

Reflections on Half a Life in Homage to Sophia

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In this autobiographical fragment, the author demonstrates the call to philosophy as a quest for sophia, logos and sacred wisdom, and also as resistance to mad and brutal circumstance.

Before I go any further let me explain that I am not an academic or a qualified philosopher.

I was conscripted into the South African Defence Force in 1974 and ended up as a Commando behind enemy lines in Southern Angola. Mercifully, I never experienced contact, but I was sufficiently close to the action to realise what a bizarre form of Existentialism can be found in mortal combat. As it turned out, I had a 9 mm held to my head by a deranged Staff Sergeant “Killer” Smit (who was alleged to have fought with “Mad Mike” Hoare in the Belgian Congo) during a darts competition. Once again—by the Grace of God—I managed to throw a double tops and save the extra-judicial murder. Somehow, however, the lads never forgave me, because I was forced on the last night to defend myself against an equally deranged Sergeant du Plessis. Unfortunately for *mens sana in corpore sano*, I lost the plot completely—possibly because of my excellent training—and was only prevented from killing the fellow by being dragged off bodily to the medic.

Meanwhile, I had enrolled for Philosophy at UNISA and had been studying Descartes and Gilbert Ryle by torchlight when I should have kept a lookout for invading forces. Thus I soon realised that philosophy is not a great Protector of Mankind. The trouble—as a one-eyed driver told me in the publishing house where I later worked—is that you think too much. One only has to read *Hamlet* to discover the consequences of too much soliloquising.

Nevertheless I enrolled in 1975 at the University of Cape Town, and plunged head-first into the delectable world of books, conversation, left-wing dissent, music and dagga. In September of that year I was dragged off to Valkenberg where I found myself in a padded cell, followed by six doses of shock treatment and an intravenous dose of Modicate with all the horrors attendant on playing poker with a serial killer in a locked ward.

Somehow, by another batch of divine intervention (and a long-suffering wife), I struggled back to consciousness, majored in English and African

Languages and became a textbook commissioning editor. During that time Marxist philosophy was *de rigueur*, but it was combined for me with a love of Comparative Religion and Jungian analysis. God was in His Heaven and dialectics ruled below, while the personal remained political.

In the 1990s, however, I was obliged to revisit the Existential problem of insanity in spades. I was hurled back into Valkenberg, but with a slightly more jaundiced eye, and was able to observe first hand the complexities of Existence and Anxiety. In the midst of recurring bouts of psychosis, I realised that—if I were indeed God, I would know Everything. Since I clearly did not know everything (or anything Really), I could not possibly be God, and started to get better immediately thereafter.

I began to consume vast quantities of literature, from 000 to 999 in the Dewey Decimal System at Jagger Library and the various libraries—both public and private and among second-hand booksellers—in order to gain greater understanding. Like Solomon and the author of the Proverbs I sought Wisdom, and above all, understanding.

Thus I was reminded that the meaning of Philosophy is *philo Sophia*: the Love of Wisdom, and I found glimpses of her fleeting form in many great works of literature: in Ancient Egypt and the Middle East, in Pythagorean Greece, among the Neo-Platonists, the Renaissance Gnostics, the Alchemists, the Rosicrucians, the Theosophists and the Anthroposophists.

Metaphysics became for me a road to mental health, until I went full circle all the way back through the Christian Mystics (Thomas à Kempis and St. John of the Cross) back to basic Morality 101A: the virtues and the vices, particularly Lust and Anger.

“Rule your spirit” say the Proverbs, but they don’t say how.

Anger is born of frustrated Desire and desire is born of the Ego. Me-first. I want. Gimme.

It’s only when you learn to recognise the Ego and its powerful sway over your emotional life that healing can begin—to become Whole again, to re-member the dissolution of the Self through active engagement in the *mysterium coniunctionem*, which is the aim and object of the Magnum Opus. More often than not we project that marriage of Sol and Luna onto a material person, in my case another woman—first the mother, and then the wife or the lover, but the ultimate practice of philosophy (the love of Sophia) is to come to terms with the lover within.

“Love your neighbour as yourself” says the Christian Master (who got it from Rabbi Hillel) but how can you love another when you don’t know

how to love yourself? When aspects of your self are at war with one another, when the enemy is everywhere but close at hand, it is no wonder that the soul descends into the chthonic Underworld of ghosts and demons, the hysterical search for people both incarnate and disembodied who are “out to get you.” This can lead on so easily into the Grand Mal, the Great Destruction which will consume Everyone: the dreaded Apocalypse.

Now we know what is Right and what is Wrong. Now I believe that I have run out of people to blame and that I only have my self left. But understanding and insight are not enough. In the words of Comrade Lenin: “What is to be done?”

We return to Catholic mysticism, to the language of the Pauline letters and the example of St Francis. We recognise that we ride a particularly mischievous donkey, the Vehicle (or chariot with charging horses under rein) and that we have to exercise a particularly firm hand, Goethe’s rudder on his fragile craft in stormy seas.

So we practise.

“One day at a time, sweet Jesus” goes the Country & Western song.

I conclude by appending a translation from an Afrikaans poem by T.J. Haarhof.

This Vehicle

(translated from *Twee perde: ’n fragment* by T. J. Haarhof)

Two horses pull the old cart’s soul:
The one is black and rough and rude,
Likely to fight and prolong a feud,
Ready to ask too much of the goal;

The other, white and pure and still,
Obedient if the driver requires
And strong in allowing those inner fires
To be tempered by his Master’s will.