

Real Toads And Imaginary Gardens

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Author of *Education in American Literature*, Dr. Greene is here concerned 'with one of our age's strangest paradoxes: a widespread and desperate concern with "meaninglessness" at the same time that exact knowledge exceeds even the dreams of 25 years ago. It is this problem that invests the humanities with significance in a culture whose major motif is science. How the literary experience can help us to cope with man's inevitable "unanswerable questions" is the subject of this article.

NO PREVIOUS GENERATION of young people has produced as many mathematicians and theoretical scientists as this one. We have never before seen so many adepts of the calculus or the forms of logic, nor have we seen such a large proportion of youthful experts in fields requiring formal and abstract competencies.

Yet this is also the generation reared in value crisis and discussions of "meaninglessness." Even when we grant the differences between subscribers to the *Scientific American* and enthusiasts of "Howl," we cannot assume that those who succeed in the more rigorous specialties have escaped the moral predicament of our time. If they show fewer signs of anomie or boredom than other young people, they are not necessarily indicating that they are more sanguine about the "good" and the "right." They may simply assume that nothing meaningful can be said about matters which are not susceptible to empirical test. When they confront one of the more troubling moral issues of the day (the "banality of evil" in the Eichmann case, or certain ambiguities respecting civil rights), they may find it no easier to justify their responses than do the poets of despair or the youth who "play it cool."

To assert that nothing meaningful can be said is to abide by a set of rules governing a particular "game" of language or inquiry. To do the opposite—to say, for example, that the universe is objectively meaningless—is

to make, without warranty, a statement that sounds like a factual one. Being empirically unverifiable, it is not, of course, what it seems. Nevertheless, the individual who makes such a claim is very likely to arouse responses of recognition. He may, in fact, find it hard to believe that anyone could seriously disagree. He becomes like Nietzsche's Zarathustra: " 'Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that God is dead!'"

THE TIME'S DILEMMA

We confront, then, an apparent dilemma. The tested and intellectually responsible methods of inquiry cannot help us very much where the really significant existential problems are concerned. The arbitrary or "emotive" methods which arouse such widespread affective responses seem to be intellectually disreputable. There is considerable evidence, however, that the unanswerable moral questions cannot be legislated into insignificance. They nag at young people and eventually find behavioral expression—in aloofness, cynicism, "sick jokes," a fascination with the perverse, or as in Pop Art, with the dissociated "objects" on the surfaces of life. (Or, it might be added, in becoming a fan of the Beatles, a convert to a politician's charisma, or a compulsive devotee to "making the scene.")

Surely, the teachers of the young must attend to phenomena like these and consider what they mean. It is not just a matter of becoming informed and vicariously involved. It is a matter of determining whether there are means of countering the tendency to act as if meaninglessness were ontologically real.

OF CHAIRS AND UNICORNS

This essay is an attempt to explore some uses of imaginative literature in meeting what appears to be an acute educational

need. There may be, in authentic literary experiences, some potentiality for developing a sense of meaningfulness congruent with what we logically and empirically know to be "real" and "true." It may be that readers gain even more than what Phenix calls "personal knowledge" (7) from becoming engaged and momentarily absorbed in certain works of art, when they are given opportunities to reflect upon what they have felt and seen. They may be helped in choosing stances to take, actions to perform. They may be helped in defining experiential orders in the neutral universe the sciences describe.

The universe described by the sciences constitutes the only "real" universe there is. To deny this is to give way to what Sidney Hook has called a contemporary failure of nerve (5). For him, this failure denotes a "loss of confidence in scientific methods" and, as seriously, a pursuit of "a 'knowledge' and 'truth' which are uniquely different from those won by the processes of scientific inquiry." They are different in that they are undependable, whereas scientific conclusions are not. Undependable, often wish-fulfilling and whimsical, they may subject men to "delusion." When distinctions are not properly made between that which is reliable and that which is not, when methods of finding out are not differentiated, the question of meaningfulness becomes hopelessly obscured. In a world where unicorns are no less deserving of a status in reality than dining room chairs, confusion multiplies—and so, in a related sense, does meaninglessness.

A recognition that this is the case appears to be essential for adequate "reality perception" in a scientific age. But such recognition cannot simply be prescribed. Professor Hook blames the failure he speaks of on "a flight from responsibility." It is as if he has no patience with those who find it difficult to grasp scientific constructs or with those who find it hard to accept the notion that the symbolisms used in the various sciences represent all we are now entitled to call "real." It is much as if he were blaming ignorance and incapacity on some original—or acquired—sin. One can only wonder what he would have said if he had

been one of the Comforters who came to Job.

Irresponsible, uninformed, fearful, or sad—the particular form of human failure described does indeed account for the "mysticism" of many young people, for their insistence on counting fantasies as true. It must be recalled, however, that the sciences no longer provide visual or verbal models to counteract the pull of private fictions or the personal imagings defined in response to need. We no longer have Dante's three-tiered universe to serve as external control or the Newtonian watch-universe ticking dependably away in absolute space and time.

ANSWERABLE QUESTIONS

Oppenheimer, for one, has explained that in each scientific specialty, the terminology is so specialized that it is "almost unintelligible except to the men who have worked in the field" (6). In the last half century, the scientific concepts used to order sense experience have become less and less susceptible to formulation in ordinary language. Scientists have become progressively less capable of showing pictures of the regularities they discern, less likely to point to models in the shared, familiar world. Their constructs and equations, therefore, lack the affective power of Ptolemy's and Newton's visualizable cosmic orders. But it is those very constructs and equations which provide the truths which enable us to make predictions, to extend our control over nature, dependably to "know."

The point is that only factual and formal questions are actually answerable. This is because they are framed in such a way that they point towards certain empirical and logical operations which are taken to be the only reliable methods of seeking knowledge of the truth. Since, in these days, the truth finally reached is likely to be most properly expressed in abstract, often "empty" terms, it is understandable that those in search of a stable framework, a sustaining cosmos, sometimes lose their "nerve."

It is understandable that some react like the waiter in Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and feel, as he does, that "It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing, and a man was nothing too." It is understandable that others respond to Camus's description of "the hopeless encounter between human questioning and the silence of the universe" (2). The universe seemed dreadfully silent when President Kennedy was killed, when a bomb exploded in a Birmingham church, when three young men were murdered in a Mississippi town. The questions arise, no matter what; and there are no answers. "Why?" people ask. "How could it happen to them—to him?" They want truth when they ask, even when they know there are no answers. Is it any wonder that they speak of meaninglessness? Is it any wonder that, when they hear the silence, they despair?

The difficulty often is that "meaning" is read too narrowly. "The realm of meanings is wider than that of true-and-false meanings; it is more urgent and more fertile . . .," John Dewey once wrote. He went on:

When the claim of meanings to truth enters in, then truth is indeed preeminent. But this fact is often confused with the idea that truth has a claim to enter everywhere, that it has monopolistic jurisdiction. Poetic meanings, moral meanings, a large part of the goods of life are matters of richness and freedom of meanings, rather than of truth. . . . (4)

It is in this wider realm that teachers have an opportunity to work to overcome the failure of nerve. It is here, among "matters of richness and freedom of meanings," that they can make it possible for their students to endure confrontation and at once avoid despair. And it is here, of course, that the literary encounter may serve to counter the sense of meaninglessness—if it is an authentic one, and if the necessary distinctions are made.

CRUCIAL DISTINCTIONS

There are two sorts of distinctions: one between the noncognitive and the cognitive, the other between cognitive meanings which are truth-meanings and cognitive meanings

which are not. A noncognitive expression or communication is most commonly taken to be an expression or communication of emotion. In the Crocean school of aesthetics, art is said to communicate "intuitive knowledge" without relation to the intellect; and this, while somewhat different from emotion, is equally noncognitive. Then there is the conception of the "unconscious," the "irrational," which is, by definition, noncognitive.

No art form can be totally devoid of emotive content; and it is unlikely that a work of art can be created unless the unconscious ("the well," as Hemingway called it) is crucially involved. It does not follow from this, however, that works of art, by their very nature, lack cognitive content.

This is particularly clear where literature is concerned because literature, after all, is made of words. Henry D. Aiken has said that the aesthetic appeal of literature is largely due to the cognitive meanings conveyed by the language used. Like all verbal symbols, those used in literature function denotatively and connotatively. Ideas, interests, memories are addressed; so are moods, feelings, and even fantasies. Aiken writes, "The predominant power of words to arouse, sustain, and project emotion is a function, not of their quality as sounds, but of their meaning—and in this case, their cognitive meaning" (1). He has in mind the "wider realm" again, rather than "true-and-false meanings," which are not the prime business of art. To support his point, we need only recall a few first lines—such as these from William Faulkner's *The Bear*, Carson McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding*, and T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*.

Faulkner, to begin: "There was a man and a dog too this time. Two beasts, counting Old Ben, the bear, and two men, counting Boon Hogganbeck. . . ." Then McCuller: "It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member." And, finally, Eliot:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:

The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.

A fragment, at best, can be only vaguely evocative; but the lines selected may make clear that the use of words often makes cognitive meaning inescapable even when "truth" is neither being prepared for nor told. And this makes it all the more important to keep the distinctions among cognitive meanings in mind. The integrity of scientific methods must be protected. Literature must be kept free to release a world of meanings, to permit wide and complex orders to be made.

A PLACE FOR THE GENUINE

Marianne Moore, in a poem called "Poetry," has said some of this:

I, too, dislike it; there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.

The poem goes on to challenge poetry that becomes "unintelligible," perhaps because it is confused with discursive prose. Then it continues:

nor is it valid to discriminate "against business documents and school books"; all these phenomena are important.
One must make a distinction however:

It is as if a refusal to make the distinction threatens both the discursive and the nondiscursive—and a variety of cognitive meanings as well. In this poem, poets are to be "literalists of the imagination" who present "for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them." This suggests what "genuine" signifies; and it brings us back to the nature of literature as an art form, and at length to its potentialities in combatting meaninglessness.

The poet's garden may suggest some aesthetic ordering, the form that is created when imagination goes to work on selected particulars in the world. Whatever they are—toads, Grecian urns, or faces in a crowd—these particulars have been selected by

emotions that pulled at them, separated them from the density of things, and made them part of a new order, as the surf flows in and carries off pebbles, grains of sand, chips of glass, when it withdraws into the sea.

The sea is analogous to the strange new context in which the perceived toads or urns or faces now exist. It is the artist's context, the consciousness of the poet. The poet's imagination transmutes the particulars, changes them, gives them symbolic form. Toads or urns or faces are remade deliberately, patterned in accord with the feelings they have aroused.

Transformed, the perceived toads, for instance, become toads more literal, more concrete, than actual toads, once their garden is entered by a reader. In day-today life, toads are generally invisible in their singularity. For scientists, they are merely representative of a species. For gardeners or visitors to gardens, they tend to blend with the dust; or they function in the organic life of gardens, or they provoke dismayed recoils. It takes an imaginary garden to make toads horticulturally useless, to remove their power to startle, and to make them significant as forms.

VISIONS OF POSSIBILITY

If the toads in works of art are misconceived, if their felt "realness" is confused with veritable existence in the natural world, they lose their significance as illusions, and their expressive power decays. Works of art function as experiences only when they are viewed as presentations, not representations or revelations or commentaries. They are realizations of certain possibilities in the particulars that compose them. They are self-sufficient entities once they are formed; they are organic structures, complete unto themselves. Like John Keats's Grecian urn, each one is a still presence, "a foster-child of silence and slow time." In its presentness, it means nothing except as it is experienced. When it is experienced, meaning may happen, suddenly or gradually. It can only happen in relation to a human consciousness.

The event becomes significant, however, when there is an awareness of the meanings occurring. A literary experience can only be "integral," as Dewey said (3), or complete when the consummation reached involves such awareness. An encounter which achieves authenticity, therefore, is one which culminates in a reflective activity of exploration and patterning. That which is explored and patterned is some dimension of the reader's own existential history. Form is imposed upon the flow of concepts, images, and codifications making up that history. The feelings pervading it are formed as well, and the form is fed by the roots reaching underground. A literary experience is complete, in other words, when a work of literature leads a reader into himself—to reflect, to reflect upon, and to re-form his "image" of his world.

Illustrations may clarify the connections between this process and the nurture of meaningfulness. There is, for instance, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which has so often served to generate intense experiences among the young although it states no verifiable truth, reveals no facts about man's condition in the modern age. It deals with a brief time in the life of young Holden Caulfield, who is seeking candor and compassion in a "phony" adult world. It requires a certain suspension of disbelief if a reader is to enter into Holden's quest and abide, for a while, by its rules.

Once a reader is engaged, however, his consciousness is tapped on several levels as he reenacts in imagination what he reads. He is most likely to "understand" the story in terms of his own recollected adolescence, perhaps in an American city or town. The more he can summon up of adolescent disgust and disillusionment, the more he will be engaged. The more adult observations and ideas he can integrate with his memories, the richer and more complex will become the perspective through which he sees.

UNDERSTANDING VIA FEELINGS

But he has to feel what he is undergoing. He has to respond emotionally to an initial

tension and entanglement. He has to be free to search for the resolution his own emotion demands. If he is being "taught" the novel, the teacher's concern ought to be primarily for the student reader's naturalness and ease, for his release into the work of art. Given enough ability to read freely, there is usually a good possibility that the feelings aroused in a reader will magnetize a variety of energies, perceptions, and ideas to be patterned in accord with the form of the book.

The Catcher in the Rye or any other work of art "means" this variety formed in a manner new to the reader. Since sense sui generis and unique in the world, awareness of what this novel patterning signifies depends on the reader's ability—and opportunity—to reflect upon what he has seen and felt after the experience is complete. It is here that the teacher and the class have crucial roles to play.

Students frequently do not realize that they have discerned new highlights and nuances in their own histories until they talk or write about what they have experienced in something they have read. The very process of putting the experience into words helps to organize what has been undergone. Once expressed, it becomes a kind of content, a structure which may well give rise to questions never framed before.

Having encountered, say, Holden's fantasy about becoming a catcher in the rye, the reader may well ask (later, when the reading is done) questions which have to do with adolescent psychology. Having moved imaginatively through the city streets, the playgrounds, the park, he may define problems only sociology can resolve. He may thus be led into a search for meanings in several fields, each one characterized by a particular type of methodology, specific cognitive controls.

Choosing to enter into any single field means choosing to accept appropriate conventions. The teacher, helping students to make distinctions as they extend their searching, may be creating occasions for the perception of many sorts of meanings and, at once, permitting aesthetic meaning to become clear. The student reader may

become clearer about where he stands in a field of distinguishable meanings. Knowing more about what he has been about, he may be enabled to choose himself afresh. He may be enabled to choose a commitment in some defined area and thereby focus his concerns with some authentic end in every artistic presentation in some view.

THE LITERARY ENCOUNTER

This constitutes the sense of meaningfulness that may derive from literary encounters. It is surely not accidental that the symbolic action it involves so closely resembles the action of the dramatic and especially the tragic hero: Job, Oedipus, Hamlet, Lear. Also—not accidentally—it resembles the action in certain modern works of fiction: Billy Budd, for example, Heart of Darkness, The Plague, Catch-22.

Hamlet may exemplify this most sharply. The beginning, it will be remembered, is obscurity, an atmosphere of meaninglessness, in almost the sense with which we began. The unease of the sentries, the cold darkness of the ramparts, the groping to explain the Ghost—all is mysterious, "A mote to trouble the mind's eye." The uncertainties multiply as the play proceeds. Nighttime and strange sounds are not the only things that confound. Murder begins to preoccupy the mind. Love and restiveness trouble one man; the threat of disorder troubles another. There is the vague corruption overlaying the state, causing things to be "rotten in the state of Denmark" from the heights to the depths.

Polonius, Claudius, Gertrude, and Hamlet frame their hypotheses and test them in action. What they do is determined by their positions with respect to the "sickness" pervading all things. Hamlet, the prince who ought to be king, bears the crucial responsibility to "set things right"; and so it is Hamlet who, by testing and incorporating every guess and gesture made by others, must "by indirections find directions out." He must discover what is real and distinguish it from what is nothing but a projection from his own "bad dreams." He must cease to despise himself for relieving his "heart with

words" and move to break through the "seeming" and to act.

It is his action which, at length, sets things right. Once the duel is fought at the end, Hamlet has not only worked his revenge; he has restored health, purpose, and meaning to the community. His death does not alter the fact that he has become a full prince and done what a prince must do. Before dying, he asks Horatio to tell his story in order to clear his "wounded name." Horatio is to let men know what has happened and, by the telling of it, perhaps to make some difference in the world. This may make the events of the Danish past cognitively meaningful for those who have not witnessed them. In a profound sense, however, meaninglessness has already been overcome—in action rather than words, in and through a man's choice of himself and his commitment to do his work.

And this, too, leads back to the contemporary problem of meaninglessness. The point is that there is no factual or rational answer to be found when questions are asked like those aroused by the death of Hamlet—or the death of John F. Kennedy. To seek such an answer is too often to give way to the failure of nerve because only mystical, visionary answers are available. To deny the need for an answer, however, is to suffer a dreadful apathy, to say "What does it matter?" after all. The alternative, suggested by so many modes of literary experience, is to define one's self against the inscrutable and within one's community—to take action to create direction, to become a kind of prince.

THE HUMAN COMMITMENT

Tragedy, of course, gives this exemplary form; but many works of literature offer kindred occasions. Even Salinger's novel, concluding with the image of a carousel, culminates in a need to choose: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." This is not basically different from Hamlet's appeal to Horatio, for Holden has already begun to "sort of miss everybody I told about." He has made contact, almost in spite of himself; he has taken action against the "phony" world by

telling. And yet there are no answers, as Holden admits when D.B. asks him what all the stuff he has told about means. "If you want to know the truth, I don't know what I think about it." For him, too, and for the reader, "there are more things on heaven and earth" than are dreamt of in Horatio's—or anyone else's—philosophy.

One must take action, even so. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* the hero may be taken to be Captain Vere, since the Captain is the one who makes significant choices as the tale moves on. A reader cannot identify with the totally innocent Billy or with the evil Claggert, cursed with a "natural depravity." He can only reenact the Captain's tragic choosing, the Captain's encompassing of good and evil in the midst of ambiguous nature, on the sea. Men's allegiance, he knows, is not to nature; and, severe as man-made laws may be, human beings must abide by them. To appeal beyond them—to the heart, to natural compassion—would be, for the anguished Captain, to fail in nerve as well as responsibility.

It is clear to "Starry" Vere where duty lies. It is clear that "measured forms are everything." And there is no sustaining answer to questions about why the Handsome Sailor has to die. "Everything is for a term remarkable in navies." Men proceed, doing their work against oblivion. For the Captain, for the reader, there remains the arch of created forms and meanings, the sole barrier against chaos and the ambiguous threat of the sea.

As in the case of Hemingway's early heroes, one can only do what one has to do "with style," even when one knows that "the world kills everyone, the very brave and the very good. . . ." Like Dr. Rieux, in Albert Camus's *The Plague*, one fights the plague because it is "only logical," even though one knows there is no cure. One says, as Rieux does, "it is my job," because there is no other way to survive. Or, like Yossarian, in the absurd whirl of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, one takes the risk of being called manic-depressive and admits to being "antagonistic to the idea of being robbed, exploited, degraded, humiliated, or deceived." Why? For no sound or defensible reason. Merely because one decides that one is "too good for all the

conventions of society" and is committed, therefore, to remaining alive.

BEYOND US YET OURSELVES

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* may serve as a summary of what it signifies to search for meaningfulness in a world where the constructs of the scientists represent the "real." This is the account of Marlow's journey down an African river, through the Congo and into the depths of himself. Because it is a story of confrontation, a plunge into a darkness that can only be combatted by the most deliberately wrought forms, it brings us back to where we began.

"The truth is hidden—luckily." In our own terms, there is no truthful answer to the questions Marlow must ask, to the existential questions. There is the job of piloting the riverboat through a jungle that is inscrutable, past the tempting cries of savages along the banks. And there is the telling about it later—in Marlow's case, to people who are too safe to understand. He tells them they will never really understand because of the "solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbors ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman. . . ."

In our case, the pavement is no longer solid for many people. The younger generation cannot step delicately, since there is little protection left. The danger of denial, abstractness, or despair is great. It may be more necessary than ever before to "fall back on your own innate strength, your own capacity for faithfulness," and, still in Conrad's words, "your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, back-breaking business. . . ."

It is obscure because anything is possible, and because the questions science cannot answer are so ubiquitous in modern life. Nevertheless, our work, our business, goes on. In an important sense, it is the work of searching after truths that are dependable. It is the business of using intelligence to adapt what is discovered by the sciences to the service of mankind. Since the days of Socrates, there has been no more promising

ideal than the freeing of the human mind. It is our business now to enlarge its freedom, to strengthen human nerve enough to permit mindfulness to be chosen over bigotry, superstition, wishfulness, and the simplism of anti-intellectual "common sense."

And this is the prime reason for making required distinctions, for combatting meaninglessness. Nothing can erode the commitment to mindfulness more than the feeling that "it is all a nothing." What, then, is the point if it is all "Nada"? Yet if we ask for truth-meanings as we search for what it is, the only response we can get is "Nada" or the "silence" of which Camus wrote.

There remains the option of creating forms, since "measured forms are everything." There remains the hope of action in the light of created images of dignity, of decency, of work. This is where imaginative literature can help us on our way. Forming experience by means of our encounters with it, we can choose the stand we must take, the gesture we can make, when we confront what cannot be resolved in factual terms. We can enact meaningfulness as we shape our illusions of purpose, our images, our forms. In doing so, we can create values as we live, values susceptible to continual remaking—"beyond us," as Wallace Stevens puts it, "yet ourselves." And in "The Man With the Blue Guitar," he says some things about the literary artist or the literary imagination which may serve as last things here, since they may remind us once again of meaning, and the need to seek out meanings, in the service of the truth:

They said, "you have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

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