another busy road, Timothy reflected that this Christmas could have been a lot better, a much finer approximation to Heaven than theirs had been, and not only on account of his stepfather's cold, by any means! No, on a number of counts. But, alas, his parents had prevented it from being such by their emphasis on traditional, or sensual, approximations to the Beyond, and had thus made it virtually obligatory for him to follow suit. The ideas which were now welling-up in his conscious mind, like molten lava, would hardly appeal to them, well-meaning though they undoubtedly were. No, they couldn't be expected to appreciate what he now considered a higher way of celebrating Christmas, a way which, instead of emphasizing downward self-transcendence, put the emphasis firmly on upward self-transcendence and was accordingly closer to Heaven, to what Timothy liked to think of as the spiritual climax to human evolution in the not-too-distant future.

However, being average sensual people, his mother and stepfather could only celebrate Christmas in a fashion commensurate with their average sensuality, not in a fashion which he now regarded as of a higher and altogether more agreeable order. Yet what was true of them was no less true of the great majority of people, who were likewise indisposed to change their habits and celebrate Christmas in any but a sensual way. And as he neared his flat, a poignant truth suddenly dawned on him. Like it or not, the majority of people's attempts to approximate to a heavenly condition at Christmas only resulted in their ending-up in a condition closer to Hell, in which their customary sensual habits were intensified to a point of gluttony and drunkenness, if not lechery as well!

Yes, that was the ironic truth of the matter! For the average sensual man Christmas was simply an intensification of his average sensual habits, and thus, in certain respects, an approximation not to Heaven but to its beastly antithesis. Society hadn't yet evolved to a stage where the great majority of people were disposed to approximate, no matter how humbly or tentatively, to the heavenly Beyond through upward self-transcendence. Consequently the only reasonable alternative to average day-to-day

consciousness for a relatively short period of time lay, for them, in downward self-transcendence, in the gratification of the senses rather than of the spirit, and thus immersion in the subconscious instead of the superconscious. For which, as Timothy well knew, food and drink were eminently suitable!

And so, by a curious paradox, the Devil was arguably given more acknowledgement, by a majority of people at Christmas, than God, and a kind of sensuous approximation to Hell triumphed over the Christian world during that time. Only in a minority of cases was it likely that the godly in man would be given its due and duly acknowledged, and as Timothy drew closer to his small flat he realized, with some regret, that he hadn't been among that minority of higher types this Christmas but, on the contrary, had consumed more than his customary amounts of food and drink!

Maybe next year - assuming he wasn't living in the same place and had the means to be more independent of his parents for Christmas - he would be able to celebrate Christ's birth in a manner more suited to his tastes, and thus become a part of that tiny minority who acknowledged the superiority of the spirit over the senses at Christmas, thereby upward self-transcending. He hoped so anyway, since he had become somewhat dissatisfied, no thanks to his parents, with the traditional way of celebrating it!

But what, exactly, would this alternative to sensual indulgence be? He had arrived at the front door to his ground-floor flat and duly let himself in. Yes, what exactly? Quickly, almost impatiently, he removed his black leather zipper and matching scarf and hung them on the metal clothes pegs just inside the door. Then he hurried into his small living-room and immediately switched on the electric fire there. Its two coiled filaments were aglow in no time, and he gratefully sat in front of it and rubbed the cold from his frozen hands. Yes, well, to approximate more to Heaven than to Hell at Christmas meant that one would have to reduce one's consumption of food and drink for a start, and thus avoid the temptation to become both a glutton and a drunkard. Whether one went as far as limiting oneself to bread and water instead of, say, roast and wine was another thing. But one could at least make do with a less sensual fare than one was ordinarily accustomed to, and certainly avoid alcohol, that leading enemy of the spiritual life! Milk, tea, coffee, or some fruit juice was morally preferable to booze, though not perhaps as good as cola.

Timothy smiled slightly at the thought of it and continued to gently rub his hands together in front of the electric fire. He was still feeling quite bloated from the turkey-sandwich supper his mother had provided for him,

and not a little conscious of the soporific effects which the last glass of sherry was having on his mind. He was still thinking of heavenly approximations from the disadvantage-point, as it were, of hellish approximations, or so it seemed. But he hadn't imbibed that much sherry in all, and was accordingly still capable of lucid thought, thanks in part to the sobering influence of the cold weather during his brisk walk home. So, as a step in the right direction of upward self-transcendence, it would be necessary to minimize the part played by downward self-transcendence by curtailing one's sensual intake. That much was obvious.

But what else? What about the actual feeding of the spirit? Would reading a paperback throughout the Christmas holiday suffice to take care of that? An image of a painting by Daniele Crespi entitled *The Meal of St. Charles Borromeo*, in which the Saint was depicted reading the Bible whilst eating a frugal meal of bread and water, came soaring into his mind's eye and to some extent answered that vexing question. Yes, reading *would* serve the needs of the spirit and contribute towards establishing an approximation to the heavenly Beyond, or Omega Point, as Teilhard de Chardin had called the projected culmination of spiritual evolution. But a rather crude approximation to it, one had to admit, insofar as only the lower reaches of the spirit would be acknowledged and served - those reaches in which the intellect had its throne. The greater and higher part of the spirit, the soul, would languish unfed, undernourished, and ignored.

Thus while reading would be better than dozing, one could approximate more closely to the heavenly Beyond by meditating throughout the Christmas holiday, thereby allowing one's spirit to expand on a wave of blessed peace. Stillness, quietness, alert passivity, joy ... all these consequences of Transcendental Meditation would bring one closer to heavenly salvation than ever reading could, even when the book in one's hands was of an elevated order, and so result in a finer Christmas. Yet if a few days given-up to meditating still seemed too much ... well then, one could always divide one's time between reading and meditating, or meditating and watching some ennobling film or listening to some inspiring music. As long as the spirit rather than the body was being acknowledged, no matter how imperfectly, one would be in alliance with that tiny minority of higher types.

Yet, what else? Was there anything besides culture and meditation that could be indulged in over Christmas in order to approximate as closely as possible to Heaven? Undoubtedly meditation was the best thing for any length of time. But if, by any chance, one felt one had to have recourse to some kind of concrete substitute for alcohol or tobacco, what was there?

Ah, there was indeed something that could be indulged in but which wasn't legal at present, and that was mind-expanding hallucinogens like LSD, the acronym for lysergic acid diethylamide. Whether LSD, for example, would be legalized in the near or distant future ... remained to be seen. But, whatever its ultimate fate, there could be no denying that its synthetic constitution distinguished it from natural drugs, or drugs which either grew naturally or were less than fully synthetic, like tobacco, alcohol, opium, and morphine, rendering it an altogether different proposition from them.

For all the 'natural' drugs - in short, everything that grew from or owed their origins to the earth - were inevitably stamped with nature's imprint and were thus of a sensual essence. Whenever one had recourse to them, in whatever doses, the result was an intensification of sensual indulgence and therefore a downward self-transcendence. According to their strength and the amounts imbibed, they imposed varying degrees of subconscious stupor, ranging from the shallow in tobacco to the deep in opium or morphine. Being of natural origin, they could only appeal to the senses, not the spirit, and thus were aligned with Hell rather than Heaven. The deeper the level of subconscious stupor imposed by them, the more evil, it seemed to Timothy, they were, so it wasn't altogether surprising that society had sought to protect itself from the most potent natural drugs by making them illegal and punishing those who trafficked in them. Only the relatively less evil ones, including tobacco and alcohol, were officially sanctioned and accorded a degree of social respectability, even though they were by no means without extremely serious consequences, as lung cancer and sclerosis of the liver made more than adequately clear! Hopefully, a day would come when even tobacco and alcohol would be officially discountenanced, and all degrees of downward self-transcendence through natural drugs duly proscribed or, at the very least, discouraged. But, at present, we were still living in an age when such evils were to a certain extent inevitable and somehow relevant to the times.

However, perhaps there would also come a time when hallucinogens like LSD would be legalized, and those who wanted to use it could do so without fearing prosecution? At which thought Timothy clicked his tongue and, ceasing to rub his hands together, sat back comfortably in his armchair. Yes, for LSD was a synthetic drug, and therefore it acted on the superconscious rather than the subconscious. It resulted, as a rule, in visionary experiences of a transcendent, translucent, and altogether mystical order, opening the door to the Beyond and thus giving rise to upward self-transcendence. It was divine rather than diabolic, uplifting rather than degrading, enlightening rather than depressing.

Yes, if sanity was to prevail in the world and evolution continue on its upward curve, then LSD would certainly have a role to play in the future as probably *the* drug of transcendental man. The centuries of tobacco and alcohol consumption, not to mention the illicit consumption of dope and the harder natural drugs, would have to be supplanted by the centuries of LSD consumption, in which man aspired towards God, through expanded consciousness, rather than regressed towards the Devil in varying degrees of subconscious stupor. Then perhaps Christmas, or some such equivalent festival, would be celebrated with LSD instead of alcohol or tobacco. Then Christmas would approximate more closely to the heavenly Beyond for the great majority of people, and so be a much superior occasion to what it was at present. For at present it was all too under nature's sensuous influence. Only by overcoming nature, Timothy believed, would man eventually attain to God, since the mundane and the transcendent were ever different, if not antithetical, propositions.

But, in the meantime - no, one couldn't expect overnight miracles. The majority of people were simply not ready for LSD and, consequently, it had to remain illegal. Only a comparatively small number of people would be capable of using it profitably and sensibly, whereas, for the average sensual man, it would probably prove either a blank or a danger. And not only to himself! One shuddered at the thought of what might happen if a crowd of football thugs or other hooligans were to get their coarse hands on the divine hallucinogen! Why, they were bad enough under the influence of lager!

No, it was pretty obvious that the one drug seriously capable of effecting an upward self-transcendence would have to wait a while yet for official approval. There was no sense in casting pearls before swine! When society as a whole had progressed to a higher stage of evolution, a stage transcending anything we now knew, then perhaps an official change-of-heart would be possible. But, in the meantime ... ah! one would just have to make do, in a majority of cases, with alcohol for Christmas. And if one found that *infra dignum*? Well, one could always meditate or read a book - which was exactly what Timothy Byrne intended to do next Christmas, all being well!

Getting up from his armchair, he ambled over to the windows and pulled their floral-patterned curtains across. He had quite overlooked them when first entering the room, but it didn't really matter too much. Few people would have been interested in staring-in at him and, besides, the low wall and front-garden hedge provided his room with a certain amount of seclusion anyway. Yet he was reminded, by the sight of a large Christmas

card standing on the small table just to one side of the windows, that he had been invited out to dinner on New Year's Eve, so he hastened to pick it up and re-read its contents.

Yes, this late card, only received on Christmas Eve, had come as quite a surprise to him, particularly since he had met its sender but once, and then rather briefly. Yet the man had shown what seemed like genuine interest in his philosophy, and suggested the possibility of their dining together some time. So it looked as though he had meant what he said. Here, however, is what he had written:-

Dear Timothy Byrne,

Just a brief note to wish you a Merry Christmas and invite you down to Rothermore House for dinner on New Year's Eve. You will recall that we discussed your most recent publication together, earlier this month, and that I was quite impressed by it. Perhaps you would like to offer me some further enlightenment on its difficult subject-matter in due course? If so, then come down by early afternoon train to Crowborough in East Sussex, and join the select group of cultured guests whom I have also invited to see in the New Year with us. I hope you don't have any prior engagements?

Yours sincerely
Joseph Handon (Viscount)

Timothy re-read the invitation through twice and then replaced the rather picturesque card on the table. He was really quite baffled by it, not having received any such invitation before. And the fact that Handon was a viscount came as something of a surprise to him. He hadn't realized, at the time of their first encounter, that he was dealing with a peer of the realm. Maybe that explained why the invitation made mention of a dinner rather than a party? It seemed to him quite posh really, not what he would have expected at all. But, still, what was he to make of it? Should he accept?

He returned to his single armchair and involuntarily began to warm his hands in front of the electric fire again. Crowborough? No, not a place he had ever been to before? And Rothermore House? He smiled at the thought of his arriving from the station by taxi at a large country house with fluted pilasters surmounted by Ionic or Corinthian capitals on the façade, and a large central pediment, with or without relief sculpture, over the architrave. Maybe, on the other hand, it would be less classical, more baroque or even gothic? He hadn't the faintest idea. Nevertheless, it was almost bound to be large, imposing, spacious, and surrounded on all sides by plenty of open land. Country houses were usually like that, after all.

Again he smiled to himself and sat back in his armchair. He wasn't sure whether or not to accept the invitation, especially since he didn't know much about Joseph Handon and had absolutely no idea who the other guests would be. It wasn't as if he were exactly enamoured of country houses either, though he had retained a certain rather narrow aesthetic interest in one or two of them, compliments of some informal architectural studies in the reference division of his local library, several years before. Yet, all things considered, perhaps the experience would prove rewarding, confirming him in his suppositions and further enlightening him where aristocratic lifestyles like Viscount Handon's were concerned. Yes, maybe he would learn a thing or two from first-hand experience, as it were, of country houses and their inhabitants that contact with reference books had denied him? It was certainly worth considering anyway.

Still smiling, he vacated his old armchair again and proceeded to slot an audio cassette into the tape-deck of his modest midi sound-system. Boxing Day still had an hour to run and he was determined to pass the remaining time in as cultural a fashion as possible. Some synth-based modern jazz would, he supposed, enable him to do just that!

CHAPTER TWO

At length the train arrived at Crowborough station and a rather bored Timothy Byrne alighted from the empty second-class compartment, in which he had sat cross-legged for most of the journey, and slowly made his way towards the ticket barrier. Only a handful of other people had got off the train with him and he wondered, as he passed through the exit, whether there might not be another person bound for Rothermore House among their number.

Once outside the station he quickly engaged the services of a waiting taxi, and presently found himself being driven through a series of narrow country lanes in the general direction of Rothermore House. It was almost four o'clock and he hoped that his arrival there wouldn't be too early; though he had no way of telling from the invitation at exactly what time the viscount would be expecting his other guests to arrive. Perhaps most of them were already there? He mentally shuddered at the thought of it and sought distraction from that prospect by scanning the surrounding fauna-and-flora of the passing countryside. He never liked being the last or nearly last guest to arrive anywhere.

"Been out this way before, mate?" the cabby asked, addressing his passenger via the driving mirror.

"No," Timothy replied, a bit startled by this unexpected intrusion into his sordid reflections.

"Nearly there now," said the cabby, who speedily steered the taxi round a couple of sharp bends and then brought it to a gradual halt a hundred or so yards along a relatively straight road, which appeared to lead nowhere. On one side, a view of trees and hills. On the other side, a tall gateway presented its black steel bars to their attention. It was slightly ajar, and stood between high brick walls lined with trees and bushes.

"I'll take you up the driveway if you'd like," the cabby offered, half-turning round in his seat.

"Is it a long one?" Timothy asked.

"At least a coupla hundred yards," the cabby informed him.

"Right, thanks."

Having got out of the taxi to push the gate open, the cabby returned to his seat and restarted the engine, which had in the meantime spluttered out. "You're the second geezer I've driven up here today," he revealed, as they

got under way again.

"Oh, really?" responded Timothy, who hadn't expected to be informed of that fact! "Perhaps I won't be the last," he commented.

"Perhaps not, mate."

The taxi reached the end of the driveway and there, suddenly, the expanse of Rothermore House loomed menacingly ahead, no more than seventy yards away. One had the feeling, curiously, of coming out of a jungle and into the open again.

"I'm afraid this is as far as I can go, mate," the cabby informed him on a slightly apologetic note, as unexpected as it was strange.

Timothy felt like saying: "That's quite far enough," since he had no wish to be driven right up to the large front doors of such an imposing house in a bright red Cortina, but simply nodded his head and got out. Then he paid the driver and, reciprocating his New Year wishes, stood back to allow the taxi to turn around in the narrow space provided and speed back down the driveway.

So this was it! He stood a moment stock-still, staring across the wide expanse of front garden which framed the large house. He hadn't been far wrong in his conjectures as to what the place would look like, for it did indeed possess fluted pilasters surmounted by Corinthian capitals. But where he had imagined a central pediment there was a balustrade, upon which a couple of weighty-looking sculptural urns were standing, and this balustrade extended along the entire length of the façade, reminding one, in a way, of crenellated battlements. Thus a two-storey house, with twelve vertically-elongated windows on each story - six to either side of the aediculated entrance. Where had he seen a building like this before? Yes, of course! A book on English architecture in the local library's reference division had shown him a photograph of Easton Neston by Nicholas Hawksmoor. There was indeed a close resemblance between the two houses. But whereas Easton Neston had only been a photograph, Rothermore House was right there in the flesh, so to speak, and altogether very real. Almost too real for comfort, as far as Timothy Byrne was concerned!

Realizing that he couldn't very well continue to stand out in the cold and gaze up at the building as though he had nothing better to do, he forced himself on towards his objective. The crunching of his steps on the gravel path which led through the English garden made him feel rather self-conscious and exposed to view as he neared the large front entrance, and he carefully avoided looking at the windows from fear of seeing someone behind them. The house seemed to tower above him like some fearful

monster the nearer he got to it, making him feel rather dwarfed as well as self-conscious. He was almost wishing he hadn't accepted Joseph Handon's invitation, as he climbed the steps leading to the framed entrance. Almost, but not quite! For he was determined to brave this experience out until the end and learn what he could from it. And he was learning fast, because now, halted just in front of the door, he realized that there was a world of difference between looking at photos of country houses and actually standing in front of one! The former he could tolerate, the latter... He shuddered with apprehension and pressed the bell. Now he was irrevocably committed.

In less than a minute it was answered by a manservant, who, on receiving his name, politely ushered him inside. Once there, he took off his leather jacket and handed it, together with woollen scarf, to the man. He hoped that his sartorial appearance would pass muster here, since he wasn't in the habit of dressing more conservatively, having burnt his last bridges, so to speak, of conventional attire several years before. His black denims and green sweatshirt were presentable enough, he thought, and his new white leather sneakers with black stripes sufficiently clean, in spite of the dust kicked up while crossing the gravel path. All in all, pretty typical of him these days, and not something he had any desire to change, given his long-standing aversion to suits and ties and other sartorial manifestations of a more conventional, not to say bourgeois, lifestyle.

"Now, sir, if you'd just care to follow me," said the elderly servant, once he had deposited Timothy's jacket and scarf in a cloakroom to one side of the entrance hall. Smilingly, he led the way across the intervening space to a pair of double doors which, on reaching, he threw open with a polished gesture, to reveal one of the longest and largest rooms Timothy had ever beheld. Having announced his name for the benefit of its occupants, the manservant ushered him in with formal politeness and then gently but firmly closed the doors behind him, leaving the young writer to his fate. Never before had he felt as self-conscious as now, what with the sight of those already gathered there. He might as well have been standing in the nude before a roomful of nubile females, as standing in his usual informal clothes just inside the doors of this immense room!

But help was at hand in the form of Lord Handon himself, who beamed an encouraging smile at him while swiftly approaching across the bright blue carpet which covered the greater part of the floor. "So glad you could come," he announced, extending a welcoming hand; though the six or seven yards he had to walk seemed to take an eternity for Timothy, who gratefully clasped the outstretched hand when it finally arrived. "I trust you

had a pleasant journey?"

"Yes, quite pleasant," the writer responded, blushing slightly.

"I'm a bit out-of-the-way here, and wouldn't like to think that you'd got lost en route from the station," Lord Handon remarked.

"Oh, no trouble in that respect," Timothy averred.

"Good! Well, allow me to introduce you to the others," said the viscount and, taking his latest guest in tow, he led the way towards the centre of the room, where a small group of people were seated in a semicircle in front of a roaring open fire. There was hardly time for Timothy to get more than an inkling of the extent and variety of his surroundings, as he bashfully accompanied the grey-haired peer back across the carpet. Besides, he couldn't very well begin investigating the room's contents as though he were in a museum. It was obligatory to ignore them, as though stepping into such an ornately-furnished and expensively-decorated room was a commonplace affair, unworthy of more than a passing curiosity. The only thing that mattered was the series of introductions which were about to befall him. It was impossible to concentrate on anything else. "Allow me first of all to present you to my wife, Pamela," the host obliged, extending his arm in the direction of a medium-built lady with high cheekbones and a long nose who was seated nearest the fire. She at once rose from her amply-cushioned armchair and held out a dainty hand for Timothy to shake.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr Byrne," she said, smiling primly.

"And here is my youngest daughter, Geraldine," rejoined Lord Handon, leading his new guest's attention to the occupant of the next armchair, who duly stood up and offered him a similar hand, albeit in a more tentative manner. She was wearing a straight purple dress with black stockings, and had fine dark-brown hair which was tied-up in a bun on the crown of her head. She couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen.

"Unfortunately, my eldest daughter is celebrating New Year's Eve elsewhere," Lord Handon explained, for the benefit of his guest, "so you'll have to forego the pleasure of meeting her."

Scarcely had the writer shaken hands with Geraldine than he was whisked-on to the occupant of the third armchair from the fire, who happened to be an artist by name of Lawrence Gowling. Of the three men besides Timothy in the room, he was the only one with a moustache, which, like his hair, was of a fair complexion. Next to him, as the armchairs curved around, sat a dark-haired, broad-shouldered man with short, stubby fingers who offered a firm but clammy handshake. This was Nigel Townley, an architect who, like Timothy, was a first-time visitor to

Rothermore House. He briefly smiled at the man being introduced to him, then relapsed back into his chair with an eagerness that suggested he didn't much like standing up. Possibly the alcohol imbibed had left him a shade unsteady on his legs. For, as Timothy now noted, there was a distinct smell of wine on his breath.

"And here," Lord Handon announced, leading the way past an empty armchair to one occupied by a coloured girl of slender build, "is a highly-talented young opera singer by name of Sarah Field, whom you may well have heard of or even heard sing."

"Indeed I have," Timothy admitted, extending a nervous hand for its sixth shaking.

"Pleased to meet you," said the singer, with a polite smile in due attendance. Her brown eyes sparkled gaily from the reflection, in part, of the electric lights which issued from an overhead chandelier. She was tastefully attired in a dark-green minidress with pale stockings, and wore her smooth dark hair combed back into a single plait which stretched a third of the way down her back. Her lips were enhanced with pink lipstick, and pink was the preferred colour of her eye make-up. She was about the same height as Timothy - a little short of tall.

"And, finally, before the strain of encountering so many new faces proves too much for you, here's Miss Sheila Johnston, that excellent concert pianist of Scotch origin, whose graceful tone and touch gladden the heart," Lord Handon smilingly revealed.

Miss Johnston held out a firm muscular-looking hand for Timothy to shake and lowered her large blue eyes while he shook it. She was blushing from the compliments of her host and smiled involuntary appreciation of his flattery. Timothy she hardly seemed conscious of and the handshake was uncomfortably one-sided.

"Good, that just about takes care of everyone," Lord Handon commented, simultaneously giving the writer a congratulatory slap on the back, or so it seemed to the latter. "But for a couple of people yet to arrive, we're all here," he added, before drawing Timothy's flagging attention to the vacant armchair in between Nigel Townley and Sarah Field, and motioning him to sit down, which he thankfully did, though not without a certain self-consciousness at actually taking his place there amongst the other guests. "Since we've all had a glass or two of port this afternoon, I should be delighted if you'd join us in that respect," the host declared, beaming brightly.

"Very well," said Timothy, politely putting aside his natural aversion to such drinks.

"One port here!" Lord Handon requested in an extraordinarily loud tone-of-voice, bringing his butler, who stood at a discreet remove from the armchairs, into action.

To his astonishment, Timothy found the port being served up to him on a silver platter by the officiating servant - a slight, balding man with long grey whiskers and a sober mien, who bent down to facilitate service.

"Would anyone else care for another?" the host asked, casting around the arc of his guests. "No? Very well. That's all thank you, Madley."

The old servant straightened up and withdrew to the drinks cabinet across the far side of the room, where he noisily deposited the platter before taking up his customary stance, like a sentry on duty, unobtrusive and remote. It appeared that he would have to stay there, attentive and waiting, until his next summons, which, to Timothy's way of thinking, seemed rather strange.

Hardly had the young newcomer got over the experience of being served port on a silver platter than he found himself being questioned by Lady Handon as to the nature of his work. "My husband tells me you're a religious writer," she remarked, fixing a pair of beady eyes directly upon him.

"Yes, that's basically so," he admitted.

"And quite a revolutionary one too, I hear?" Lady Handon added.

"Yes, I suppose so," Timothy confirmed, nodding vaguely.

Lord Handon smiled acquiescently and confessed to only having read one of Timothy's books so far, and that the latest. Yet it had made quite an impression on him, and he was now interested to discover whether its author had made any progress beyond that point in the meantime.

"Yes, do tell us what you're currently writing," Lady Handon seconded. "Are you a deist, a theist, an atheist, or what?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm an atheist, insofar as I reject the assumption of an existent deity in the Universe and the attendant concept of Divine Creation," Timothy blushingly confessed.

"You do?" Lady Handon responded, on a note of subdued alarm. "And, pray tell me, why's that?"

"Because I believe that the Universe is fundamentally of diabolic origin and that evolution is essentially a struggle, as it were, from the Devil to God," the writer averred.

One or two brows were raised in tacit incredulity with the reception of this unconventional statement. Young Geraldine even found it slightly amusing and smiled faintly.

"In what way diabolic?" Lady Handon wanted to know.

"Diabolic insofar as it was brought about by the formation of stars and their myriad explosions," Timothy answered her. "To my mind, there's nothing more infernal and hypernegative than the stars, and, taken together, they signify the Devil for me, purely and simply."

"This is certainly beyond what you wrote in 'Religious Evolution'," Lord Handon observed, before his wife could say anything further. "You never mentioned that there."

"No, and I believe I've made more progress in my religious thinking these past three or four months, since its publication, than in the whole of the preceding twelve months," Timothy confessed.

There came a murmur or two from some of the other guests and, once again, Lady Handon interposed with further curiosity. "You say the stars should be equated with the Devil, but what, pray, do you equate with God?" she asked. "After all, you've just told us that you don't believe in Him."

"Quite so, I don't." At which point Timothy sighed softly and took a sip of the port which, until then, had remained untouched. "What I do believe, however, is that man is entrusted with the responsibility of creating God, that human evolution is essentially nothing less than a development for bringing God to fruition in the Universe, and thus of establishing God as the climax to it."

Lady Handon raised her brows and cast her husband a correspondingly puzzled look. She had never heard anything of the sort and couldn't very well disguise the fact. "But how?" she asked, in an almost petulant sort of way.

"Increasingly, in the future, through the widespread practice of Transcendental Meditation and the cultivation, in consequence, of superconscious mind - in other words, the spirit," Timothy revealed.

"Transcendental Meditation?" Geraldine repeated, still vaguely amused.

"Yes, though not in a passive sense, reminiscent of Buddhist practices, but in a dynamically post-Christian sense which stresses the difference between God and the world, between, for want of a better term, the Holy Spirit and human spirit. One mustn't think that because one is meditating one is tuning-in, as it were, to God, since, as I've just contended, God is in the making, not already there. All one would be doing, in reality, is tuning-in to one's own spirit. But one's own spirit shouldn't be confused with the Holy Spirit, with God *per se*, since it's contaminated by the flesh, the senses, and therefore isn't transcendent. It is simply human spirit. Therefore Brahman and Atman are not, strictly speaking, one and the same. There is no *tat tvam asi*, or 'thou art that', contrary to Oriental assumptions.

Rather, the Holy Spirit is that which, as God, will arise out of man in due course, when he has evolved to a point where his spirit has expanded and developed to such an extent ... that it becomes transcendent, and thereupon abandons the flesh to literally establish God in the Universe. And once God *has* been established there, He will shine inwardly for ever - eternally. So man is the medium through which the future culmination of the Universe strives to realize itself and attain to its blissful goal. Man is the maker of God, not vice versa. For the maker of men, animals, plants, etc., would appear to have been the Devil, or stars, and so one would be quite mistaken, in my view, to speak of a divine origin to life or to equate God with the world. 'Out of evil cometh good', and out of the world will come God ... as pure spirit."

Lady Handon had become well-nigh flabbergasted and now turned somewhat pale in the face. "Do you seriously mean to suggest that nature is evil?" she exclaimed, her beady eyes more concentrated, seemingly, than ever.

"I most certainly do, insofar as it's under sensual dominion in subconscious stupor," Timothy retorted. "Quite the opposite of the Holy Spirit, which would be a completely spiritual essence in superconscious bliss."

Lawrence Gowling, who had listened patiently to the conversation thus far, suddenly felt a need to challenge Timothy on the nature of God. After all, hadn't Pascal stressed the impossibility of our having absolute knowledge of Him, and wasn't it therefore presumptuous of Timothy Byrne to presume he knew better?

The young writer smiled sympathetically and took another sip of port. "One should beware of taking everything thought by great men of the past too seriously," he remarked. "For their views are often proved fallacious in the course of time. But no, I'm not presuming absolute knowledge of God and, in that respect, I'm in complete accord with Pascal. However, the fact that God is a spirit would be hard to refute, since, by definition, God is the highest we can conceive of, and there's nothing higher than pure spirit. But that's only relative knowledge. I can say, for instance, that God will emerge in the Universe following transcendence, but I cannot tell you for certain what His exact scale will be, nor how brightly He will shine, nor how intense will be the bliss that results from His spiritual constitution. I cannot tell you what it would be like to actually be *in* the holy light of pure spirit, for the simple reason that I'm a man, with a body and impure spirit, not God. I can only speculate and say, rather theoretically, that the experience of ultimate being would be higher and greater than anything one

could ever hope to know in the becoming ... as man. I cannot have any absolute, eternal knowledge of it. Only, at best, a diluted, temporal, transient knowledge, such as is compatible with my earthly condition."

"Yet, presumably, this holy light of pure spirit, or whatever, would be a pretty large entity," Lord Handon commented, turning a mildly inquisitive face towards his religious guest.

"Quite possibly, though we cannot have any idea of exactly how large," Timothy rejoined. "We can, however, speculate that it would be compounded of the transcendent spirit of the entire population at the climax of evolution, and quite probably the entire population of human-equivalent life forms throughout the Universe, so that the sum total of superconscious mind gathered together there in absolute unity would be way beyond our comprehension. A phenomenal cohesion of pure spirit."

"What a staggering thought!" cried Nigel Townley, offering his fellow first-time guest an expression of bewilderment.

"Yes, and this phenomenal cohesion of pure spirit would presumably constitute the One which has arisen from the Many," Sarah Field suggested, warming to Timothy's thesis.

"Precisely," the writer confirmed. "Thus the converging universe to the Omega Point, which Teilhard de Chardin often speaks about in his fascinating books, would indeed be a fact of spiritual evolution. Willy-nilly, the Diabolic Many are giving way to the Divine One."

Lady Handon frowned bitterly and snorted defiantly. "I really cannot reconcile myself to your attitude towards the stars and nature," she said. "Why, is one to see the Devil in the sun every time one looks up at it on a fine day?"

Geraldine tittered in frivolous response to this sceptical if not rhetorical question, and that prompted an otherwise circumspect Sheila Johnston to do likewise. Even Lord Handon permitted an indulgent smile to cross his formerly impassive face.

"You might find it less picturesque if you were transported to Venus, where the surface temperature is reputed to be somewhere in the region of eight-hundred degrees Fahrenheit (800°F) and you'd be in for an extremely roasting time," Timothy replied, endeavouring not to flinch before Lady Handon's stern gaze. "And, of course, the closer you went to the sun, the hotter the temperature would get, so that you'd have a less complacent notion of it. Even here on earth there are places, like the Sahara, where the sun's heat is too intense to be ignored, and one would consequently be more inclined to equate it with Hell than Heaven. The fact of the sun's infernal heat would leave one in no doubt as to its evil essence, which is only

relatively less apparent here because we're at a comparatively safe remove from it in the middle of an English winter. Appearances can beguile, but anyone who went too close to the sun would soon find it the source of excruciating agony - quite the reverse of the Holy Spirit which, when it ultimately emerges, will be the scene of ineffable bliss. So there is all the difference in the Universe between the unholy light of primal damnation and the holy spirit of ultimate salvation. Fortunately or unfortunately, however, the former is eventually destined to collapse, leaving the Universe to its ultimate perfection in pure transcendence."

Lord Handon smiled defensively. "One would think that the Universe is still quite an imperfect place, judging by the vast numbers of primal stars currently in existence," he said.

"Indeed," Timothy agreed, nodding. "And it will continue to know imperfection until such time as the last star collapses and fades away in so many thousands-of-millions-of-years' time. Only when the Universe is solely the Holy Spirit will it be perfect. In the meantime, it will remain under the Devil's influence to some extent, even with the initial emergence of transcendent spirit."

"You mean, with the climax of human evolution?" Gowling suggested.

"Either that or with the climax of human-equivalent evolution on some other planet or planets elsewhere in the Universe," Timothy smilingly rejoined. "After all, we can't be sure that we're the only relatively-advanced species of life in the Universe, can we? And if there are others, then they must be a part of a converging universe to the Omega Point as well."

"What makes you so sure that some other species, more advanced than us, hasn't already established transcendent spirit somewhere in the Universe?" Lady Handon asked, offering fresh opposition to the young writer.

"Well, frankly, I just can't believe that any other civilization elsewhere in the Universe could possibly have evolved to that level when we still have such a deplorably long way to go here," Timothy replied. "It's too fantastic. The theory of a converging universe would seem to suggest that, willy-nilly, all its higher life forms must converge together en masse and roughly apace, rather than at great evolutionary intervals. Now the fact, moreover, that we haven't yet encountered any alien civilizations, not having explored too deeply into space, suggests that evolution still has a long way to go before an extensive convergence becomes manifest in the Universe. Consequently, judging from the absence of any superior alien visitors to earth thus far, we needn't expect other civilizations to be greatly

ahead of us. In all probability they'll either be a little behind us, approximately on our own level, or a little ahead - assuming, for the sake of argument, that any such alien civilizations, and hence alternative life-forms, do actually exist. Yet I'd be extremely surprised to learn of an alien civilization which had already established the beginnings of God, so to speak, in the Universe, when it would seem that we on earth still have such a deplorably long way to go. Somehow I can't help but assume that any truly-advanced, superior 'people' would already have made themselves extensively known throughout the Universe by dint of their spiritual sophistication. Accordingly, I remain unflinchingly an atheist, but an atheist with this difference: I'm all in favour of our doing what we can either to establish God as the Holy Spirit in the Universe in the future or, if some other civilization beats us to it, at least contribute to its growth by linking our spirit with the sum total of transcendent spirit already there. Thus I'm in the quite unique position of being an atheist who's in favour of God. No small distinction!"

Lady Handon snorted contemptuously and sought distraction in the flickering flames of the large open fire to her left. She wasn't at all resigned to the writer's beliefs, nor to his apparent facetiousness concerning them! But Lord Handon had a different response.

"Yes, you're probably onto something there," he at length opined, a reflective expression on his darkly clean-shaven face. "The notion of a diabolic origin and of a divine consummation to the Universe does, I must say, possess a certain logical appeal. After all, when one recalls that this planet was once populated by fearsome dinosaurs and other loathsome monsters, and that volcanoes were erupting all over the damn place, it would seem more logical to ascribe such a creation to the Devil than to God. Life on earth must have been a real hell for the earliest men, mustn't it?"

"To be sure, and only very gradually did it become less so, as man evolved away from nature and thus grew less evil himself," Timothy averred. "For a long time man was little better than the beasts, since more given, like them, to sensual indulgences. But gradually, with the development of civilization, he became less sensual and more spiritual, grew closer to God. Yet even the most spiritual men are partly of diabolic origin, insofar as they're of the flesh. All they can do is aspire towards God, not actually *be* God. For God and nature, which includes the flesh, are two very different things, and should never be equated!"

Lady Handon frowned sullenly at Timothy, while Geraldine drew attention to the difference between his standpoint and those who equated

God with nature. Apparently, the pantheists were quite mistaken, then?

"To my mind they're really unconscious devil-worshippers," the writer asserted confidently. "Anyone who equates God with creation rather than consummation must inevitably make the same mistake. For nature is an entirely sensual phenomenon, and anyone who thinks he sees God in it must be imagining things. If, on rare occasions, it appears transfigured, shines, as it were, with a spiritual glow - as it apparently did for Wordsworth on occasion - one can assume that the mind of the beholder has experienced an inrush of spirit and projected this internal transformation onto nature, thus giving rise to the delusion that it's nature itself which shines with 'something far more deeply interfused', or whatever the quotation is. For, in reality, nature can never be anything other than its own subconscious self."

"Accordingly, writers like Aldous Huxley were somewhat mistaken to equate it with God?" Lord Handon suggested.

"Indeed," Timothy opined. "Although unquestionably a brilliant man, Huxley fell too much under the influence of Oriental mysticism, with its complacency in nature. He couldn't properly distinguish between the One and the Many, but was all-too-disposed to see the Many in the One rather than as the basis out of which the One would eventually emerge. He could never have equated the stars with the Devil, still less regarded nature as the Devil's creation. To him, it was all part of the One, and the One was compounded of the creative force behind nature, or the Ground, the natural realm itself, including the human, and the Clear Light of the Void."

"Which, presumably, is approximately equivalent to the Holy Trinity?" Lord Handon conjectured.

"To be sure," Timothy conceded. "But this, I believe, is where traditional religion, both Eastern and Western, slips up. For, in reality, there's no such unity but, rather, a continuum of evolution from the Diabolic Alpha to the Divine Omega via man. The One is the consummation of this evolution, not a combination of 'Three in One', like the Christian cynosure of the Holy Trinity. To my mind, the Creator, or the Ground, is symbolic of the Many, whereas the Holy Spirit, or Clear Light, symbolizes of the One. And, in between, we have Jesus Christ, or some such Eastern equivalent like the Buddha, who represents the human aspiration towards God, towards Oneness. He is a son of the Many, as it were, aspiring towards the One."

"A son of the Devil?" Lord Handon queried, on a note of slightly scandalized concern.

"Inasmuch as we're all sons or daughters of nature and are thus fleshy,

worldly, natural," Timothy calmly responded.

"Yet Christ is represented as a supernatural being in scripture," Lady Handon objected.

"From a theological standpoint, that is absolutely correct," the writer admitted, blushing slightly under pressure of her fierce gaze. "But, not being an orthodox Christian, I don't personally take Christ's divinity too seriously. To me, there's only one true divinity, and that is the pure spirit which should emerge out of man's spirit at the culmination of evolution. I reject all other concepts of the supernatural, including the ghostly. And that's why I'm an atheist, not a believer in divinities which are presumed to exist already."

"Then what, pray, of the resurrection of Christ?" Lady Handon imperiously pressed him.

"I regard that as an excellent symbol, or metaphor, for man's future destiny in spiritual transcendence," Timothy declared. "Don't think I'm knocking Christianity, I'm not. If you must know, I regard it as the greatest of the traditional, or 'axial', faiths ... to cite a term coined, I believe, by the philosopher Lewis Mumford. But I also believe that, so far as the more advanced industrial nations are concerned, it has seen its best days and is gradually being superseded by a transcendental attitude to God, an attitude which should constitute the final stage of our religious evolution. Christianity has brought us to transcendentalism, but transcendentalism will take us to God - of that I have no doubt!"

"Let's hope you're right," said Nigel Townley sympathetically.

"Yes," agreed Geraldine, to the consternation of her mother, who briefly cast her a sharp look of reproof. "And presumably this transcendentalism to which you allude, Mr Byrne, should not be confounded with Oriental mysticism, but is largely a Western affair?"

"It stems from the artificial influence of the modern city, which, in cutting us off from nature to a greater extent than ever before, has made the cultivation of a predominantly spiritual approach to God possible." No sooner had Timothy said this, however, than he realized that he was speaking to a person who, together with her parents, spent most of her time in the country and therefore wasn't in a position to appreciate it properly. But, since he had already spoken at some length about his religious beliefs anyway, there seemed little point in his refusing to continue just because Geraldine wasn't likely to appreciate it. And so, with fresh resolve, he went on: "One might say that it's post-Christian, insofar as we're led to concentrate our religious devotion on the Third rather than Second so-called 'Person' of the Trinity, and so work towards actually bringing about

the birth of the Holy Spirit in the Universe. Accordingly we're not indulging in Buddhism or Hinduism or Mohammedanism or any other traditional religion, but in something which is the logical outcome of them all, since a further instance of the converging universe from the Many to the One. Instead, therefore, of a number of so-called world religions, the future will contain just one, a true world, or global, religion, and, being transcendental, it will prove acceptable to everyone. Indeed, religion is hardly the word! For we won't be dealing with creeds or dogmas or rites or prayers or any of the other formulae of traditional religious observance. Yet inasmuch as religion has to do with the cultivation of spirit, then a religion of sorts is what it will assuredly be, and meditation, as a method of directly cultivating the spirit, will apply to it. But its objective will be to establish God, whereas traditional religion assumes that God already exists, which, in my opinion, just isn't true. All that actually exists is the Devil, viz. the stars, and the Devil's creations, viz. nature, the beasts, and man. For me, the Creator, which traditional religion upholds, is symbolic of the stars and is thus diabolic, not divine! 'Our Father Who art in Heaven'.... No, rather 'Our Father Who art in Hell' ..."

Lady Handon huffed indignantly and cast her guest another withering look. "Really, Mr Byrne, how can you say such a scandalous thing!" she exclaimed.

"Because I believe it's true," the latter explained. "After all, we're living in an age which is in the process of transvaluating all values, to cite Nietzsche, and this is simply a further instance of such a transvaluation, whereby the Father becomes synonymous with the Devil, in order that the term 'God' may solely be applied to the Holy Spirit, and all ambivalence and open-society relativity accordingly be overcome. In reality, the concept of the Blessed Trinity is a myth. For the Father is decidedly cursed, whereas Christ, like all men who have attained to a civilized stage of evolution, is somewhere in-between - in other words both cursed and blessed, as his dual role as banisher and redeemer at the Last Judgement adequately attests, whether or not one actually believes in such a judgement. So the Father is really the Devil in disguise, an anthropomorphic metaphor for the creative-and-sustaining force behind the world. Now what is that if not the sun and other such stars in the Universe? As I've said before, if evolution is a journey from the Diabolic Alpha to the Divine Omega, from the Devil to God, then one can hardly regard the creative and sustaining force as God. On the contrary, God is, only the Devil *does*."

"All this is indeed rather revolutionary, isn't it?" Lady Handon

observed disapprovingly. "And also rather blasphemous, I might add."

"Blasphemous?" Timothy queried.

"Well, you do speak of the Father as cursed, don't you?" Lady Handon rejoined. "And your interpretation of the Lord's Prayer would suggest that you identify 'Our Father' with *the* Father instead of with Christ, even granted the rather ambivalent terminology involved, which may well lead some people to unthinkingly identify the Lord's Prayer with the Creator, and thus with anything but the god of Christian humanity."

"That's all too true, and one has to accept that Western civilization is anything but clear-cut in its allegiance to Christ," averred Timothy, who was pleasantly surprised to find himself at last agreeing with Lady Handon on something. "Yet my use of the word 'cursed' in relation to the Father is only on the understanding that the Father, or the Creator, stands as a symbol for the sum-total of flaming stars in the Universe.... Besides, as an atheist, I would be incapable of blasphemy. For God is something I regard as in the making, not an already-existent fact. We have to develop our spirit until, by transcending the flesh, it becomes pure spirit and thereby establishes the light of God in the Universe. At present, the Holy Spirit simply isn't there to be blasphemed, only the Devil. And I don't see how one can be accused of blaspheming that!"

"I wasn't accusing you of blaspheming the Devil," the hostess sternly countered. "Simply of blaspheming God by regarding Him as cursed."

"Correction," said Timothy. "I was regarding the Father as cursed, since He is symbolic of the stars for me. And the stars ... well, I could hardly be expected to regard them, in all their infernal heat, as blessed, could I? Quite the reverse. Only the Holy Spirit will be truly blessed, and I can assure you that I'd be the last person on earth to blaspheme that - assuming one could. No, the age of blasphemy, so to speak, is by and large a thing of the past, and let's be sincerely grateful for the fact! For we are gradually coming to realize that the Universe, or at least the world, is becoming increasingly peopled by men who, having turned their backs on the Diabolic Alpha in light of a more evolved status, aspire towards the Divine Omega, not by men who imagine they can come into direct contact with the Divine Omega, or that alpha and omega are really one and the same! One can of course come into a more profound, expansive contact with one's spirit if one bothers to cultivate it. But that's quite a different proposition, I should think, from actually being *in* the Holy Spirit as pure transcendence. One's own spirit is, at the best of times, only potentially divine. For it's all the time surrounded by the flesh or, rather, the brain. Only those whose spirits develop to a point, in the distant future, of literally

becoming transcendent ... will know what it means to have direct contact with the Divine Omega. For they will actually *be* God."

Lady Handon permitted herself a sharply cynical laugh, in spite of the gravity of the subject. "Are we therefore to suppose, dear boy, that the spirits of these future people of your perverse imaginings will somehow break out of the body, or wherever it is that spirit reposes, and soar heavenwards, like comets or rockets?" she cried, casting Timothy an equally sharp look of quizzical scepticism.

In spite of his convictions her guest was unable to prevent himself from blushing at what seemed like a cynically rhetorical question, especially since Geraldine and one or two of the others were manifestly amused by it. "It may seem odd," he admitted, after due deliberation, "but you could well be right in supposing something of the kind. After all, how else could spirit become transcendent if not by breaking free of the brain and gravitating towards some point in the Universe congenial to itself?"

Lady Handon huffed disdainfully. "And from whereabouts in the brain would this ... transcendent spirit emerge?" she wanted to know.

"Presumably from that part of the psyche known as the superconscious, in which it had been cultivated," Timothy averred.

"What, leaving a hole in the skull behind?" Lady Handon conjectured cynically.

Lord Handon flashed his wife a reproving glance, but said nothing.

"Not necessarily," Timothy responded, remaining calm. "Though it might cause the brain to blow apart, since it would be an incredibly powerful globe of spirit - more powerful than virtually anything of which we can now conceive."

Lady Handon smiled self-indulgently. She was endeavouring to imagine what thousands of small globes of spirit simultaneously converging upon a central axis in the Universe would look like. Some kind of vast fireworks display in reverse was the nearest she could get to it. "And, presumably, when all the transcendent spirit in the Universe had converged upon a central axis, God would be complete, would He?" she frowningly concluded.

Timothy nodded his head in wary confirmation. "But not until then," he opined. "Which is another reason why one can assume that, properly speaking, God doesn't at present exist. For even if, by some remote chance, an alien civilization much more advanced than ours *had* established transcendent spirit somewhere in the Universe, such spirit would only amount to a tiny fraction of the potential sum-total of pure transcendence which the evolving Universe was capable of producing. In other words, it

would merely constitute the beginnings of God, not the Divine Omega in its entirety, grown to full maturity, so to speak, through the spiritual assimilation of the total transcendence of every advanced civilization. However, I incline to doubt that even *one* alien civilization elsewhere in the Universe has already attained to definitive salvation, and thus entered the heavenly Beyond."

Lady Handon coughed superciliously and turned her beady eyes back towards the fire, as though to seek refuge in a more congenial element - one necessarily closer to the Diabolic Alpha.

"But what happens to our spirit when we die?" the host asked, taking over the reins of sceptical interrogation from his fire-struck wife. "I mean if, as you would doubtless agree, transcendent spirit is eternal, why shouldn't our mundane spirit also be eternal and thus, as has been traditionally believed, capable of surviving bodily death? Surely if spirit is eternal, it must continue to exist following death?"

"I rather doubt that," answered Timothy in an almost commiserating tone-of-voice. "For it seems to me that spirit only has a right to eternity if it has been extensively cultivated and is thereby able to escape the body, not otherwise being strong enough to survive it. Now since we haven't yet evolved to a stage of extensively cultivating the spirit, having too many bodily obligations to attend to, it would seem that it is destined to perish - mine, yours, everyone's. We none of us seem to have got to a point where spirit is strong enough for eternity."

"Not even the saints and spiritually elect?" Lord Handon queried, his eyebrows slightly arched in sceptical response.

"I doubt it," Timothy opined. "After all, they mostly lived in an age which was at a lower stage of evolution than ours, an age in which men were closer to nature and had more contact with natural things generally. And, as far as I know, they all died - like everyone else. Now it has been assumed that, at death, the spirit passes into the heavenly Beyond. But I incline to the view that, even in the case of the more spiritually earnest individuals, it simply expires and thereby succumbs to that nothingness the other side of life. For if the spirit ever were to leave for the Beyond, it seems to me that the point of death would be the last time at which it could do so, since it's weaker then than at any other time and therefore unlikely to gather sufficient energy together to be able to precipitate itself into Eternity. No, I incline to the view that, at death, the spirit simply expires. If one is ever qualified to transcend the body, it would be at a point in time when the spirit was most energetic, not when it was on the point of languishing irrevocably into death. One would, I imagine, be in one's spiritual prime,

fully conscious and determined to attain to the Beyond, which isn't, however, the narrow personalized heaven of Christian man but, rather, the climax of evolution in which, by completely transcending the body, man ceases to be human and becomes divine. That is my belief anyway, and you can accept or reject it, as you please. I'm not trying to convert anyone here to my religious position, simply endeavouring to offer what I consider to be a valid reinterpretation and extension of Christian belief in suitably contemporary terms. For we've now got to the stage, as a society, where it's possible to look upon spiritual evolution not with the eyes of faith, like our Christian forebears, but with the eyes of scientific knowledge. The age of faith is, fortunately or unfortunately, a thing of the past, rendered necessary in its time by the egocentric stage of evolution to which dualistic man had progressed. Now that we're in the post-egocentric or transcendental stage of evolution, however, we can regard spiritual issues with a transpersonally factual eye and thereby aspire to objective truth. We needn't consider ourselves particularly unfortunate on that account."

There was a rustle of clothing and a few embarrassed coughs from amongst the recipients of Timothy's informal lecture, followed by an uneasy silence in which baffled or sceptical looks were exchanged. Only Nigel Townley on the writer's left and Sarah Field on his right conveyed an impression of having been impressed by it, since they gently smiled in his direction and regarded him with respectful eyes. However, the host and hostess appeared somewhat disconcerted, especially the latter, whose eyes smouldered with resentment in the shadow of the flickering flames. But nothing further was said or asked to provoke Timothy into continuing an exposition of his current religious freethinking. And so, before long, the conversation turned elsewhere, giving some of the other guests an opportunity to reveal their deeper selves, however right or wrong those selves might happen to be!

CHAPTER THREE

Later that afternoon Lord Handon, desiring as much to show off his house as to entertain his guests in a relatively educative manner, took those of them who hadn't set foot in it before on a brief tour of inspection, starting with the ground floor and working up to the bedrooms in which each of them had been allocated a bed for the night. Sarah Field expressed her delight in and amazement at what the host had in store for them, whereas Timothy Byrne, though intrigued by the scale of everything, remained somewhat cooler and more objectively detached than the others, as though in an effort not to be too impressed by anything, least of all by its scale or amount.

It was in the library, for instance, that he acquired his first real glimpse of an aristocratic norm where books were concerned - a glimpse, alas, which did little but confirm him in his low opinion of aristocratic libraries generally! Stretching some thirty yards along the length of an entire wall and reaching to a height of about ten feet from the floor, the shelves of this particular library were crammed full of rather cumbersome-looking leather-backed tomes of ancient lineage, which had doubtless been handed down from generation to generation of the Handon family line. There must have been upwards of 20,000 books there, most of which had probably never been read, at least not by the present owner, the 4th Viscount Handon. They had probably just stood there for centuries, gathering dust. Only a tiny fraction of them, at best, would have had their pages turned and perused in a thoroughly curious manner.... Though quite a number may well have served a brief reference purpose which the owner felt it incumbent upon himself to engage in from time to time. Indeed, many of them were so large, so weighty and lengthy, that it was inconceivable they could possibly serve any other purpose than one of reference, since, even with all the time in the world, such tomes would have taken months, if not years, to peruse individually. For the most part, they were simply decorative possessions which the viscount had considered it expedient to hold-on to for family honour and to satisfy the scholarly traditions of his class - extremely expensive possessions which would fetch a tidy sum from any prospective buyer, if ever he or any of his descendants decided to sell.

Oh, yes! And as Timothy scanned the tightly packed shelves of cumbersome tomes, he realized that their purchase could run into hundreds-

of-thousands of pounds. But that wasn't something by which he intended to be unduly impressed. On the contrary, he needed to keep his customary attitude to the existence of such collections in mind - an attitude which, rather than being impressed by them, tended towards their condemnation on grounds of excessive materialism. As the Biblical proverb had it: 'Easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven', and, by God, how true, in a funny kind of figurative way, that statement was! Weighed down by the extent and scale of his possessions, it seemed pretty evident to Timothy that men like Joseph Handon were almost at the furthest possible remove from the 'Kingdom of Heaven', which is to say, the Omega Point - the climax of evolution in spiritual transcendence. Burdened by so many material belongings, it was inconceivable that the viscount could be anything but a kind of spiritual tail-ender on the journey to God, a victim of the Devil in materialistic dominion - the higher materialistic dominion, on the one hand, of the man-made, which included his house, and the lower materialistic dominion, on the other hand, of nature. For as Timothy could plainly see via the library windows, there was no shortage of sensuous, subconsciously-dominated plant life in the immediate vicinity! The viscount's land stretched around the house virtually as far as the eye could see, and contained more than a few trees, bushes, hedges, etc., which testified to the prevalence of the Devil's influence there, even though a degree of cultivation had been brought to bear on them, especially to the north of the house. Yet cultivated or not, nature was still of partly diabolic origin and nothing man did, by way of reshaping or pruning it, could ever alter that fact. Nor was it altogether surprising that, surrounded by so much land, the Handons hadn't been particularly appreciative of Timothy's transcendentalism, since they were the victims of so much subconscious influence. One could hardly live in the middle of the country and adopt a Mondrian-like disdain for nature!

No, it was perfectly obvious that they were not the ears for his mouth, to paraphrase Nietzsche, but, given their stately circumstances, would either be offended by what he said, as in the case of Lady Pamela, or somewhat perplexed by it, as in the case of the more benign Lord Handon, who nevertheless endeavoured, in his capacity of host, to remain as receptive as possible. Still, one could understand the human aspirations in the face of nature which had led to the building of large country houses like Rothermore. Rather than risk being dwarfed by the surrounding countryside, the aristocracy had sought to tame and dominate it as best they could, and the erection of the largest possible houses had gone some way towards satisfying that end. After all, even the ancient aristocracy were

human beings, not animals, and consequently they reflected human aspirations towards the Divine Omega, no matter how crudely or materialistically. Even the viscount's great-great-grandfather would have had a spirit of sorts and found it desirable to cultivate that spirit to at least some extent, even if only to the rather limited extent of collecting thousands of cumbersome books and filling his house with Greek or Roman statuary. For, as the library amply demonstrated, there was no shortage of classical sculpture on display, though most of it was undoubtedly derivative. In fact, it was difficult not to stumble against various of the statues, statuettes, and busts, as one gingerly wound one's way between the tables and chairs liberally scattered along the length of Lord Handon's library, as though in anticipation of a whole tribe of avid readers. Doubtless a certain *horror vacui* had possessed the original furnisher of this room, which duly resulted in its becoming virtually crammed with possessions, both aesthetic and utilitarian. And the current owner had not rebelled against the fashion of his ancestors but, if the comparative newness of one or two of the chairs and tables was any indication, had succumbed to it with a few materialistic additions of his own! Well, judging by the amount of furniture already in the room, it was pretty obvious that Lord Handon wouldn't be able to add much else to it in future, not unless he either sold off most of what was already there or set about filling up the interior space of certain other rooms - assuming, of course, that they still had any such space left to fill. As yet, Timothy had only seen a couple of the downstairs rooms, so he wasn't really in a position to judge. But what he had seen was more than enough to make him pessimistic about the rest of the house, bathrooms and toilets not excepted!

Yet, by an ironic paradox, it could also be claimed that this urge to collect and fill one's rooms with expensive possessions was a further indication of aristocratic man's desire not to be dwarfed or smothered by nature, but to extend civilization to the extent he could. The regrettable thing, however, was that he could only extend it, for the most part, in materialistic terms, not in terms, significant of the spiritual, which stood at the furthest remove from sensuous nature. With him, it was more a case of endeavouring to protect oneself against a greater evil with the aid of a lesser good. Whereas it was increasingly becoming the tendency of modern man to protect himself against a lesser good with the aid of a greater good, which is to say, to bring forward the direct cultivation of the spirit through meditation at the expense of its indirect cultivation through culture. No small distinction! But aristocratic man, reflected Timothy, hadn't really been in a position to do any such thing, and so the indirect

cultivation of the spirit through culture was, as a rule, the best that could be done.

And not generally the most elevated culture either, if Lord Handon's library was anything by which to judge! One searched in vain, among the numerous sculptures on display, for anything with a direct bearing on Christianity. Not a single statue, statuette, or bust of a senior Church dignitary, not even of a pope or an archbishop, and no reproductions of saints or evangelists either. Except for some busts dedicated to the memory of various members of the Handon line, the entire collection revolved around classical antiquity, with reproductions of Roman emperors, Graeco-Roman deities, and one or two Greek heroes, like Hercules and Ajax. Therefore not with a Christian culture, but with the lower pagan culture which had preceded it ... such was the stratagem by means of which the Handons had sought to elevate themselves above nature! A liberal scattering of naked or semi-naked pagan gods and goddesses about the library had claimed the eye and precluded any serious attempt at self-realization. One would have looked in vain for even the smallest crucifix there. It wouldn't have served their materialistic purposes.

Yet neither, it appeared, would the writings of the great Christian mystics have appealed to this family. For the bookshelves were mainly dedicated to the pagan authors of classical antiquity, especially the Romans, who figured prominently on the lower shelves. Possibly everything ever written and preserved for posterity by Sulla, Cicero, Tetullian, Caesar, Scipio, Horace, Seneca, Juvenal, Catullus, Virgil, Terence, and Pliny was to be found there, both in the original Latin and in subsequent English, French, and German translations, reminiscent of the sort of library favoured by that great sixteenth-century humanist, Michel de Montaigne. By craning one's neck up to the top two shelves at the far end of the library, it was just possible to discern a few large depressing-looking bibles, again in various tongues, but the eye soon encountered the beginnings of a series of books written not by the Church Fathers, as one might vaguely have expected, but by medieval scholastics of a classical turn-of-mind, whose interest in contemporary scientific endeavour extended to a commentary on the Greek philosophers, and whose works now sedately reposed beside the major philosophical achievements of Plato and Aristotle. Farther along that same shelf the subject of Greek philosophy was superseded by a series of large tomes on alchemy, among them a number by Paracelsus, and beneath these the eye discerned the complete plays of Shakespeare, Racine, Corneille, and Molière in rather old but evidently valuable editions - probably the first or very nearly. Apart

from a number of important literary figures such as Chaucer, Dante, Montaigne, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Petrarch, Cervantes, Milton, Byron, and Goethe, the greater part of the remaining shelves was taken-up with histories, memoirs, biographies, letters, philosophies, and books on painting, architecture, graphics, landscape gardening, and sculpture. In fact, apart from a little modern history, the only contribution the twentieth century seemed to make to Lord Handon's library was in the realm of aesthetics, notably through art books dealing with classical antiquity and the Renaissance. Judging by the nature of the house itself, one might have thought the Baroque would figure prominently. But, try as he might, Timothy could discern no more than three works dedicated to that stage of aesthetic evolution, and they were decidedly pre-war, suggesting acquisition by the viscount's father or grandfather rather than by the current owner himself. Thus apart from the aforementioned histories and studies in classical and renaissance aesthetics, the crisp spines and bright titles of which betrayed comparatively recent purchase, the great majority of the books on display appeared to have been inherited and retained in aristocratic tradition. Unless by some chance Lord Handon had a second library elsewhere, it looked as though this collection was broadly representative of his intellectual tastes - tastes which completely excluded the modern! For even the newer books in it had been written in the twentieth century *about* pre-twentieth century activity, like the studies in classical art. As regards modern art, a complete blank. And as regards modern literature, the nearest one came to it appeared to be half-a-dozen novels by Disraeli and a couple by Lytton! Really, Timothy could hardly believe his eyes, as he frantically scanned the shelves in search of twentieth-century life. Not even a Proust or a Gide or a Mann. Nothing! So far as this library went, the twentieth century didn't exist. Evidently, Lord Handon had little use for it. Or would it be nearer the mark to say that it had little use for him?

It wasn't exactly a question one could ask there and then, not, anyway, while the man in question was so fervently engaged in explaining to both Sarah Field and Nigel Townley how his great-grandfather had acquired the Venus statuette in imitation of Phidias by an unknown Roman sculptor whilst serving as English ambassador to Italy at the time of its discovery. A quite shapely statuette it was too, but terribly nude and pagan! It would have been of more interest to Timothy, just then, had someone inquired how the family had come by the worn edition of the Marquis de Sade's *120 Jours de Sodom*, which reposed, beside a number of the master's other novels, on a shelf just to the left of where he was now standing, slightly

apart from the small group of admiring statuette-gazers. At least de Sade, for all his moral faults, had the virtue of seeing the criminality in nature at close range, so to speak, and in not pretending that it was really something else. There was even a dash of the saint about him, albeit in a paradoxically negative kind of way. For rather than turning towards God and the spiritual with love, like a genuine saint, de Sade had elected to turn against nature and the sensual with contempt, and thereby set about denigrating it in the manner best known to posterity. Hardly surprising, therefore, that he was condemned as a criminal and regarded as an eccentric in an age of Rousseau-esque fervour *for* nature and Wordsworthian complacency *in* nature. His hatred of nature, and the rather extreme manifestation it was increasingly to take, could hardly be described, under the prevailing circumstances, as trendy. Yet it served as an example of sorts to such negatively inclined 'saints', or anti-saints, as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Huysmans, who were to bring the anti-natural tradition of decadent writings to a much more refined pass later in the century. But de Sade, it appeared, was the only ...