Taking things seriously

My long-lost and recently found schoolfriend Jeremy Tambling has sent me his book on the German romantic poet Hölderlin, and asked for my comments, particularly on the chapters relating to Greek literature. I find myself completely unqualified for the task. It would be easy enough to point to the passing of time and confess to having forgotten what little I ever knew about the Greeks. It goes without saying that I know nothing at all about Hölderlin.[1] I could plead ignorance. But quite apart from wanting to respond to Jeremy's kindness, I feel that there is something I want to say. It's a challenging book. I want to treat it with the seriousness it deserves. Even after two chapters it was prompting me to think back over parts of my life and aspects of my character that I have tended to ignore. Perhaps Jeremy will accept this short memoir in lieu of the helpful commentary that he hoped for. It describes the sort of child I was when I took up Greek, and hints at how my ideas have changed. It also illustrates the reasons why I am not equipped to comment on the book.

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It was often remarked that I was a serious child. I'm not sure when this started. I have always had a feeling that something happened around the age of five to damp down what had previously been a sunny and exuberant disposition. I now think that this is probably an illusion, but at different times I have referred it to the loss of my position as the baby of the family, to starting school, our move from Guibal Road or my 'accident'.[2]

My parents liked to get hold of a phrase, and for a while it would hang around in the air giving shape and meaning to events. There were a couple of phrases that related to the process of growing up. The first was 'shades of the prison house', Wordsworth's image for the loss of early innocence and joy. I can have had no doubt in my mind that this referred to school, which always seemed to me to be a prison, but I suspect that for my parents it had a wider application, connecting it with another of their phrases: 'sex rears its ugly head'. They used the word *adolescent* in a way that led me to think it stood for all sorts of mysteries.[3] My mother also liked to quote other parts of Wordsworth's *Intimations*, the parts expressing innocence and joy. This irritated me; I sometimes suspected she was trying to shame me into feeling a happiness I didn't feel. I never studied the poem, and never grappled with its complexities, and certainly never dreamt that its contradictions might be reconciled.

I can't place the moment when the shades of the prison house closed in, but I don't remember a time in my adolescence or childhood after the age of five when I did not feel that life was a sorry business. I magnified the little frustrations and resentments of childhood and adolescence into colossal and disproportionate anger. And yet the grounds of my anger remained childish: squabbles at school, envy and jealousy of my sisters, anger against my parents. Escaping the family was a recurrent fantasy, and leaving school eventually became an urgent necessity.

As always, one can't be sure that one is not distorting childhood memories. The distortion can work in two directions. I'm a pessimistic adult, so perhaps I am painting my childhood the way I think it ought to have been. Or perhaps it's the other way about and my childhood self is controlling what I write now; perhaps I am still replaying the conflicts of the past, keeping my family and my school in my sights, settling scores, setting out the reasons why I was right and everyone else wrong. I can't be sure that there are no unconscious motives pulling me in one or both of these directions, but I can guard against them. One safeguard against imposing current

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1 The other evening our friend Simon Taylor recited, in German, a passage from Hölderlin's poem on Heidelberg. It sounded extraordinarily beautiful, making me want to hear more.

2 Rowwy was born in January 1952. I started school in September of that year, at Coopers Lane. We moved to Shooters Hill Road and I started attending Kidbroke Park in February 1953. Some four weeks later I fell off the verandah and was in hospital for ten days with a fractured skull.

3 My mother's friend Nina Bartholomew, who will be referred to later, eventually became a teacher, and while she was doing her training I remember her coming to stay, and talking enthusiastically of her lectures in child psychology, frequently repeating the word 'maturation'. This didn't enter my parents' vocabulary.

pre-occupations on the past is to look always for specific and circumstantial memories, tied to incidents for which there are independent sources. This isn't watertight, because the memory is a clever blighter and can produce plausible and coherent structures which are entirely false, so one has to be forever tapping away to see if it rings true. Nor is it easy to avoid endless rounds of self-justification, re-fighting the battles of the past, because they can turn up heavily disguised. One has to keep listening out for the tones of the inner Pumblechook.

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Following my famous accident, before I went back to school, my mother took me down to stay with Nina Bartholomew in Hastings—convalescence by the sea might be an old-fashioned notion now, but seemed natural in those days. Nina, whose husband Ted was in the army and whose two sons were, I think, at boarding-school, was an old school-friend of my mother, and when they met they would talk endlessly. My mother would take her lead from whoever she was with, and I imagine Nina had always been the dominant partner in their friendship. She was a woman of brisk commonsense, whose company may have appealed to my mother for a while as a relief from the intellectual and bohemian friends that she and my father had in Blackheath. I remember several things about that stay. First, Nina allowed us to have marmalade on our bread and butter at tea-time, whereas at home we only had it at breakfast. Such was Nina's influence on my mother that from then on we too were permitted to have marmalade at any time of the day or night. Less agreeably, I recall that for the first time my mother spanked me with a slipper. In this too I suspect the influence of Nina's brisk commonsense. I suspect that the main crimes for which I were spanked arose from antagonism between me and Nina. There were conflicts over my afternoon rests. These may have been prescribed by the doctors following my accident, but I think I blamed Nina for the strict regime that banished me from my mother's company for an hour or so each afternoon. I remember other things. Walking on the beach, my mother and I once had to run up the steep shingle to avoid an unexpectedly large wave, and I remember with pleasure the sense of a shared adventure. And I enjoyed walking along the front, where some of the walls were set with glittering fragments of glass—at least I think that is what they must have been. I have the impression that before our stay was over my mother was beginning to be as weary of Nina as I was.[4]

Sometime after my return to school I became aware that I was 'clever'. I don't know how this was communicated to me or by whom. One of the saddest shocks in my childhood was when Miss Rhys-Price spoke sharply too me because I asked her for help with reading and she said I should leave her to help those who needed it. The word I was stumbling over was *Mummie*. I had worked out what it was, but I was puzzled at the non-standard spelling. It seemed a reasonable question to ask, and I was stunned by the rejection. I remember being captivated by Miss Rhys-Price in her summer frocks with her bare arms. Looking back, I suspect that what attracted me was her vitality. She must have been always living on her nerves, giving everything to her job, to her performance. I remember my mother expressing admiration for her, and amazement that she could manage a class of fifty-two five-year-olds.

Gradually I came to realise that I was expected to get things right, and to do better than the rest of the class. Unable ever to separate these two ideas, I was highly competitive and desperately afraid of failure. Getting things wrong would make me look silly. Not being better than the others would make me look silly. How much of this was self-generated, and how much did I pick up from adults? Undoubtedly my mother put pressure on me, although I can't point to any example except

4 They remained friends. As an army family, the Bartholomews were always on the move, and a few years later Martin (a little older than me) came to stay with us for several months while his family were in between houses. Later still, Celia Bartholomew, who was roughly Rowwy's age, used to come on holidays with us. Sniffing was a Bartholomew family trait. I remember one incident from Martin's stay. One Saturday when my mother was out, he and I painted ourselves all over with daubs of gloss paint, much to my father's irritation and the amusement of his friend Peter Startup. After we had been partially scrubbed down with turps, my father wanted me to go to the off licence for his half ounce of Digger Shag. I objected that I still had traces of paint on my face, hands and legs, and so couldn't go out because people in the street would think I looked silly. Peter, who was spectacularly ugly, replied that I shouldn't let that bother me; he didn't, because if he did he would never dare go out.

one ridiculous incident. In Mr Skinner's class (I was seven) we were putting on the play of Androcles and the Lion. I was given the part of Androcles's master, who only appeared in the first scene. I was convinced that my mother would be disappointed that I had such an insignificant role. She may have said something to that effect, because she did so want her children to be stars, and was never good at hiding her feelings. So I went up to Mr Skinner's desk and told him that I thought I ought to have a bigger part. He dealt with me tactfully, suggesting that my character would reappear and have more to say later in the play (this wasn't true, I found), but I couldn't expect always to take a lead and should give others a chance.[5]

Throughout my school career I was placed in positions of responsibility, appointed monitor for this or that, made to keep order in the class while the teacher was out of the room. I took this extremely seriously and felt it as a personal failure when things didn't work out as they should. Even at Dulwich I used to be put in charge of things, such as the Mission collection. In the third form our English master had the whole class giving short talks, and he put me in charge of the schedule. When the end of term arrived and there were still some members of the class who had not given their talks I felt it was my fault that I had not organized it better. It wasn't, of course, but I felt I had failed. Unkindly, the master who was responsible for all this complained that I was going around looking as though I had the cares of the world on my shoulders.

That was the sort of comment I became used to hearing. Once, well on in adolescence, the prison house well and truly closing in, I was given a tremendous black eye by a blow from a cricket ball. When I got home and my mother saw my face she didn't notice the black eye until I pointed it out to her. She said what she had seen was that, for a change, I was smiling. I remember a custodian at the National Gallery remarking that I looked terribly bored and unhappy, a casual, perhaps kindly comment which upset me dreadfully, because in fact I had been enjoying myself. I don't know whether I worked out why I gave off this misleading impression, but I think it must have increased my sense of loneliness. It was bad enough that I felt unhappy most of the time, but it was worse to find that when I was happy I seemed unable to show it. I came to feel that I couldn't (or at least didn't) experience art in the approved manner. Several times masters at Dulwich said that this or that picture, piece of music, or poem ought to 'send a tingle down the spine' or 'make the hair stand up at the back of the head'. Like the boy in the story who didn't know what it was to get the shivers, I found nothing in my experience to correspond to these phrases.

Bored, gloomy, bowed down by care and responsibility[6] – that was how I appeared to others. Other things people said were that I was pompous (favourite accusation of my sisters) and priggish (one of my mother's words). An early incident left me with a fear of appearing cocky, which was a problem because I *was* cocky. At primary school the situation was complicated in ways I didn't

5 John Slaughter played Androcles, and so far as I can tell was very good. He had a clear, ringing voice, and I was my mother's son enough to notice that he had no very marked London accent. I remember him kneeling to take the thorn from the lion's paw. If I knelt down I would keep my toes straight, with the upper side of the foot lying along the ground; John bent his toes as he knelt, which struck me as a curious innovation. I think all I had to say was, 'Slave, slave, where is that idle fellow?' My sisters laughed at me as I practised it at home, and when it came to the performance I muddled it, and stumbled on my toga. Mr Skinner's judgement in not giving me a larger part was vindicated.

6 Although responsibility sat uneasily upon me I remained keen to assume it whenever possible. Once this got me into an absurd scrape. When I was at Charlton Manor I went twice on the School Journey to Torquay. In the course of the second visit we went on a coach trip to Plymouth, in the course of which we went to the covered market. I went round the market with the teacher, Mr Weedon. As we all assembled on the coach to return to Torquay two men got on, and walked up and down the aisle. I assumed that they were there to select someone for some honourable post, and I was determined to show myself worthy, so I sat up straight and looked as responsible as I could. The men, it turned out, were policemen trying to identify children who had been pilfering from stalls in the market, and my demeanour evidently aroused their suspicions, and I was hauled off the coach and accused of the crime. Fortunately, I had an alibi, and was known to be a law-abiding boy, and so Mr Weedon persuaded the policemen that I was innocent. I was too upset to take much notice of what happened, but I think the false accusation against me discredited the identification process and accusations against other boys were dropped.

begin to understand by the class issue. As a middle-class boy I was not expected to be daringly naughty. At Dulwich I was regarded as a goody-goody – I don't know that this was said in so many words, but I could tell from the way boys looked at me. Although school-children are notoriously cruel, they are also broadly tolerant, and for most of the time I found I could get away with things so long as I stayed in character. But the boys were puzzled because my behaviour was timid and conformist, whereas my views were known to be extremely non-conformist. I was sometimes called a hypocrite. This was painful, because it was true.

In those days an interest in pop-music was not universal; my backwardness in this area was not held against me as it might have been in subsequent generations. In fact I was largely able to conceal my homelife and extra-mural activities (or lack of activities) from my schoolmates. I never knew what they did outside school.[7] I also kept quiet at home about school, convinced, like Pip, that I could never convey the truth of what went on. Once or twice I was tempted along the veal cutlet route, inventing stories that I thought my parents would like to hear. In my fourth year at Dulwich, after an incident in which I had broken down in tears, Mr Vellacott phoned my father, and I remember listening as the two of them demolished boundary wall between home and school. Nothing dreadful happened as a result.[8]

I read a lot. From the age of nine or ten I would plough my way through long books. I enjoyed them, up to a point. I think I embarked on books like *David Copperfield* and *The White Company* because my mother wanted me to, but having started I kept at them through doggedness. And I went on in the same way throughout my time at Dulwich. For almost the whole of my first term I was reading *Dombey and Son*. The volume, which had belonged to my dead grandfather and was given me by my grandmother, was bound in what I think is red Morocco, and it got terribly damaged as I carried it back and forth to school for weeks and months. I never skipped. My mind often wandered, but I kept on.

When I was fifteen or sixteen my father told me he would show me how to 'take the guts out of a book', but time went on and he never did it, and I never asked him, coming to suspect that the offer had never been made. I sometimes think I'm still waiting for this important lesson. One ought to take books by the scruff of the neck and worry the ideas out of them, but although I frequently tell myself that this is what I will do, I can never keep up the active approach for long. I become passive. I turn the pages, waiting for the information to come to me.

During that unhappy fourth year at Dulwich I complained of headaches and sore eyes, and eventually I went to an eye specialist. He quizzed me on my reading habits, and I told him that I was currently reading some Greek tragedies (in translation). Before that I had been reading other Greek tragedies. Don't you read for pleasure? he asked (or words to that effect) and I tried to tell him that I read the Greek tragedies for pleasure, but he clearly didn't believe me, and I suspect he was right. If it was for pleasure, then it was for the pleasure of knowing I had read them, not for any enjoyment I found in the process of reading them.[9] He wanted to know what games I played (none, if I could avoid it), and what I did in my spare time. I don't think I had much spare time, once my homework was done, and I remember an oppressive sense that the summer holiday had been stolen from me by the stressful time in France.[10] The specialist sent me off with his assistant to do some tests while he lectured my mother, telling her that 'that boy' was heading for a nervous breakdown. He made this prognosis, I assume, partly on the basis of my answers to his questions,

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7 When decades later I talked to Michael Callaghan about these days I was surprised to learn that he had belonged to a group of boys who spent a lot of their time together outside school.

8 In fact good came of it, because Mr Vellacott engineered a friendship between me and a boy who was even sadder and less sociable, Tony Wills. He broke the ice between us by getting us to work together on making translations from Martial for a Classical Society meeting. Mr Vellacott remembered the incident. Many years later, my St Andrews friend Peter Branscombe, an Old Alleynian who had kept up with him, told him about me, and he said that he remembered having once said something casually that reduced me to tears, and it had been a lesson to him on the need for caution in dealing with boys.

9 That might not be quite true. I liked the feel of Penguin books, and there was something particularly appealing about the brown covered Greek Penguin Classics.

10 I spent six weeks during the summer of 1961 with a family in Bourges.

and partly on what we would now call my body language. My mother made the mistake of telling me. I thought a nervous breakdown would be a solution to my problems. It would release me from my family and from school.

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Why did I want to study Greek and Latin? There's no doubt that I did want to, even before I started at Dulwich. I have a memory of standing on a beach telling someone that I wanted to 'do classics'. It wasn't, of course, a single decision, so the question is not simply about choices made at school, but about my attitudes during the whole period of my education up until my twenties. Dulwich notoriously made boys start specialising early, and the decision to take Greek was made at thirteen, but I was already determined to do it well before that age, and after the initial choice had been made it had to be ratified at intervals. Boys dropped out of Greek along the way. I could have moved over to study history after O level; I could have thrown over the classics when I escaped from school at seventeen; I took a choice to stay with classics when I started at St Andrews[11] and then to stay with Greek when I opted for philosophy instead of Latin. I always said I was seduced by the pleasures of Greek prose composition and the study of Plato, but there may, even then, have been more to it than that.

My mother was fond of Greek myths; in fact, in common with many English people of her generation, she thought they were the only myths there were, that mythology meant Greek mythology. She had a fat green book telling the stories of the myths[12], illustrated with dreamy monochrome prints of vaguely pre-Raphaelite nymphs, tastefully nude. I enjoyed both the text and the pictures, but there was a gauziness about both which left me thinking I wasn't getting through to the truth of the matter. I don't know when my mother's book was published, probably in the twenties, when she was at school, but the author must have had his sensibility formed in the previous century. As well as contending with all the layers of myth-making and re-making in the ancient times, I had to break through the foggy Victorian sensibility as well. No wonder I was baffled. Greek myths were treated with more respect than fairy-stories. There was a canonical version, and you could be asked general knowledge questions about them, as though they were true. How many labours did Hercules have? What was Procne turned into, and why?

My father was keen on Odysseus, whom he thought of as an old soldier like himself, a reliable, unsentimental NCO, the backbone of the army. He was always busy, my father, earning a living for his family, or trying to keep up with the demands of a large untidy garden and large damp house. I treasured the odd afternoons when he and I did something together. He would take me to London with him now and then, for example when he had to go to SOAS to check something for his thesis. Sometimes he was silent. I remember one day on the station he bought me a copy of *Swift*, and himself a copy of the *New Statesman*, and we sat in the train each with his comic. But sometimes he would tell me stories: the wooden horse, the cyclops, Telemachus and the return of Odysseus. I don't remember Circe or Calypso or even Penelope's web, although he may have included them, particularly Penelope. Perhaps he preferred the masculine stories. When Odysseus was finished he went on to historical events. I remember sitting with our nose-bags beside Cleopatra's needle as he told me about Leonidas and the three hundred.

So the Greeks were always there, but why did I choose them? My parents undoubtedly believed the claims that were still widely made for the classics as the road that led to intellectual excellence and opened up all other studies. Training the mind. I picked this up. My mother wanted me to become a barrister. When I got my 'Christ's Hospital'[13] she took me as a reward to see *At the Drop of a Hat*,

11 The explanation I usually give for this is that I preferred to study under Kenneth Dover rather than in the English department of Professor Falconer. But I'm not entirely convinced that this isn't a justification for a more obscurely motivated decision.

12 The phrase 'telling the stories of the myths' is revealing. The myths were stories, but we think of them as things in themselves, apart from the stories.

13 On the basis of the eleven plus a limited number of scholarships to Christ's Hospital were awarded. There was some talk of my taking up the scholarship. My mother sometimes suggested I'd be happier at a boarding school, away from my sisters, but I think she was mainly attracted by the thought of my going to the same school as heroes such as Coleridge and Lamb.

and before the show we had tea in Fullers and walked around the Inns of Court, where she told me about Charles Lamb – hardly a typical role-model for an aspiring barrister. If I did classics I could become a barrister, at the drop of a hat. It was what a clever boy like me should want to do.

A classical education, we were told, made you fit for anything. All you had to do to become a surgeon was to top up your classical studies with a few tedious facts and a little bit of practical training, and then start cutting people up. I think people were still saying, without irony, that classics made you fit to run the empire, but I can't be sure.[14] They certainly told us that we could go straight into the civil service, where it was a positive advantage not to have specialised in any particular area, because you never knew which area you would end up in. A good generalist, that's what you should aspire to be.[15] It was not until I met Bernard that I heard this idea seriously challenged. Under his remorseless critique (he was later backed up by Ann) I retreated further and further from the view that classics gave a uniquely valuable training. I was still defending the classics and the grounding they had given me some years after I took my degree. One discussion took place in Annie and Ronnie's flat in St Andrews sometime around 1974. I conceded almost all the ground to Bernard, but hung on by claiming that the unique value of my classical education was that it had prepared me for life by giving me ample practice in being bored. This was probably the last time I tried to make any exalted claims on behalf of the classics.

By 1974 I may have been on shaky ground, but while I was at school there was definitely still prestige in the classics. I swallowed the story and must have been influenced by it, but I don't think it was decisive. I think I knew full well that, despite the propaganda, the classics offered a shabby little corner of resistance to the modern world. It was a place where someone who was out of sympathy with the world could withdraw, cocoon himself in the impregnable past, and hurl abuse at the present and the future. I suspect it was this contrarian[16] streak in my nature that, in the end, drew me into the classics. As often happens when people are searching for an identity and allegiance, I defined myself by what I wasn't: not a scientist, not practical, not modern, not interested in money, against progress, anti-American. At a time when the likes of Belloc and Chesterton were still names to conjure with it was easy enough to find backing for such a world-view.

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In my study of Greek I was attracted more towards prose than poetry. The lyric poets left me cold; I was too lazy to break down the barriers of language and sensibility. To my shame, I never got on with Aristophanes, and the tragedians made little sense. Among prose writers, it was the philosophers who interested me most, and my approach to them was dominated by the philosophical fashion of the day, which was for linguistic philosophy, in particular for the approach of Ryle and Austin, whose followers took the view that the big questions of philosophy were based upon linguistic solecisms and could be resolved into a series of ingenious puzzles. Our friend Ian Higgins once said to us that while continental philosophers argued about great issues of life and death, authenticity and betrayal, Anglo-Saxons would debate whether it could be right to use someone else's toothbrush. As a serious person, I found something unsatisfactory in this refusal to pursue big questions, but the influence of my philosophical mentors was overwhelming. For me the Greek mind was limpid, rational and detached, a stiff upper lip, public school version of Plato. Serene was the word one heard applied to them.[17]

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14 In 1970, when I hoped to teach in Africa, the people who interviewed me were quite aggressive, clearly believing that I was making this sort of assumption about the virtues of a classical training. I wasn't. I had all sorts of other daft ideas, but not that one.

15 One had to be careful over how this was expressed, because a general course and a general degree were what the less bright boys, or the less conformist boys, were doomed to follow.

16 I didn't know the word (the earliest citation in the OED is from 1954, and it wasn't current while I was at school) but there's no doubt that this is what I was. Of course, once drawn in, I became contrarian in the other direction, and decried the classicist's ignorance of science and the modern world – taking Snow's side in the two cultures debate.

17 In the nineteenth century the Romans often seemed to be co-opted as honorary proto-Englishmen; in the post-war period we were told the same about the Greeks. In the west we were Athenians compared with the Soviet Spartans; and then again, the British were the mature and cultured Greeks

One of the books that I read while doing my degree was *Merit and Responsibility*, which mined the whole of Greek literature for signs of the emergence of morality from its origins in shame culture. Aeschylus featured largely in this, I recall. This was typical of the approach to classical studies that I was trained in. I suppose it helped to mould my attitudes, but I was willing to be moulded, it gave me something I was looking for in those days.[18] I was more than ready to accept the Greeks as the architects of the western mind, a mind in which reason had tamed the passions and subdued those violent and unconscious tendencies that are left over from our bestial, savage, primitive or superstitious pasts.

In the course of his review of evocations of madness in Greek tragedy Jeremy picks on an image of the charioteer which occurs in both the *Choephoroi* and the *Eumenides*. In the first Orestes describes the onset of his madness: 'I am like a charioteer with his horses well off the track; I am carried away, overcome by senses hard to control.' And then in the second the Furies describe the anger of the ghost of Clytemnestra which they heard in their dreams, and which 'struck like a chariot-driver with his goad … deep to my heart, deep to my core. I can feel the scourging, brutal as a public hangman's …'[19] I was immediately impressed (I won't say struck) by this image, because it inevitably recalls Plato's extended simile of the charioteer with his winged horses – which I remembered as being in the *Republic* but which is of course in the *Phaedrus*. Plato describes the threefold soul: the villainous horse that will not use its wings to soar heavenwards but tries to drag the chariot towards the gratification of sensual desires; the horse with noble impulses that seeks heaven and is ashamed of the sights and deeds in which he is implicated by his sordid companion; and the charioteer who tries to control his divided team. As Plato works out the analogy in subtle detail, the image is developed at length, compared with the brief and allusive uses that Aeschylus makes of it. But in Aeschylus the image does more work. What we know about chariots and horses conveys something powerful about both Orestes's madness and the Furies' mysterious compulsion, whereas in Plato, if we don't already grasp what he is saying about the soul, his image of the charioteer will not help us very much. A disturbing image in Aeschylus becomes in Plato's hands an elegant teaching aid.

I saw none of this in the days when I was studying Greek tragedy. I was all for the elegant teaching-aid. It's not surprising that I couldn't see the point of Aeschylus.

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I used to go frequently to the theatre. My parents had always encouraged this, my mother being generally stage-struck, and my father being a devotee of Shakespearean tragedy. The first plays I went to were *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* at the Old Vic, when I was about eight. Jennifer was an Old Vic regular and a fan of Paul Rogers (Macbeth and Brutus). After one of the plays she persuaded me to go and ask for his autograph, but all I got was Charles Gray. I mpressed by the spectacular deaths, I quizzed my father over why Brutus insisted on his slave holding the sword for him to fall on. Couldn't he do it himself? When I was ten I was taken to Stratford to see King John, and that provided my first genuine theatrical experience.[20] I was very impressed by Alec Clunes as the Bastard, I think because I could tell the Bastard was by far the most intelligent person in the play, and had all the good lines. 'Old Sir Roger, father, on my knee, I give Heaven thanks I am not like thee.' That is probably not one of the good lines, but it has stuck (more or less accurately) in my mind. After that, I continued to go to the Old Vic, and it became another way in which I was precociously serious. When I was about thirteen a play by Camus was put on in London. I didn't go to see it, but one of my parents' friends took it into his head that I had, and, when rather drunk,

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to the powerful American Romans. I was thinking of this in the context of the Black Athena controversy. There are (I gather) countless good scholarly reasons for rejecting the thesis and the historical methods of Bernal's book, but I can't help wondering how much of the visceral anger it generated was due to the feeling that 'our' Greeks were being stolen from us.

18 Perhaps I owed my good degree to having read this book, which enabled me to digest many aspects of Greek thought and so to write pithy gobbets in my final exams.

19 It's hard not to think of the scene in *Crime and Punishment*.

20 An odd choice of play, one might think. We went with a group of Danes who were attending a summer language school taught by my father, which meant we had to take what we could get.

he got hold of me and declared to the assembled company that Julian would now give us all the low-down on existentialism.

I continued my theatre-going right through my school-days, and afterwards, until I left London. I went with various friends, including Jeremy, who I think was stage-struck in the same way as my mother, just loving being in the theatre.[21] By contrast, I was gradually becoming luke-warm. I had fixed ideas, and became indignant the year after *King John* over a modern dress (Tyrone Guthrie) production of *Alls Well*. Even as I grew older I lacked the openness to the new and unexpected which is the key to enjoyment of the theatre. Theatrical conventions puzzled me and got in the way, both when they were observed and when they were challenged. I often found the theatre-going crowds oppressive and inhibiting. I began to suspect that I was not responding in the right way. The theatre demands a response, and I didn't feel up to it. Partly it was the old matter of not being able to get the shivers, but it was also a more general lack of spontaneity and inability to think on the move. I kept wanting to rewind, to look at things again, to interrogate, to work out what was going on, what motives were at play, what feelings were expressed. I began to prefer the cinema, although I didn't realise that this was because there the conventions were subliminal and unchallenged, and things went more according to plan.

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When Jeremy's book moves on to the Pre-Socratics I thought I might be on firmer ground, because I made quite a study of them at one time. The references to Heidegger reminded me that Lawrence Moonan recommended me to look at what Heidegger said about Heraclitus, although I don't think I ever followed up this hint. As I understand him, Jeremy at this point is looking at the split self, the division that is implied by self-consciousness. Consciousness of 'myself as an absolutely free being' brings with it, I think he is saying, a consciousness of the world which constrains my freedom. It is clear that some of the fragments of Heraclitus can be used to paint the background to these thoughts: 'Wholes and not wholes, concurring differing, concordant, discordant, from all things one and from one all things'; 'They do not understand how what is born apart agrees with itself: struggling union, like that of the bow and the lyre'.[22]

The German romantic's starting point is his awareness of himself as an agent, which leads to tension, madness and tragedy; whereas the French rationalist has as his starting point his awareness of himself as a thinking being, an idea which leads him step-by-step to a whole panoply of objective knowledge of the world. And of course it is the Cartesian insight which has dominated my intellectual life—even though among the first things I learned in the study of philosophy was that Descartes was wrong in this, that and the other respect. You learn that progress in thought is made not by people being right, but by their being wrong in interesting ways. I never used the Pre-Socratics in the way that Jeremy and the philosophers he is writing about use them. Thales, Anaxagoras, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Democritus, each earned his title to be called philosopher by being wrong in an interesting way. We took the Whig view of the long trail of Pre-Socratic thought, seeing it as a gradual progress towards Plato and Aristotle, who in turn were steps on the way to 'modern thought'. These thinkers were not to be thought of as equal participants in our current intellectual debate[23] – even Plato and Aristotle, whose greatness lay in their being wrong in so many interesting ways, were hardly accepted as current players in the game. Hegel and Hölderlin, on the other hand, evidently found that Heraclitus spoke to them as a contemporary, his enigmatic pronouncements feeding directly into their own thought.

I wrote about the split self, about self-deception and self-knowledge when I was working on the philosophy of mind with Roger Squires. The approach we took in those days (Ryle and Austin still in the ascendant, though not for much longer) was all pretty much behaviourist. We started from

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21 Jeremy's father was a member of the Eltham Intimate Opera, as was my mother.

22 How easy it is to jump to conclusions. Ah, I thought, bow and lyre, clearly a stringed instrument that is played with a bow like a cello, a good image of 'struggling union'. But I don't think the lyre was ever played in this way. The bow and the lyre are two separate examples of strings in tension.

23 In 1970 I wrote to a Cambridge academic called Sandbach saying I wanted to research the Pre-Socratics, and he replied that there was nothing much left to say about them except 'trifling and error'. He was probably thinking of the use made of them by continental thinkers.

what people did and said and how they and others described it, and I seem to recall that this enabled me to deny that there was any paradox in self-deception, which was simply (!) a fairly complex piece of behaviour. There were ways of judging sincerity, and independent ways of judging motives, and so there was no contradiction between sincerely believing one's motives were of such and such a nature when in fact they were something quite different. Like so many things that have puzzled and excited philosophers down the ages, the paradox of self-deception could be smoothed away by the firm application of analytic philosophy.

It was twenty years later, when I was reading Dickens, that I returned to the subject from a different angle. Dickens has some sensational examples of the divided self. Bradley Headstone, mad with jealousy and driven on by his unacknowledged murderous impulse, roams the streets, reduced to a 'haggard head suspended in the air' that flits across the road. (*OMF* 3.11) Other instances are more homely. Wemmick, for instance, has his office self, evident in his harsh grimace, his mouth set like the slit in a letter box, and his Walworth self, and he melts from the one into the other in the course of his journey home.[24] The most frequent instances of the divided self in Dickens are his comprehensive collection of hypocrites.[25] Some are straightforward deceivers, pretending to be what they are not, in order to gain favour and extract money – like the confidence trickster Montague Tigg, and, apparently, like Pecksniff fawning on old Chuzzlewit. But the falsity of Pecksniff is out of all proportion to the profits to be won from his deception. The mercenary motive looks more like an excuse, a rationalisation which makes the behaviour seem less terrifying. His pretence is not a clever trick, but a deeply engrained and defining trait of character. Having deceived the world so successfully, Pecksniff has ended by deceiving himself. The hypocrite who puts on an act for others is commonplace; the remarkable thing is, as Pip says of his own self-deception, that he was able to pass off spurious money on himself. Dickens is not interested in the logical paradox, but in the hard and frightening fact that self-deception exists in the world. It's the ultimate humbug, the hollowing out of the personality.

But this moralising approach to the subject is hardly any closer than the linguistic analytic approach to what Jeremy's writers are thinking when they talk of the split self.

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This memoir was in danger of being clogged up with memories of Dulwich, including the vexed question of why I left school early. But I'll leave all that for another time. One reason why so many Dulwich memories flooded in was that a name referred to in the book brought back something that I have hardly thought of since I left school: my time as a member of the school library staff. Jeremy cites the German philologist Erwin Rohde[26], whose book *Psyche* I remember occupying a prominent position (why prominent? was it a particularly large volume?) on the shelves of the library's Classics section, the section that was my responsibility. I became very familiar with the book's outside, but never read it. Until I saw the name in Jeremy's book I had quite forgotten how important a part the library played in my school life. It is relevant to this note because work in the library was a responsibility that I took very seriously, and another of those things which weighed disproportionately on my mind, causing me in the end to resign.

Another thing that threatened to take over this memoir was my relationship with my father, a relationship which now seems to have been a succession of missed opportunities. It seemed relevant to the present discussion because of the influence he had, or failed to have, on my intellectual development, if that isn't too grand a term. It's too big a topic for now.

All I'll say is that among the many things that my father was interested in was the opposition between the classical mentality and romanticism. I have no doubt that in his radical youth he was a romantic, sharing my mother's love of Wordsworth—*sharing* might not be the right word, as I'm

24 In principle there is no deviation from this rule, but for Pip's sake Wemmick allows his office self to acknowledge the existence of Walworth sentiments. This is an example of the grace that attends Pip throughout the book.

25 It is an extraordinarily varied and crowded gallery. Consider just the City strand in *OMF* where we have four different specimens of humbug: Veneering, Lammle, Fledgeby and Podsnap.

26 1845-1898. Rohde was a friend of Nietzche, and *Psyche* was for long the standard work on Greek cults.

sure they loved Wordsworth in their own very different ways. But I suspect he moved in new directions after the war. For several years in the fifties and early sixties he spent two or three nights a week in Farnham.[27] For much of the time he stayed alone, or with his friend Ben, in a caravan in a sandy wood above the town. By the light of a gas-mantle he read extensively, including Boswell, Johnson and Gibbon, as well as contemporaries such as C P Snow, Iris Murdoch and Anthony Powell. He got stretches of Gibbon by heart. He was not given to theoretical arguments, and his whole attitude was inclusive, so I'm sure he didn't abandon his liking for Wordsworth and the Romantics, but I suspect his reading at this time marks a growing appreciation of the classical mood.

When he read my early novels he put me down as a romantic. He said it was all right to be a romantic, but when you came down to it all they ever had to say was Ouch! It was the sort of epigram he would use on his art school and WEA students. I think what he meant was what is implied in a sentence that Jeremy quotes from Hölderlin's essay 'The Ground for Empedocles': 'nothing whatever can be understood and animated, if we cannot translate our own mood and experience into a foreign analogical subject matter.'[28] This sentence is only a single step in the long argument that Jeremy is constructing about Hölderlin's work on Empedocles, but I couldn't help coming to a halt when I read it. Yes, it's as my father said, the Romantic's message is Ouch, me, my mood, my experience.

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I found I got on better with Jeremy's chapter on Hölderlin's translation of and remarks on *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Perhaps I was becoming more used to his style of writing and style of thought, his always exploratory sentences and his paragraphs with their cataracts of names and allusions. My ignorance continued to get in the way, however. I would start off a paragraph quite hopefully, only to find it blow up in my face with references to authors I had heard of but never read (Derrida, Lacan) or, more often, never even heard of (Pietro Pucci sounds interesting). Still, there were things I picked up and managed to hold onto. I had forgotten that Oedipus's name contains the word for knowing and seeing, and was convinced by the suggestion that his insanity consisted of his determination to know. I also liked, but have probably misunderstood, the suggestion that the caesura can be found in the structure of the line, the structure of the tragedy and the structure of the mind.

There is a paragraph on page 110 which reads like the sort of literary criticism that I recognise. It's where Jeremy looks at the various pronouncements of the oracle, at what was said, by whom precisely, and in answer to which question. But for my satisfaction, that paragraph would have to come as the conclusion of a close and contextual reading of the lines in question, teasing out what was meant in each case, rather than asserting boldly what each passage says. A similar point might be made about the paragraph on the next page which discusses τυχη, δαιμων and μοιρα.[29] It says, lightly, that in some respect, and at some stage in the on-going argument, these terms can be regarded as equivalent. But this is a massive question, to be hammered out by historical argument. This is the sort of trench that opens up repeatedly in my path as I make my way through the book.

I don't remember much from the lectures I attended as an undergraduate, but I do remember one thing that Kenneth Dover said. I remember that he was writing something on the blackboard as he said it, throwing it off as though it was almost too obvious to be worth saying, although he weighed his words and undoubtedly said it for deliberate effect. It was that the study of literature and philosophy was essentially an historical study, by which I take it he meant first that the texts needed to be read in their contemporary context, with reference to conditions which influenced or limited and constrained the authors and readers; and that to study them was a matter of accumulating evidence and drawing proportionate and often tentative conclusions by means of

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27 He worked at Farnham Art School from about 1955 onwards, but did not move house to Farnham until 1965. The time in the caravan was from about 1955 to 1960, when he was in his early and mid forties.

28 Quoted on page 72.

29 My sense of myself as a quondam Greek scholar means that I can't bring myself to transliterate these words, but at the same time I have forgotten, if I ever knew, what diacritical marks they should bear.

analogy and imagination. I several times heard him say in later years that C P Snow drew the line between the two cultures in the wrong place. It was not artists and scientists who failed to understand each other, but those whose work was strictly evidence-based, and the rest. These obiter dicta of the great man have stuck in my mind. The conclusions I have drawn from them are twofold. First of all, those who work in the humanities need not feel inferior to scientists in the matter of objectivity. They might not proceed in Popperian ways by means of hypothesis and experiment, but they have their own strict ways of dealing with evidence. Therefore there is no need for them to distort their proper method of study in order to make it look more scientific. The second conclusion is that we have, in the humanities, to guard against the opposite danger, of confusing the study of literature and philosophy with the actual practice of those arts. Dover used to bemoan the tendency for perfectly good scholars to feel the need to cap their careers with a big book, in which they were tempted (and all to often fell) to rewrite rather than analyse and explain the texts they were studying.

I have the feeling that Jeremy has fallen into this temptation. But then why shouldn't he? Kenneth Dover was a great man and a great scholar, and was always very kind to me, but his views on scholarship are not the last word. Indeed, when I was a student I was not altogether convinced. I had the feeling that the historical approach was relativist, and my seriousness in those days involved me in believing in Platonic absolutes. But in any case, history isn't everything. There are other ways of doing things. Jeremy's approach, looking at Sophocles through Hölderlin, and Hölderlin through Sophocles, and both of them through a battery of modern thinkers, is clearly not going to be historical in the Dover sense. But one should not ask books to be something that they don't pretend to be.

Among Greek tragedies the *Antigone* is probably one of the most accessible to modern audiences. Rightly or wrongly we can find contemporary themes in it, the individual against the state, a clash of loyalties, a clash of moralities. Whether for this reason, or because I was beginning to get the hang of Jeremy's way of operating, when I reached the chapter on this play I felt on firmer ground than hitherto. But still my vast ignorance of continental philosophy from Hegel to the present day meant I was quite unable to evaluate the argument. No doubt I should be able to see how the discussions of incest, sibling relationships, patriarchy, being and nature, and the death wish all fit together, but I was defeated. One small but excellent point was made, that *nature* is not a good translation of φυσις, but I can no longer remember how it fitted into the argument.

All in all, I really have failed to do justice to the book.

Perhaps this is because, in my small way, I exemplify the simple truth (expounded by Nietzsche and Heidegger, as Jeremy reminds us on page 129) that the tradition of rationalism that began with Socrates put an end to tragedy. It's certainly true that the tragedians were contemporary with the pre-Socratic philosophers; the use of pre-Socratic fragments to illustrate the minds that produced the tragedies is historically justified. Does this argument extend further to justify the use of Hölderlin, who places himself outside the post-Socratic, Cartesian tradition, as a medium for investigating the tragedies? And then does it extend further to cover also the use that Jeremy makes of later writers to explore Hölderlin's state of mind? Whatever it was in Hölderlin's romantic sensibility, and in his madness, that gave him his unique sympathy with the Greek tragedians, was the product of his age, and needs to be understood in its historical context, while the tragedians need to be understood in their historical context. Hölderlin's sympathy, and the correspondences between his mind and that apparent in the tragedies, provide a fascinating case-study. How should it be investigated? For me it is an historical curiosity, calling for historical methods applied to each of the very different periods; for Jeremy it is a psychological case-study, belonging to critical theory and psycho-analysis.

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I think back to that serious fourteen-year-old doggedly reading through the *Oresteia* in the brown Penguin translation, following it up with some of Euripides' problem plays; or to the equally serious undergraduate clinging to a belief in cloudy Platonic absolutes in the face of gung-ho Rylean philosophy and cheerful historical relativism. Had I remained truer to those earlier selves I would have made a better job of responding to Jeremy's book.

Or perhaps not. The trouble was, I was not really serious about Greek tragedy, nor about Platonic forms. I was serious about myself. I didn't take things seriously, I took myself seriously, as my father repeatedly pointed out to me. For him it was the great sin. His favourite episode in the Odyssey was where Odysseus calls himself Nobody. He approved of Zacchaeus in the bible story, because he climbed a tree in order to see Jesus, instead of barging his way to the front. He told a story of a fellow soldier in India who made much of the fact that he was to meet Gandhi, and whose self-importance was rebuked when Gandhi, instead of imparting a great spiritual truth to him, advised him to have an enema each morning.

When I was in hospital at the age of five after my accident my parents were not allowed in to see me for over a week. Family visiting was restricted to Sunday afternoons, and the first Sunday they came but were told I was asleep. I wasn't asleep, and I saw other parents coming and going along the corridor, and I remember my disappointment that my own weren't there. It was only much later that I learned that they had tried to see me but been turned away. So I could tell a story about myself as a child who for years imagined his parents had abandoned him, and in my late teens or early twenties it was a story I was happy enough to tell, even though I was maybe half-aware as I spoke that it was not really true. In those days I had not learned about the inner Pumblechook. I guess I told the tale once too often, and my father replied in tones that mortified me: 'Well you know now, so be quiet about it.' The shock of that moment was so great that it was the last time he had to complain about my taking myself too seriously. Not that I was cured of the vice, but I was careful never again to let him see it. And of course he was right to pour cold water on the story. In theory the hospital experience, followed by years of believing I had been abandoned, ought to have been damaging for a child, but so far as I can tell it had absolutely no effect on me – probably a terrible effect on my mother. Indeed, what really upset me was when they came the next weekend, because they brought me bags of sweets and cakes. This was against the rules and caused me anxiety and embarrassment until a kindly nurse relieved me of them: 'What would Sister say?' she said.

History. What really happened, what came before and what happened next, not what psychological theory says ought to have happened.

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