THE DESACRALIZATION OF WORK*

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> And if a man takes upon himself in all its fullness the proper office of his own vocation, it comes about that he and the world are the means of right order to each other ... For since the world is God's handwork, he who maintains and heightens its beauty by his tendance is cooperating with the will of God, when by the aid of his bodily strength, and by his work and his administration, he makes things assume that shape and aspect which God's purpose has designed. What is the reward? ... That when our term of service is ended, when we are divested of our guardianship of the material world and freed from the bonds of mortality, God will restore us, cleansed and sanctified, to the primal condition of that higher part of us which is divine.
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> —Hermes[1]

The Traditional Work Ethic

In the West, as we have seen, the earliest theorist of work at any length or in any detail was the Greek philosopher Plato. His account of work has remained one of the standard accounts. An almost identical theory to Plato's is to be found in other cultures and particularly in India where it underlies the practice of Karma Yoga, the yoga of action. This theory, wherever it is found, may be called the traditional or perennial theory of work, and most of what has been said in the last four chapters derives from it. A brief outline of its major tenets should therefore be enough to establish it clearly and firmly in the mind of anyone who has read this far. But we should take care from the beginning not to confuse this traditional theory of work with a theory which superficially resembles it,

* Editor's Note: Chapter 6 of *Mining, Metallurgy, and the Meaning of Life.*

[1] Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius* I ("The Virgin of the World"), trans. A. Kingsford and E. Maitland (1885; reprint, Wizard Bookshelf, 1977).

the theory of work which is usually called the Protestant work ethic. Though both of these theories suppose a relationship between work and the life of the spirit, they do so in quite different ways.[2] Any understanding of the traditional theory of work must also be an understanding of how it differs from the Protestant work ethic which largely displaced it.

According to Plato everyone born into this world has an innate predisposition for a particular kind of work. Only by the finding and doing of this work can a person become who he or she truly is. This predisposition is the single determining factor of the human personality, in comparison to which all other traits of character, accidents of birth, environmental conditionings are negligible. Each of us is born to carry out a particular task and only when that task is completed have we done what we came for. In some people this predisposition is very clear, as in the case of child prodigies who evince at an early age a degree of competence in a particular art or science which is inexplicable in the light of their actual experience. According to the Hindus this is one of the strongest reasons for a belief in some form of metempsychosis or transmigration of souls from one body to another. So natural and unforced is the facility which a predisposition confers that the person so gifted is hardly aware of it. It is only with difficulty that a child who can draw can be made to understand that others cannot. There is some evidence to suggest that these predispositions run in families, but both Plato and the Indian philosophers are careful to point out that there is no guarantee of this, and that in a well organized society people are free to pursue other vocations than those of their parents. Nonetheless there is an expectation in traditional societies that children will follow their parents in this regard, and this expectation, taken together with the central importance of these predispositions to the personality, explains why families are often named after vocations. In northwestern Europe the names of Bergman and Smith are particularly common and derive from the professions of mining and metallurgy. Sworder is another such name but much less common.

To a society like ours which has largely done away with the traditional arts and crafts, it may appear that they are the products of

[2] *Bhagavad Gita*, Bks 3, 4, trans. Swami Chinmayananda (Bombay: Chinmaya Mission Trust, n. d.). Plato, *Republic*, Bk 2, from *Collected Dialogues*, ed. E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (Princeton, 1963).

convention rather than of nature, and that they can be dispensed with when cheaper and more efficient means of production are discovered. This assumption is debatable. One of the most remarkable developments of the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution is the hobby. After working in the factory or the office people return home to practice in their periods of leisure what previously they would have done as work. This is the significance of gardening in a society which has mostly dispensed with agricultural labor, and of the millions of workshops in the backyards of suburban houses. Nothing could show more clearly than this that the old predispositions continue to exercise their sway over the personality, and they do so regardless of the fact that the work for which they fit us is no longer paid, nor otherwise rewarded than by the intrinsic satisfaction which it provides. When Plato starts to talk about work in the *Republic* this is the very first point he makes.[3] He asks whether people would be better off if each did or made everything, or whether each should do or make one kind of thing only and then share the fruits of this labor with everyone else. In deciding that it is better to divide labor than have each person do everything, Plato argues that each person is naturally fitted for one kind of work only and is better served by doing just that. For Plato the prime reason for dividing labor is not that it is more efficient, but that it conforms to our innate predispositions. Acting in accordance with one's innate predisposition is the basis of Plato's theory of justice.

In the Indian philosophy this same theory or law of justice is called the Dharma and it is one of the major themes in the best known of all Indian scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gita*.[4] As the Indians understand it, we are impelled into action by the mere fact of our bodies. We cannot do other than act, given our equipment of arms and legs. Actions are constantly flowing from us, and what is required if we are to be happy is a way of organizing and directing this ceaseless flow of actions to some worthy end. This will finally enable us to free ourselves from the otherwise unending chain of causes and effects by which our actions bind us. This release is achieved by the selfless performance of our proper work, without any regard for the fruits of it, until we become capable at last of a

[3] Plato, *Republic* 2.368ff.

[4] *Bhagavad Gita*, 3.1ff.

kind of desireless, actionless action which is liberation. This way of thinking has something in common with the story of the Fall from the Garden of Eden. Before the Fall Adam tended the garden, cooperating in the work of God. But after eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he was expelled from the Garden and forced to provide for himself by the sweat of his brow. This concern with good and evil is precisely what transforms the selfless work of the one who is liberated into the anxious toil of the fallen. As the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it:

> Without hope, with the mind and self controlled, having abandoned all possessions, doing mere bodily action, he incurs no sin. Content with what comes to him without effort, free from the pairs of opposites and envy, even minded in success and failure, though acting he is not bound.[5]

This is how the *Bhagavad Gita* describes the man liberated through work. This selflessness in action is characteristic of the work ethic in traditional societies. The work is done anonymously and workers do not seek to arrogate to themselves the credit for having done it. This is why much of the greatest work done in the Middle Ages, or in the archaic period of ancient Greece, is unsigned and unattributed. The practice of claiming work as one's own is an index of the extent to which the traditional work ethic is in decline, and on this score both the classical period of Greek art and the Renaissance are in the process of falling away from the selfless ideal of the periods which immediately preceded them. In the ancient world this falling away was merely a matter of degree, since in the Greek and Roman traditions as we have seen, credit for the work had always finally to be given to the patron god or goddess. It was always believed that a divine power was responsible for the miracle of skillful action or creation.

These ways of thinking about work made it clear that workers were not to use their work to aggrandize themselves, at whatever level in the society they might be. Nor was work, even of the most artistic kind, a medium of self-expression, in which the personality of the artist as an individual was exposed. The personalities of artists

[5] *Bhagavad Gita*, 4.21.

were of no more interest to those who made use of their work than the personalities of their tailors or cobblers. At best they had nothing at all to do with the work. In such a society each kind of work was done by people who sought through the doing of their work to escape the limitations of the egoic self. Instead of thinking of themselves as individuals who were as far as possible separate and independent of each other, they thought of themselves as belonging to parts of a single organism. These parts were the classes and professions, each of which was different from the others, but necessary to the survival and success of the whole. Just as the same food produces and maintains the different organs of the human body, all of which are necessary to its fulfillment, so in the one society all those innate predispositions were to be found which were needed to complete it. Acting in accordance with one's innate predisposition was justice which was at once the source of the deepest satisfaction to oneself and the means of maintaining the society.

In many different ways the social order was continuous with the natural order. The innate predispositions which equipped people for particular kinds of work were in nature in much the same way that we now consider, say, the home building instincts of animals to be. The idea of whatever was to be done or made stood in the divine mind in exactly the same way as did the ideas of the natural species or those of the elements. The contemplation of the idea was the superior part of the different kinds of work, while the material realization of the idea in the world of time and space was regarded as derivative and secondary. Since every such idea came from God, it could hardly be regarded as the creation of an individual craftworker or artist, and therefore the notion of originality counted for very little. This is not to say that research, experiment, and innovation were suppressed. Plato was emphatic that enquiry is essential to the proper development and maintenance of any art or science. Instead there was a tendency to attribute the latest finding to some earlier, often legendary exponent of the art, as a token of veneration and as a way of ensuring the continuity of the tradition. In some places the same way of doing or making things persisted for many centuries, as was the case, for example, with Gregorian chant. But it would be wrong to suppose that the artists at the end of one of these periods were less capable than those at its beginning. For traditional workers, originality consisted in the recreation within

themselves of that understanding which the centuries had inherited from the founder of their art, who had received it from God.

Another respect in which human work was continuous with the natural order was in the relation between the worker and the material on which the work was done. Of almost all kinds of work there was an assumption that between the worker and the material a bond existed, a deep affinity. The carpenter had a feel for the wood, the smith for the gold or iron, the gardener had green fingers. This affinity, which underlay the activity of most working lives, established a connection between the deepest element in the personality of the worker and the universe beyond, between the microcosm and the macrocosm. This was no abstract speculation but an immediate recognition that by working through the creations of the outer world of nature, a vocation could be answered and a life fulfilled. This connection between the innermost and the outermost dimensions of experience has much more to do with human happiness than is now realized. It is the only means to the thorough integration of the human being, and the loss of it produces an alienation far more pervasive and acute than that described by Marx. Between the idea which is known through contemplation, and the material through which that idea is realized in the world of time and space, there may be a union which is the marriage of heaven and earth.

Just as the worker required the material on which the work was done in order to achieve fulfillment, so the material required the worker if it too was to be fulfilled. It seems strange to us to suppose that wood can only be fulfilled, come fully into its own, through the intervention of the carpenter. On this view the wood's fulfillment consists not in its living out its full span in the forest, but in being axed and sawn, sanded and polished. Only then are its beauties revealed. A cathedral mason who ruined the block of stone he was dressing was required to follow the cart which disposed of it as chief mourner. As stone the block would not be affected much by whatever the mason did to it. But by being turned into a block it became, as it were, alive, and then died again through the incompetence of the mason. For many traditions the metals in the ground were embryonic and the processes of mining and smelting were obstetric, bringing them to birth. According to some scholars this is the primordial view of mining, the oldest and most profound.[6] But what

[6] Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

all these examples have in common is the notion that nature longs for human intervention in order to become most fully itself. Intervention by humans in the natural order is not a rape but nature's glory, the only means by which the greatest treasures can be brought to light. As William Blake put it:

> Where man is not, nature is barren.[7]

The alchemists put the same thought even more abruptly:

> Nature unaided fails.

It is hard for us now, two hundred years on from Wordsworth, to realize that for by far the greater part of recorded history, wilderness was not regarded as beautiful but as ugly and frightening. Very often it was believed demonic, in the bad sense, a natural condition quite different from that of Eden which was a deliberately planted and tended garden. For the greater part of Christian history, wilderness was precisely the natural correlative of Adam's Fall, a place of no virtue except for what could be won from it by human effort. There was normally only one class of people attracted to it for its own sake, the anchorites and hermits, for whom it was at once a solitude and a test, a retreat from the world and an arena for spiritual combat. Even so, this use of the wilderness is far from universal, appearing most often at times when the social order is markedly decadent. At those times the most extreme luxury and the most extreme asceticism are found side by side, and from the point of view of several religious traditions the luxury and the asceticism are equally suspect. It is one thing to retreat to an ashram in the forest and quite another to endure the terrible privations of the desert. The place presently occupied by the notion of wilderness in our range of emotions and attitudes was in early times taken by pasturage and the pastoral tradition. This probably means that we can no longer quite grasp what the idea of wilderness was for our ancestors. For us there are no longer wild and dangerous places on the earth as once there were. For us a wilderness may also be a park, a confusion of categories impossible before.

[7] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Blake: Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pl. 10, 1.8.

But if the wilderness was almost entirely bad from the point of view of earlier times, so also were those who did nothing to transform the raw materials of nature, of whatever kind. People who failed to respond to their vocations, who did nothing to develop themselves in accordance with their innate predispositions, were despised and condemned. On this view everyone is born to be an artist in some field; there is nothing finally to distinguish the work of the person whom we now call an artist from the work of anyone else. The artist, as one scholar has put it, is not a special kind of person, but everyone who is not an artist in some field, everyone who does not respond to their vocation, is an idler.[8] The traditional theory of work cannot, I think, conceive even of the possibility of a person without an inborn vocation, since the vocation is the single greatest determinant of personality. There is only one person who has the right to abstain from all constructive activities, the contemplative monk or nun. But these people not only make nothing, they do not use anything either. In a strict sense they are no longer members of human society. But even these people may be said to engage in the work of transforming the raw materials of nature, since they are wholly intent on correcting and improving their own fallen natures as human beings. And, of course, it is the activity of these people which we still think to be the most truly vocational of all.

For all these reasons sloth was one of the seven deadly sins in the medieval understanding. But the traditional doctrine of work entailed much more than the mere banning of idleness. Other activities were regarded with the deepest suspicion. Merchants, for example, were typically unproductive. Engaging in no constructive activity of their own, merchants bought cheap and sold dear, and it was not easy to find a justification for this within the limits of the doctrine just outlined.[9] This problem was, however, peculiar to the West; in India the merchant class was always highly respected. Still harder to accommodate, but also apparently indispensable, were the money lenders, around whose operations the later Middle Ages built an enormous scaffolding of casuistical argument and counter argument. The traditional argument was that metal, the metal of

[8] A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 24.

[9] R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938), p. 97.

the coinage or the precious metals, was essentially barren and could not in the normal course of nature propagate itself. But this is precisely what it did when lent out at interest, and therefore the lending of money at interest was unnatural, a sin against nature. Though not a deadly sin in itself, it was very closely connected in the medieval mind with sloth and avarice, so that throughout this period the merchant and money lender alike were thought to stand in imminent danger of hell.

These consequences of the traditional doctrine of work were brought out very clearly in a passage of Dante's *Inferno* in which Virgil explained to Dante the reason why usurers were condemned by divine justice to suffer the torments of hell:

> "Would you go back a little way," I said;
> "To where you said that usury offends
> Divine goodness, and untie that knot for me?"
> "Philosophy," he said, "to him who heeds
> Indicates in more than a single place
> How Nature derives the course she follows
> From the divine intelligence and skill,
> And if you study the 'Physics' carefully,
> You will find, after not too many pages,
> That your human skill, as far as possible,
> Follows her, as pupil follows teacher,
> So that your skill is like a grandchild of God.
> From these two, if you recollect
> The opening part of Genesis, mankind
> Must draw its sustenance and move ahead.
> And because the usurer pursues another course,
> He scorns Nature for herself and for her
> Follower, and sets his hopes on something else."[10]

Virgil's source for some of this is the *Physics* of Aristotle, though he goes far beyond what Aristotle says there. All human activity, on this view, should model itself on nature, which models itself on the divine intellect. In this way, by depending on art and nature, humankind should gain its livelihood and develop. Human art repeats and imitates the creative powers of nature on the one hand,

[10] Dante, *Inferno*, trans. J. Ciardi & A. MacAllister (New York: New American Library, 1954), 11.94ff.

and the creator of nature itself, the divine intellect, on the other. As for Plato, so for Dante there is something divine about human work. On Dante's account the usurers' sin is one of omission. They produce nothing and in that failure are guilty of despising God and nature. They are guilty of violence towards God, and their punishment is to be condemned to the burning sands of a desert plain where fiery embers fall on them like flakes of snow.

Virgil explains to Dante that human work is an imitation or repetition of the divine intellect. It is just here that we see the significance of Homer's accounts of Hephaestus and of the revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. These stories are exemplary. They do not apply merely to the making of Achilles' shield or the vessels of the tabernacle. They show that the work of the smith is always a repetition of the divine act of creation. Every craftworker realizes in human form the creative power of God, just as every contemplative realizes the divine inactivity and inwardness of God. The whole world of human work is a bodying forth at many levels of the different aspects of the divine nature. By a splendid anachronism Dante's Virgil makes his point about God, nature, and art by referring both to Aristotle and to Genesis.

The Protestant Work Ethic

Dante composed the *Inferno* about 1300 C.E. From that time to the time of William Blake was a period of five hundred years, during which the traditional doctrine of work was successively forsaken until it was almost forgotten. If that should seem a very extended period for the demise of a single theory, we must remember that this theory was the basis for much of the psychology, sociology, economics, and politics of the traditional order, and that it had persisted in the West from at least the time of Homer. There are reasons for believing that the theory played a central part in Egyptian civilization from early times, which would date it back another two millennia. It is not surprising therefore that a theory of this age and importance took a long time to disappear. We must now study its decay in some detail since it is precisely from this decay and its consequences for our understanding of work and nature that the terms of the present debates about mining have emerged.

At some points it is easy enough to trace the slow decline of the traditional doctrine of work, especially in the later stages. This is

because the decline corresponded to the emergence of a new doctrine of work which has been of the greatest interest to historians and sociologists. This new doctrine is usually called the Protestant work ethic, though this name is not entirely satisfactory. This new ethic is generally thought to be the religious and psychological basis for the rise of capitalism in the Western world from the sixteenth century onwards. It has been minutely studied in an attempt to isolate those factors which created the capitalist order. Of all the questions and issues raised by historians and social scientists since the beginning of the nineteenth century, this is one of the most vital.

Unfortunately, from our point of view, this great question has been discussed almost entirely the wrong way round. The task has not been to explain how the older theory of work declined but how the new one emerged. There has been a presumption, at least from the time of Marx, that the formation of capitalism is a positive development, a social and economic order into which Europe grew, a stage on its journey towards full maturation. Accordingly, very little attention has been given to the virtues and values of the order which preceded capitalism and the new ethic of work. The best known historian of the new ethic was Max Weber who claimed that Luther originated the notion of vocation, for which there had been no historical precedent![11] This perhaps is an exceptional case, but there can be no doubt that students of this period have given very little weight to the theory of work which the Puritan and capitalist revolutions deposed. To trace, therefore, the demise of the older doctrine is to take on a task that has been little attempted.

The decline of the traditional theory of work was bound up with the decline of the Middle Ages. The feudal order of the Middle Ages was irreparably damaged by the Black Death, which created so great a shortage of agricultural laborers that the manors could no longer enforce the service of their serfs. Their labor was at a premium and could be sold to the highest bidder. The weakening of the manorial system encouraged an increasing lawlessness in the countryside and a shift to the towns. To sustain the towns, new manufacturing industries had to be developed which produced goods for export and not merely for local consumption. The most impor-

[11] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930).

tant of these in the early period were woolen goods and the towns which produced the best woolen products were in the Lowlands. These towns developed their woolen manufactures to the point where they needed to import raw wool from further and further afield, and so there began the conversion of agricultural land into pasturage in many parts of Europe.[12] This in turn led to a still greater exodus from the land, so that by the early sixteenth century Thomas More could describe the sheep as a man eating animal since it deprived agricultural workers of their livelihood.[13]

As the power of the towns increased, the power of the landed nobility declined, and money as well as land became a standard of wealth. This transference of power was a serious, if invisible, blow to the Church which had come to mirror the world of the peasantry and the countryside in its calendar and rituals. The rich townsfolk did not owe their wealth and power to a long established order, and from the beginning of the Renaissance a new emphasis on the individual appeared. The patronage of the arts was also in part transferred, as the new wealth gave the direction of the crafts into the hands of the merchant princes. This was particularly true of Florence, the greatest woolen manufacturing city in Italy, but it can be seen also in the paintings of the Lowlands. Personal portraiture re-emerged on a large scale after its eclipse during the Middle Ages, as the merchants redirected the arts to the task of immortalizing themselves rather than of glorifying God. The artists, too, forsook their personal anonymity and quickly developed a remarkable bravado and braggadocio, as can be seen, for example, in the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini.[14]

This increase in trade between cities and nations required a corresponding development in the mechanisms of international finance. The first great private bankers had acted as agents for the Church in Rome, to which they facilitated the payment of tithes and taxes by means of letters of credit. The fact that such methods were used by the Church itself made it much more difficult to maintain the religious strictures on merchants and usury. One great histori-

[12] R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.*

[13] Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. R. Adams (New York: Norton, 1992), 1.24.

[14] Benvenuto Cellini, *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini* (London: Phaidon, 1949).

an of usury during this period, R.H. Tawney, traces in detail the slow relaxing of the rules concerning usury under the pressure of the new economic order. According to Tawney, the accumulation of wealth during the late Middle Ages reached a critical point in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At this point it burst the narrow limits within which it had grown to that time, and then reconstituted the social and religious orders to accommodate itself.[15]

The development of trade and international finance weakened the nexus between people and the locale in which they lived. The idea of self-sufficiency as a desirable goal for a society gave way to an increasing appetite for the exotic. The limited aims of medieval government yielded to quite new ways of calculating political and economic success, of which the possibilities were continually being enlarged. As more and more people encountered products from abroad, the connection between the immediate environment and the amenities and utensils of daily life was lost, and this brought about a revision of attitudes to the natural world. To this change the discoveries of the New World were soon to make a massive contribution, not only in the natural sciences but because the wealth which flowed into Europe from the other side of the world had no immediate relation to the places which it enriched. The marriage between heaven and earth which the crafts had achieved through their transformation of natural resources immediately to hand, became less and less central to the economic arrangements of society.

It is an old belief that social institutions can be destroyed only by the corruption of those who govern them. In 1510 Martin Luther went to Rome and was appalled by the decadence which he saw there, particularly the sale of papal pardons for mortal sins. The same reforming anger which inspired Luther to attack the system of indulgences drove him on to attack other traditional accretions to the word of God in the Bible. According to Luther pilgrimages and saints' days were an excuse for idleness and should be done away with. He had a profound distrust of mendicant friars and the contemplative orders. He was a strong believer in the value of work and vocation, but these beliefs had much more to do with their moral than their spiritual value. Work had to be done because it was given

[15] R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.*

by God and because it served the community. But it was not itself a spiritual path. At best for Luther it was a means of keeping the soul from the temptations of leisure and wealth. Hard work was good for the soul as a duty and a discipline, but finally it had nothing to do with salvation. Luther's hatred for the papal traffic in salvation led, from the traditional point of view, to a dangerous overreaction. Anxious as he was to ensure that salvation ceased to be a marketable commodity, he detached it from the social world altogether and made it entirely a matter of faith.

At the first level Luther's distrust of idleness made him emphasize the value of work more than had his predecessors. We can already see in Luther that tendency to think of work as a mechanical discipline which was to play a central part in the Industrial Revolution. But from the traditional point of view Luther's notion of work was very limited. He was exclusively concerned with the physical act of labor in this world, the slavish element of work. We do not hear from Luther, nor indeed from any of the reformers, about the contemplative or free act, which must precede and accompany the realization of the idea so contemplated, in the world of time and space. We may put it simply by saying that they had not fully understood the exemplary nature of those metallurgical revelations which Moses had been shown on Mount Sinai. They underestimated or ignored the element of contemplation in the practice of the arts and crafts, paying little attention to the question of where those ideas originated of which every work of art or craft is an embodiment. Of a piece with this oversight was their destruction of the mendicant and contemplative orders, on the ground that these people did no productive work. Far from believing that contemplatives were the highest class of humanity, they refused to acknowledge them at all. They supposed instead that everyone should commune with God in the same way, without intermediaries, in the solitude of prayer. It is as though suddenly everyone was required to be a monk or a nun while still living in society. It may be claimed of this as of other forms of inflation, that it brought an apparent increase in wealth, followed by a long impoverishment.

Luther's view of work, with different emphases and some important modifications, was the view shared by almost all the reformers of the next two centuries.[16] For Calvin, for example, work had even

[16] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Ch. 3.

less to do with salvation than it had for Luther. Calvin's doctrine of predestination made salvation a gift of God, given irrevocably and without any consideration of the virtue or otherwise of the soul to which it was given. By just so much did Calvin suppose the gift of salvation to be above the human capacity to earn or deserve it. The moral life for Calvin was not a means to this immeasurable grace but a sign of it. The soul which was saved had only one goal in the world, to glorify God in every word and deed. This theory of the moral life and of work is not unlike the traditional doctrine in one respect, since there too the worker works for no advantage extrinsic to the work, but achieves a divine selflessness through his commitment to the work for its own sake. In the traditional view the fully realized worker is concerned only for the good of the work to be done. But in the traditional view the doing of the work is itself the means of achieving this selflessness, which is not predestined but won. And this selflessness is found at the very heart of the work, where the innate predisposition of the worker for that particular kind of work turns out to be a divine genius which transcends the limits of the human, but is at the same time peculiar to that kind of work and no other.

Calvin's theory of work was more like the traditional doctrine than was Luther's in this respect but it was less like it in others. In social theory Luther was conservative, with a medieval belief in the life of the peasant and a medieval distrust of trade. For Luther the vocation to a traditional kind of work was of vital significance, especially in his later writings, because it was the principal means of service to the community. The smith's work was priestly because it served the community. Luther was himself the son of a miner. In Calvin's thought the traditional vocations were by no means central. His social theory was less peasant than urban, and applied as well if not better to the life of trade as to the lives of craft and field. He was concerned with questions of fair exchange and fair profit and was prepared to engage in the complex economic considerations that these issues demanded. Though his religious vision enabled him to create a social organization at every level and on a grand scale, that organization was in theory if not in fact very different from the social system of the Middle Ages. Gone is that governing ideal of integration in which all the different functions of the social organism were predisposed by divine providence to meet the needs of the whole and to fulfill the differing talents of each. In its place was a

social order derived from and consistent with the doctrine of individual predestination, a city of the elect marked off from the rest of humanity and held together by a communal sense of this unbridgeable gulf.

In their own lifetimes the teachings of Calvin and Luther profoundly altered the societies in which they lived. They were men whose time had come, and continental Europe was instantly changed by them. Their effect on England was less immediate but when it came it was even more profound. In the meanwhile, throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, there were other tendencies in English life which ran counter to the general movement from the feudal to the mercantilist order, or at least counter to the desacralization of work. During these centuries there was an increase in the number and power of the craft guilds. These guilds conferred upon their members a strong sense of how their work was valuable of itself. Each guild was proud of the peculiar nature of its work, the special knowledge which its members shared to the exclusion of outsiders. Quite new occupations quickly developed this sense of their own mystique so that very soon after their invention printing and gun making were organized on the basis of guilds.[17]

Each of the crafts had its patron saint and its own shrine, the maintenance of which was the responsibility of the guild. The members of the guild prided themselves on their exclusive privilege of worshiping at that shrine. Each craft had its own holy days in honor of its patron saint and took part as a guild in other festivals of the Church. In many parts of England the guilds were charged with the responsibility for putting on the miracle plays, the great cycle of plays which the Church mounted annually for the edification and education of the townspeople. In the city of Chester each of twenty five such companies put on a play. Each of the guilds had its own uniform or livery, to be worn by its members on special occasions.

This practice and others are still preserved by the livery companies of the City of London. There were also the apprenticeship rituals which further developed the craftworkers' pride in the mystique of their work. We know from many sources that the

[17] E. Lipson, *Economic History of England* (London: A.C. Black, 1960-64); *Cambridge Economic History of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952).

apprentices of each craft formed a very tightly knit body which often made riot in the streets with cudgels and barricades against its rivals. Each group had its own oaths and boasts. The good natured rowdiness of the shoemakers is dramatized in Thomas Dekker's play "The Shoemakers' Holiday" which was published in 1600. The play pictures the city life of Elizabethan England though it is nominally set in the reign of Henry V. It tells the story of how the yearly feast of apprentices was established by Simon Eyre, shoemaker and lord mayor of London. It was a matter of the greatest pride to shoemakers that they should be the hosts on this occasion to all the apprentices of London. Dekker's play was the most popular comedy in London in Elizabethan times and it reveals a side of English life not found in Shakespeare.[18]

In the very nature of the case it is extremely difficult to determine how far the lore and rituals of these guilds were truly initiatic. We do not know their secrets but we cannot be sure whether this is because there were no secrets or because their secrets were jealously guarded. No doubt the "rites of passage" from the condition of layman to apprentice, from apprentice to journeyman, from journeyman to master, marked vital stages in the careers of craftworkers, in parallel to the sacraments of the Church. We have already considered the kissing of St. Barbara and the ritual leap over the leather apron of the German miners and mining engineers. But whether these rites realized for those who underwent them any substantial connections between the nature of their daily work, the cosmic creation, and the final redemption or release of the spirit, is not easily discoverable. The one case in which it is claimed that a genuine initiatic tradition has been preserved, masonry, is hotly contested. It is enough to say here that some of the claims made by masons are quite consistent with traditional understandings, for example that the human act of building is a repetition of the universal creation by the great Architect of the universe. Given the layer upon layer of symbolism concerning the crafts in scripture, myth, and folklore, it is highly probable that craftworkers made use of these symbols in their daily occupations, and developed practices to deepen their insight into them. The guild system inculcated in craftworkers a strong sense of pride in their crafts. This pride would have urged

[18] Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (London: J.M. Dent, 1926).

them to an understanding of their crafts at the deepest level. To think of one's craft as a symbol of the divine creation or of spiritual redemption is to see it in its most glorious aspect. Many guilds accompanied their members to their burial, covering their coffins in elaborate palls on which the instruments and symbols of their craft were embroidered.

We cannot know for certain how things stood in this regard in sixteenth century England. We do know that from the middle of this century the religious affiliations of the guilds were attacked and progressively destroyed by the reformers.[19] The miracle plays were suppressed, not because they had lost their popular following but by reformist zeal, reinforced by state opposition to their alleged idolatry and superstition. We have already noted Luther's opposition to the saints' days and holy days which craftworkers regarded as important privileges, since on the days dedicated to the patron saints of each of the crafts, those craftworkers celebrated at the expense of their employers. Calvin likewise attacked the practice in his *Institutes*. In England the attempt to suppress these festivals was justified in the name of industry, just as Luther had criticized them for encouraging idleness. But it is hard to resist the feeling that the reformers had more positive objections to them, that they encouraged merry making, pranks, and high spirits, and that they were superstitious. The behavior of the apprentices in London and the various attempts to control them are matters of the greatest interest throughout this period.

In the seventeenth century reformist attacks on the religious practices of the craft guilds continued. According to the Puritans there was no authority in scripture for their worship of the saints, nor for the elaborate rituals, ornaments, and vessels of the high Church. These remnants from the time before the Reformation were banned or destroyed, and with them went some of the most powerful and enduring links between religion and the crafts. At this point a distinction may be drawn between southern Germany and Puritan England, since in Germany the Lutherans retained much of the medieval decoration in their churches and have preserved it to our own time. The Lutheran mining communities in southern Germany still keep paired wooden statues of miners and angels in

[19] R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, pp. 101–102, 107.

their churches, together with screens illustrating the miners' work.[20] They have also preserved the practice of dedicating their work to the patron saints of mining.[21] Mathesius, an immediate disciple of Luther gave sixteen sermons to miners about mining, on the basis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians who were the first Christian mining community. In short, this part of Germany did not suffer from the iconoclasm which in the name of a purer religion smashed much of the finest craftwork in England. In this way we can distinguish between the Protestant and Puritan work ethics and acknowledge that the Lutherans' emphasis on traditional vocations, however much they diminished the notion, did something to preserve the connections between craft and religion. In England, however, the inspiration of the Puritan divines was Calvin, not Luther. By the time the high Church party was finally successful in 1660, the damage had been done.

There is some evidence that the Puritans themselves felt the vacuum that their iconoclasm had created, and their attempts to fill that vacuum demonstrate better than anything else the distance between the doctrines of their reformed Church and the traditional doctrine of work. Towards the end of the seventeenth century there were books published with titles such as *Navigation Spiritualized*, *Husbandry Spiritualized*, and *The Religious Weaver.*[22] But such works were hardly at all concerned with what we might expect from their titles, the exposition of how each of these crafts is symbolic of the divine creation or of spiritual redemption. They are concerned with saving their readers from the social vices attendant upon those forms of work: in the case of sailors, for example, from drunkenness, swearing, and whoring. Nonetheless their titles promise much more, a promise which would attract readers who had some understanding of what these forms of work had meant before they came under the new dispensation.

The desacralization of the crafts, on the ground that their religious practices were superstitious and idolatrous, was carried through by the reformers at the same time as they desacralized the

[20] W. Paul, *Mining Lore* (Portland, Or.: Morris Printing Co, 1970), pp. 140–141.

[21] W. Paul, *Mining Lore*, pp. 124–126.

[22] R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, pp. 242–243.

land. The conversion of Christianity into a religion of the book, and the stripping away of Catholic tradition, entailed that many of the practices which sanctified the land also had to be suppressed. Once again there was no authority for them in Christ's teaching. Almost from the beginning of the Reformation in England the processional beating of the bounds of the parish was severely modified. Up to this time the tradition had been that just before Ascension Day the priest and others would ceremonially walk all the way round the boundaries of his parish. The old ritual with banners and crosses and a large crowd of followers had thanked God for the gifts of the earth, had strengthened the parish against the incursion of evil spirits, and had reinforced the people's sense of the inviolability of titles and legal boundaries. But from the middle of the sixteenth century processions were banned and the beating of the bounds became instead a perambulation. The wayside crosses and the ritual drawing of crosses on the earth were done away with. Richard Corbet, who was Bishop of Oxford in the early seventeenth century, when Oxford was the center of high Church opposition to the Puritan movement, described the effects of such reforms in a famous poem.

> Farewell, rewards and fairies,
> Good housewives now may say,
> For now foul sluts in dairies
> Do fare as well as they.
> And though they sweep their hearths no less
> Than maids were wont to do,
> Yet who of late for cleanliness
> Finds sixpence in her shoe?
>
> At morning and at evening both
> You merry were and glad,
> So little care of sleep or sloth
> These pretty ladies had;
> When Tom came home from labor,
> Or Cis to milking rose,
> Then merrily went their tabor,
> And nimbly went their toes.
>
> Witness those rings and roundelays
> Of theirs, which yet remain,
> Were footed in Queen Mary's days

On many a grassy plain;
But since of late, Elizabeth,
And, later, James came in,
They never danced on any heath
As when the time hath been.

By which we note the fairies
Were of the old Profession.
Their songs were "Ave Mary's,"
Their dances were Procession.
But now, alas, they all are dead;
Or gone beyond the seas;
Or farther for Religion fled;
Or else they take their ease.[23]

Corbet was a sharp observer of his times and particularly of the effects of the Puritan revolution. He described in another poem how the old wooden crucifixes were used by Puritans as splints for horses' legs. This story of the fairies' departure reflected a common and widespread belief of the time, which often credited the West Country and then Ireland with being the last refuges of these dispossessed spirits of the land. As spirits of the land they had enabled the human inhabitants of a place to imagine the occult intelligence of the natural world around them, as though it were an extension of themselves or they an extension of it, all members finally of a single species. In another poem written nearly two centuries later, Wordsworth was to mourn the loss of the pagan gods of nature for just this reason.

We have already considered the dwarfs of mining folklore, the help they gave miners, and the connections which such beliefs established between miners and the ground they worked. Similarly Corbet's poem makes very clear how the fairies played a part in domestic work and the work of the farm. These spirits of place were powerful agencies in the traditional beliefs about work. They not only rewarded the scrupulous housekeeper but celebrated the industry of the laborer and the milkmaid. Being themselves very active and alert, the fairies introduced an element of playfulness into the workaday world, the same element we have seen in the feast

[23] Richard Corbet, *The Fairies' Farewell.*

days, festivals, and pageants of the craftworkers' year. Their departure typifies the novelty of the Puritan attitude to work. For the Puritan, work was not an occasion for making merry, any more than it was in itself a means of spiritual development.

Blake and Wordsworth on Work and Nature

Despite the defeat of the Puritans and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the damage which had been done to the traditional understandings of work and nature was not repaired. On these issues there seems to have been a compromise or a standoff between the forces of Cromwell's commonwealth and those of the restoration. It is fascinating to speculate on how far the loss of these traditional understandings contributed to the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions which now transformed Britain and later the world. Could the chemists of the eighteenth century have done what they did if they had supposed their material to be charged with those occult powers in which their alchemical predecessors had believed? How much more difficult would it have been to establish production line processes in English factories on such a scale if manufacture had retained the aura of the sacred? Would the English Midlands have become the black country if the fairies had remained? Might it not have been the removal of these restraints rather than capital accumulation, technological advances, or political freedom which enabled Britain to create an entirely new human order? The old doctrines of work and nature were discarded, but was this because they were no longer in step with the new economic and political circumstances? Or were these circumstances themselves the outcome of a new spiritual order? It is just on this issue that Weber and Tawney diverge, as Marx diverged from Hegel on what governs the dialectic of history.

To these issues we cannot attend here, except to point out that the decay of the traditional doctrines of work and nature played a much greater part than is generally acknowledged. The easiest way of tracing the decay of these traditional doctrines from this point to the present time is to examine the ideas of two representative authors at the turn of the nineteenth century. One of them, William Blake, made an heroic attempt to re-enact the traditional doctrine of work in his own life, but despite his personal triumph was ignored. The other, William Wordsworth, helped to establish in the

English understanding an entirely new way of regarding nature, the spirit, and the moral life. It is this way, devastatingly criticized by Blake, which has become a twentieth century norm and the source of many of the disputes about mining.

William Blake regarded himself as a prophet in the Old Testament manner and he remains, two centuries later, one of the most acute commentators on contemporary life. He matters here because he is the clearest exponent of the traditional doctrine of work since the Puritan revolution, both in his writing and in the way he lived. He is also the greatest poet of the metals and of metallurgy in the English language, as well as being an engraver on metal by profession and the inventor of an entirely original method of printing from metal plates. His poetry is characteristically complex and difficult; it is also a treasury of traditional doctrine or, as Blake called it, the wisdom of ages. One of his last and greatest works was called *Jerusalem*, that visionary city which he believed would be the final apotheosis of London where he lived.

Blake's *Jerusalem* is in four chapters, each of which begins with a sermon addressed to a particular group in the society of his time. The sermon at the beginning of the fourth and final chapter is addressed to the Christians:

> We are told to abstain from fleshly desires that we may lose no time from the Work of the Lord: Every moment lost is a moment that cannot be redeemed; every pleasure that intermingles with the duty of our station is a folly unredeemable, and is planted like the seed of a wild flower among our wheat: All the tortures of repentance are tortures of self-reproach on account of our leaving the Divine Harvest to the Enemy, the struggles of entanglement with incoherent roots. I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body and mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination, Imagination, the real and eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow, and in which we shall live in our Eternal or Imaginative Bodies when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more. The Apostles knew of no other Gospel. What were all their spiritual gifts? What is the Divine Spirit? is the Holy Ghost any other than an Intellectual Fountain? What is the Harvest of the Gospel and its Labors? What is that Talent which it is a curse to hide? What are the Treasures of Heaven which we are to lay up for ourselves, are they any other than Mental Studies and Performances? What are all the Gifts of

> the Gospel, are they not all Mental Gifts? Is God a spirit who must be worshiped in Spirit and in Truth, and are not the Gifts of the Spirit Everything to man? O ye Religious, discountenance every one among you who shall pretend to despise Art and Science! I call upon you in the Name of Jesus! What is the Life of Man but Art & Science? is it Meat and Drink? is not the Body more than Raiment? What is Mortality but the things relating to the Body which Dies? What is Immortality but the things relating to the Spirit which Lives Eternally? What is the Joy of Heaven but Improvement in the things of the Spirit? What are the Pains of Hell but Ignorance, Bodily Lust, Idleness and devastation of the things of the Spirit? Answer to yourselves and expel from among you those who pretend to despise the labors of Art and Science, which alone are the labors of the Gospel. Is not this plain and manifest to the thought? Can you think at all and not pronounce heartily That to Labor in Knowledge is to Build up Jerusalem, and to Despise Knowledge is to Despise Jerusalem and her Builders. And remember: He who despises and mocks a Mental Gift in another, calling it pride and selfishness and sin, mocks Jesus the giver of every Mental Gift, which always appear to the ignorance-loving Hypocrite as sins; but that which is a Sin in the sight of cruel Man is not so in the sight of our kind God. Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage himself openly and publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem.[24]

Elsewhere Blake wrote:

> A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect, the Man or Woman who is not one of these is no Christian.[25]

These statements set out the major tenets of the traditional doctrine of work in a way which perhaps only became possible at a time when this doctrine was obsolescent. Blake can say what he says here because the position which he expounds is already only one view among others of what work is or should be. To an extent Blake is recapitulating teachings which he had inherited. He mentions the duty of our station in a way which is reminiscent of Luther, and his talk of the real and eternal world of which this vegetable world is

[24] Blake, *Jerusalem*, pl. 77, lines 1-50.

[25] Blake, *Laocoon*, k. 776.

but a shadow is Platonic. The emphasis on mental studies and performances in connection with liberty recalls the free act of contemplation. In the traditional doctrine, but not in this passage of Blake, this is contrasted with the servile act of manufacture. In the opening lines of the sermon Blake sets out the ancient doctrine that the greatest moral evil is dissipation, the wasting of one's time and talents on idle pleasures and pursuits. This evil, it seems for Blake, is not usually a deliberate turning away from one's proper work, but an incapacity to make clear to oneself what exactly that work is. He describes this in a wonderful phrase as "the struggles of entanglement with incoherent roots."

But what of Blake's claim that according to the Gospel, art and science are the real work of the spirit? Blake feels the need to argue for this and he leads up to it carefully by referring to those passages in the New Testament which he takes to support his case, but without making it immediately clear how he intends to use them. Leaving aside the apostles for a moment, we may ask what justifies his claim that the Holy Ghost is the origin of the ideas which artists contemplate. We remember in this context the spirit of God which moved on the face of the waters in the first verses of Genesis and that same spirit with which God filled Bezaleel, Aholiab and the other craftworkers who made the tabernacle, its altars, and its vessels. But is this the spirit which descended on the disciples at Pentecost and gave them the gift of tongues? Blake believed that it was, on the ground that this divine visitation conferred the art and science of poetry on those who received it. For Blake, Jesus too was essentially a poet.

In the case of the hidden talent, there is no reason to suppose that Jesus meant what Blake and we mean by this word.[26] For Jesus it meant simply a certain weight of precious metal. But this word has come to mean what we mean by it because Jesus uses it as he does in the parable, even though it is impossible to tell what Jesus himself intended by the metaphor. As for the treasures in heaven, we would normally take these to be the moral virtues. But Blake distrusted the moral virtues, seeing in them little more than an occasion for accusing others of sin. He was always working to restore what he thought to be the intellectual power of Christianity, as

[26] Matthew 25:14-30.

opposed to its morality and its devotional practice. He writes later in *Jerusalem*:

> I care not whether a Man is Good or Evil; all that I care is
> Whether he is a Wise man or a Fool. Go, put off Holiness
> And put on Intellect.[27]

Blake lived what he wrote. Overwhelmed by the delights of the intellect and imagination he neglected all other considerations. Not for him the outward prosperity and reputation of the Puritan as the sure signs of God's grace. For Blake poverty and the stigma of madness were as nothing compared to the happiness of doing his own work for its own sake. If other people failed to appreciate that work, Blake knew that the angels in heaven were delighted by it just as he was. His output was prodigious: from childhood to the songs he sang on his deathbed he lived his seventy years in an unremitting fury of creation. There was never any money. In his later years he owned a single rusty black jacket which he never wore indoors but preserved for when he had to go out. Having no servant, he embarrassed his friends by greeting them in the street as he carried his own jug of porter back from the public house. If his poor wife Catherine told him they were penniless he would fly into a rage, so she learnt to present him with an empty plate at dinner to show him he would have to earn a commission by engraving someone else's designs.[28] His disciple, the great painter Samuel Palmer, wrote of him that he ennobled poverty and made two little rooms off the Strand more attractive than the threshold of princes.

For Blake as for the Greeks and Jews the paradigm of creative activity was metallurgy. In his poem *Milton* he represented the creation of the physical universe as the making of the mundane egg by means of anvils and furnaces.[29] We may see in this some recollection of Ptah's creating the world as an egg. In his famous poem "The Tyger" Blake wrote:

[27] Blake, *Jerusalem*, pl. 91, lines 54-56.

[28] Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake* (1880; reprint, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1973), p. 356.

[29] Blake, *Milton*.

And what shoulder and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer, what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil, what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?[30]

But though the imagery of the smithy abounded in the early work as symbolic of universal creation, it was not much elaborated. According to some scholars, a great change came over Blake's work about halfway through his career, after which the metallurgical imagery was far more potent.[31] They suggest that Blake must actually have seen a casting mill in operation, since from this point the imagery of smelting was both more specific and more widely applied. Now we hear of the glare and roar of the fire, the clatter of hammers and blowing of bellows, the clinkers, the rattling chains, the ladles carrying molten ore, the dark gleam of the ashes still burning before the iron doors of the furnace. These are the tremendous images which Blake now used to illuminate the processes of the imagination and of the human body.

The protagonist in Blake's highly original mythology of creation is Los, whose name is probably an anagram of the Latin word for the sun, and who represents the divine imagination. He is the intellectual sun who creates the worlds of space and time and also the worlds of the imagination. Almost always he accomplishes this work by forge and furnace, and we must ask why Blake conceived of his own creative work as a poet and painter in these images. Partly it has to do with energy, which Blake often compared to the fires of hell and which he always imagined as burning. He may also have thought of his poems and designs as unbreakable, so well composed that the bonds which bound each of them in its integrity were as strong or stronger than iron or steel. Certainly they have endured. Then again, despite what has just been said, Blake was a tireless

[30] Blake, "The Tyger," *The Songs of Experience.*

[31] S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973).

reviser of his longer works, recasting the patterns and contexts of the various passages which comprised them. Though many of the same passages appear again and again in these works, their relations to each other are changed. This process Blake seems to have thought of as a refinement, as Los throws back the earlier work into the furnace that it may emerge purified and be formed anew.

But the work of Los does not end with the creations of the poet and the painter. His metallurgical labors are also the processes of the human body.

> In Bowlahoola Los' Anvils stand and his Furnaces rage;
> Thundering the Hammers beat and the Bellows blow loud,
> Living, self moving, mourning, lamenting, and howling incessantly.
> Bowlahoola thro'all its porches feels, tho' too fast founded
> Its pillars and porticoes to tremble at the force
> Of mortal or immortal arm; and softly lulling flutes,
> Accordant with the horrid labors, make sweet melody.
> The Bellows are the Animal Lungs; the Hammers the Animal Heart:
> The Furnaces the Stomach for digestion: terrible their fury.
> Thousands and thousands labor, thousands play on instruments
> Stringed or fluted to ameliorate the sorrows of slavery.
> Loud sport the dancers in the dance of death, rejoicing in carnage.
> The hard dentant Hammers are lull'd by the flutes' lula lula,
> The bellowing Furnaces blare by the long sounding clarion,
> The double drum drowns, howls and groans, the shrill fife shrieks and cries.
> The crooked horn mellows the hoarse raving serpent, terrible but harmonious:
> Bowlahoola is the Stomach in every individual man.[32]

This fantastic evocation of the animal organism shows how Blake conceived of the natural world. It is a continuous and infinite miracle in which the tiniest particles, the minute particulars, are organized in accordance with the will of divine powers. More than anyone else, Blake seems to have found his way to the threshold of creation where he could observe the making of thoughts and things in the realm of the invisible. In the ameliorating of the painful processes of the body by music, there is perhaps a prevision of the

[32] Blake, *Milton*, p1. 24, lines 51-67.

physiological theory that the pain occasioned by these organic processes is moderated by anesthetic secretions of the glands.

It is always a shock to turn from the fury of Blake to the passivity of Wordsworth. The two men were contemporary for nearly sixty years, each knew the other's poems, they are both regarded as Romantics, and yet in their understandings of work and nature it would be hard to find two thinkers less alike. Blake at least was aware of the gulf which separated them. For Blake the natural world, the world of space and time, was the arena of the earthly struggles which he fought against himself and against others till he died. Through the work of his hands he engaged with that world as thoroughly as anyone could, and he believed in his work as the proper means to his salvation according to the way he interpreted the teachings of Christ and the Bible. And yet at the deepest level he abhorred the material world as a constant hindrance to his vision. In his own words, it was no more than the dirt on his feet; he looked through the eye, not with it. Wordsworth, on the other hand, regarded the world of the countryside as his teacher and moral guardian. A man of the middle classes and sustained throughout his life by sinecures and bequests, he worshiped the natural world with a fervor which Blake considered idolatrous.[33]

For all the achievement of his early years Wordsworth seems to have known little of work, even of his own. He had doubts about whether his art would earn him a livelihood and he was uncomfortably aware that such a career might begin happily enough but often ended in disaster. He does not appear to have considered himself a poet born, with a destiny to fulfill. He was on occasion very doubtful of the value of books compared to the direct influence of nature. He lacked a sense of himself as a poet and this probably helped his readers to identify themselves with him. He was a man speaking to men, one who had divested himself of all the poetic artifice of the past in order to speak everyone's language. Wordsworth claimed nothing special for himself, no peculiar gift or talent, only that heightened sensibility which elevates anyone who has it in whatever walk of life. He presented himself as a person in no way distinguishable from his fellows by any predisposition for a particular kind of work. But if the moral life did not consist for Wordsworth in

[33] Blake, *Annotations to Poems by William Wordsworth.*

the doing of one's own work to the best of one's ability, in what did it consist? Instead he wrote of,

> that best portion of a good man's life,
> His little, nameless, unremembered acts
> Of kindness and of love.[34]

There is nothing to be said against little acts of kindness and love. But to claim that these constitute the best portion of a moral life is, in my view, staggeringly wrong. When we attempt to measure the distance between this claim and the spiritual ideal of work which Blake sets out in his sermon to the Christians, we realize that we are in two different worlds.

Wordsworth believed that merely to have lived among the works of nature in the country had called forth and strengthened his powers of imagination in boyhood and youth. In this way, according to Wordsworth, the external world sustained inward vision. That his inward vision was very powerful in his early years we cannot doubt.[35] He described later in life how he had found it almost impossible to believe in the external reality of the world, and many times on his way to school had had to grasp hold of things to convince himself that they were not the projections of his own mind. He called the vertigo which this feeling induced in him "the abyss of idealism." In one of his poems he described how a visitor to a waterfall had to distract his own mind by mathematical calculations, so deeply was he affected by what he was seeing. In this visitor we may catch a glimpse of Wordsworth himself. At the first level, then, Wordsworth had visionary capacities quite as great as those of Blake, but where Blake gladly committed himself to them, even at the cost of seeming mad to those around him, Wordsworth feared them.

As a result there is little in Wordsworth's poetry which is truly visionary, nor did he investigate the source of his ideas in the way that Blake did. Instead he created for himself a dependency upon the forms of the natural world, which at once evoked and curbed his visionary powers. He remained aware that much of what he had seen in his early years he had himself envisioned, and his greatest

[34] Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," line 34.

[35] Thomas de Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

poems detail the gradual closing of these visionary springs which had transformed, as he believed, the world of his childhood. But he was incapable of creating entirely from within himself as Blake could. His poems were typically the product of meditations in which he recollected past experiences in tranquility. The daffodils which he once saw are brought to life in his mind as he lies upon his couch, but they are those daffodils by that shore.[36] Blake's tiger, on the other hand, is all tigers and none of them, the veritable first tiger which God himself made. When Blake read in a copy of Wordsworth's poems Wordsworth's claim that natural objects strengthened his imagination, he wrote in the margin that natural objects always had and still did weaken, deaden, and obliterate his own imagination. Wordsworth, he adds, must know that what he writes valuable is not to be found in nature.[37]

Wordsworth's belief that natural objects strengthened the imagination is the simplest and most plausible explanation of his failure as a poet in middle age. Where Blake continued to design and write with genius to the end of his long life, Wordsworth lost his gift. He died at the age of eighty, having produced little of note during the latter half of his life. The source of Wordsworth's power as a visionary poet lay in his capacity to remember the inner events and experiences of his childhood. This was a finite stock and in any case further and further from him as he grew older. For Blake, on the other hand, the source of creation was imagination, not memory, and the ideas upon which he drew were infinite and inexhaustible. Wordsworth alone among the Romantic poets did not know his way to these waters of life in which the poetic genius is continually renewed. And so he could have no understanding of the traditional doctrine of work, in which the invisible ideas of what is to be done or made are central. Wordsworth's flight into nature and away from vision disabled him morally and in the spirit to an unusual degree. This same flight into nature is one of the great spiritual problems of our own time.

For there can be no doubt that the Wordsworthian view has triumphed. His is the moral order in which we now live, where the doing of one's work is of little or no moral significance, while kind-

[36] Wordsworth, "Daffodils."

[37] Blake, *Annotations to Poems by William Wordsworth.*

ness is all. This is the victory of niceness, for which all other moral values have been discarded and the high spiritual aspirations of previous generations forgotten. It is hard not to believe that Blake was thinking of Wordsworth when he wrote:

> He smiles with condescension, he talks of Benevolence and Virtue,
> And those who act with Benevolence and Virtue they murder time
> on time.
> These are the destroyers of Jerusalem, these are the murderers
> Of Jesus, who deny the Faith and mock at Eternal Life,
> Who pretend to Poetry that they may destroy Imagination
> By imitation of Nature's Images drawn from Remembrance.[38]

Such people are the destroyers of Jerusalem because Jerusalem, as Blake explained in his sermon, is the spiritual city which is built by the labors of inspired artists. We can appreciate why Blake should consider benevolent people to be murderers only when we set this new morality against the traditional doctrine of work. In Blake's view benevolence had usurped the place of art.

The shift in attitudes to which these lines of Blake point is, of all historical changes, the one most relevant to the place of mining in contemporary society. This shift is the culmination of those departures from the traditional doctrine of work which we have traced through the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Puritan revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But what distinguishes the Wordsworthian morality from those which preceded it, is that it was almost entirely secular. For Wordsworth the most important part of the moral life was not the realization of the divine within us, as the traditional doctrine of work proposed, nor even the glorification of God as the Puritans believed. At best there was the possibility of perceiving the divine through the contemplation of natural objects. But this was idolatrous, as Blake saw, when it turned into the worship of nature as divine in itself. Nonetheless there can be no question but that the time for this new morality had come. The Wordsworthian view was already the standard view or became so very quickly, and was to be found in the other most widely read moralist in the English language in the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens. For Dickens, too, kindness was all, and work had almost no part in the moral order.

[38] Blake, *Milton*, pl. 41, lines 19-24.

We are now in a position to see all the way around the Wordsworthian conception of nature, and to appreciate it fully. This conception of nature is so deeply a part of our thinking that it takes an act of violence to that thinking to free us from it long enough to look at it. Essentially, the Wordsworthian nature is pure spectacle: it is perceived by the eye and the ear but it is not touched. We are cut off from it as by a screen, and even the peasants who stand on the other side of the screen, though they may sing, hardly ever work. The rustic is superior to the citizen, but not because he is engaged in work which employs his intellect as well as his body, while his counterpart in the city has been transformed by the factory system into a mere hand. The rustic is superior because his passions are incorporated with the great and permanent forms of nature and because he is, like the poet, more sensitive to the simple beauties around him. He too is a spectator, and the irony is that he should have seemed so to a poet and a nation which inhabited one of the most highly cultivated landscapes in the world.

Wordsworth's views of nature and of the moral life were sentimental. They were the views of a class which had already forgotten how the wealth on which it lived had been produced, and how traditional forms of work had sustained the spirit of those who engaged in them. This is not to say that anyone who respects nature is soft in the head. Blake, too, passionately denounced cruelty to animals and the wanton destruction of the natural world. But Blake also wrote:

> The cut worm forgives the plough.[39]

More particularly Blake did what he could to resist the new productive processes which displaced the traditional forms of work. This for Blake was where the evil lay. For Wordsworth it was the city which was evil because it was noisy, dirty, and crowded, and because it was cut off from the great and permanent forms of nature. The city grated on Wordsworth's sensibility which had been most delicately attuned to the beauties of natural objects. On the one occasion in which he was tricked out of his fear by the city's beauty at dawn, his very amazement shows how settled was his conviction of

[39] Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 7, line 6.

its evil. Blake lived in the middle of London almost all his life, sustained entirely by the beauties of his own imagination and by his belief in the value of his work, despite his own stark vision of the city's horror.

But Blake was a man unknown. In his later years as he composed his prophetic books, he was far outside the intellectual world of his time. These were the years of deepening neglect as his first biographer called them. Meanwhile Wordsworth's star was in the ascendant. Common enough before he wrote, his view of nature was more and more widely accepted during these years. It is no coincidence that the English came to believe in the value of untouched nature at the very same time as new means of production were being introduced which ravaged the natural world to an unprecedented degree. In one important respect these events were complementary, not antithetical. As the traditional views of work and nature were lost, so the new modes of production and the Wordsworthian view of nature appeared. From then on, it looked as though the belief in untouched nature was a reaction to the devastation, but in fact, historically and psychologically, it was just another aspect of the same loss. To think of untouched nature as perfect is, from the traditional point of view, as mistaken as to think of it as an expendable resource. Nature is neither a goddess to be worshiped from a distance, nor a whore to be used up and dismissed. Nature is the wife of the human genius: together they are to produce their manifold creations to the simultaneous fulfillment of both.

Neither the love of nature nor the pastoral tradition began with Wordsworth. Poets have been idealizing country life and ignoring the work of the peasant since the times of Theocritus and Virgil. But they were very different from Wordsworth. It is instructive in this connection to juxtapose how Queen Marie Antoinette played at being a shepherdess and the high moral tone of the Wordsworthian pastoral just a few years later. Before Wordsworth the pastoral tradition had existed side by side with deeper moral and spiritual codes, with the transcendent God of theology and with the traditional doctrine of work. But at this time, as Blake saw, the new morality of nature and kindness began to displace these older teachings entirely. It replaced them with a divinized, untouchable nature and an unfocussed benevolence.