A Post-modern Emissary:
moving forward from McGilchrist

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Many readers will have read Iain McGilchrist's book, or at least the two articles printed in the Review. Here Chris Clarke identifies two gaps in his analysis and proposes his own way forward.

The Polarity of Being Human

Many members of the SMN will by now be familiar with Iain McGilchrist's analysis. In *The Master and his Emissary*[1], of the functions of the two hemispheres of our brain, which constitute two different views of the world. While this important work is indeed groundbreaking, I will argue that it is also gravely limited. McGilchrist is prevented from seeing the way forward by two obstacles. First, he identifies so closely with Western academic culture that he neglects the roles of other cultural strands vital to us at this juncture. Second, he similarly neglects the role of spirituality as it acts at the interpersonal and group level.

To summarise the key theme of the book: in the light of his analysis of the brain hemispheres, McGilchrist argues that the successive phases of Western culture, from the 6th century BCE to the present, 'represent a power struggle between these two ways of experiencing the world, and that we have ended up prisoners of just one – that of the left hemisphere alone.' He presents this through the metaphorical story of a ruler (the Master, the meaning-making right hemisphere) and his delegate (the Emissary, the analytic left hemisphere) in which the Emissary, despite his inferior wisdom and knowledge, usurps his Master and takes control of the kingdom. The chilling result is that we may be on the verge of a crisis in which

the emissary, insightless as ever, appears to believe it can see everything, do everything, alone. But it cannot: on its own it is like a zombie, a sleepwalker ambling straight towards the abyss, whistling a happy tune[2].

In this article I will first expand on this idea that our thinking is made up of two different parts, which give us two different worlds. Then in subsequent sections I will argue that we humans can avoid this 'abyss' if we take to heart those practices and skills which, alongside mainstream Western culture, offer us here and now a way of life that restores the balance between the two worlds of our thinking.

The idea that there is some sort of polarity in the human mind, a dynamical balance between two principles, has often been proposed in many forms. The most familiar is the division between the unconscious and conscious mind developed by Freud, but many other polarities have been proposed since then. In particular, the 'interacting cognitive subsystems' model (ICS) of John Teasdale and Phillip Barnard[3] uses data from experimental psychology to support a scheme that includes and refines many previous ones. I will describe it here because it forms a complementary 'functional' counterpart to the 'anatomical' formulation of McGilchrist, with a striking degree of correspondence between the two. Each sheds light on the other.

According to Teasdale and Barnard we are governed, at the top level of our mental organisation, by two distinct meaning-making 'interacting cognitive subsystems', both of which contribute, in part, to our consciousness. One (the 'implicational' subsystem) is concerned with the significance for the self of its overall context, drawing immediately of our sensations. It deals with what *concerns* us, including monitoring threats and opportunities, and with relationships, in the sense of our meaningful connections with other beings and within ourselves. The other (the 'propositional' subsystem) is concerned with analysis and with the thinking that is associated with speech; that is, thinking in 'propositions'. It has no direct contact with the senses, but relies on other subsystems, including the implicational, for information derived from the senses.

There are some differences between this model and McGilchrist's, such as the way they describe our handling of time, but the two approaches seem to be addressing the same basic polarity of the mind. In what follows, therefore, I shall use the terminology of 'hemispheres' while at times drawing on cognitive subsystems theory to enlarge on McGilchrist's model, and in particular on the development of it by Isabel Clarke in the context of psychosis and spirituality[4] to which I will return in the final section.

The Question of Culture

Human beings are distinguished by cultures*:* our highly elaborated systems of doing and thinking which operate in addition to, and in two-way interaction with, our genetic makeup. (McGilchrist provides an impressively careful analysis of this cultural-genetic interaction in Chapter 7.) Cultures vary with time and place, and different cultures can coexist in the same time and place with only limited interaction, much as different species of finches can coexist despite the biological possibility of hybridisation. McGilchrist is concerned with just one of these cultures, which has expanded so as to dominate the whole world even up to the point of altering its climate, namely Western Culture. In his conception, it emerged and flowered with the free citizenry of the Greek city-states*,* entered the period of the Roman empire

and the Western Church where there was an increasing breakdown of communication between our hemispheres, recovered in the Renaissance, acquired the seeds of disaster in the enlightenment and then descended with only minor respites into the pits of post-modernism and scientism. I would add the reminder that for most of this time Western culture was manifested in only a small minority of human beings, even in the geographical areas where it was present, though its material influence became increasingly dominant.

The crucial final step in this history is the abyss of my opening quotation, caused by a self-locking phenomenon which might, according to McGilchrist, make our current dysfunctionality irretrievable. The argument is as follows.

First, McGilchrist shows that the flourishing of our lives depends on the immediate holistic relational grasp of the world that comes from the right hemisphere.

> The right hemisphere pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation. It is deeply attracted to, and given life by, the relationship, the betweenness, that exists with this Other. By contrast, the left hemisphere pays attention to the virtual world that it has created, which is self-consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other, making it powerful, but ultimately only able to operate on, and to know, itself.[1, p. 93]

Next, we apply this to the present situation. The majority of the world's population now lives in cities, and in these the physical environment is almost completely human-created. Moreover, it is created through a culture dominated by the operations of the left-hemisphere. So the physical environment reflects the restricted perception of the left hemisphere. When the right hemisphere reaches out, seeking the Other in this situation, it does so through a mental and physical environment that reflects only the left-hemispheric self-image. So it may now be 'impossible for the right hemisphere to escape from the hall of mirrors, to reach out to something that truly was Other than, beyond, the human mind.' Cast adrift with no living, vital awareness of our situation, we act chaotically in a way that leads us into yet further alienation from the world beyond our own creation, leading us to increase yet further the barriers separating us from it.

I think we need first to grasp the alarming extent to which this analysis is correct, but then to go beyond it in order to see where hope lies for restoring the wholeness of being human: namely in the nature of cultures other than Western culture, but developing alongside it. The lethal self-locking way of doing and thinking represented by Western culture may be dominant, but it is not the only culture, even among genetically Western people in Western countries. Many alternatives to this dominant culture can be recognised, constituting one part of what Michel Foucault called 'subjugated knowledges:'

> a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges … that are below the required level of erudition and scientificity … the knowledge of the psychiatrized, the patient, the nurse … of the delinquent … a particular knowledge that is local, regional, or differential'[5, p. 7.]

June Boyce-Tillman[6] called these instances 'subjugated ways of knowing'. They vary in extent from individual voices raised in their own particularity, to movements and groups such as feminists and ecological communities which, through their sharing and propagating of ideas and ways of acting, constitute cultures, as I am using the term here. Moreover, these are not just a variety of cultures in addition to Western

culture; they constitute cultures antithetical to Western culture, in that Western culture is dominated by the left hemisphere and subjugated cultures maintain a balance with the right hemisphere.

Since the right hemisphere is concerned with the particularity of the individual, and the left with generic conceptual classes, the subjugated cultures are necessarily varied, pluralistic. There is no such thing as 'non-Western culture', only 'non-Western cultures'. And herein lies the hope: the hope not for a counterweight that can overthrow the current Western culture, but for a variety of openings in McGilchrist's 'wall of mirrors' that otherwise bars off the possibility of our reclaiming our right hemisphere. To reach this, however, we must deal with a much derided term …

Post-modernism

The notion that the antithesis to Western culture might be something essentially pluralistic moves us into the domain of post-modernism (with which Foucault, quoted above, is often associated). Here I find myself at variance with McGilchrist. He is scathing about post-modernism, whose art, he proclaims, 'becomes a game in which the emptiness of a wholly insubstantial world, in which there is nothing beyond the set of terms we have used in vain to construct meaning, is allowed to speak for its own vacuity.' McGilchrist is a lover of Western culture as it was in its prime, when it successfully combined the logical precision of which the left hemisphere was capable with the ability of the right hemisphere to relate to the presences of the particular. In our present situation, however, we need the aid of those forces antithetical to our current left-hemispheric Western culture, and we find them lumped together with some strange bedfellows under the term 'post-modern'. Some other cultures in this category may not embrace McGilchrist's 'Other' at all; they may reject rationality (as it used to be), or compassion; or they may hold that 'anything goes'. We may well ask, do we really have to get mixed up with these?

So we need to tread carefully. We find ourselves at a fork in the road of history, a place where 'three roads meet' – as in the account of the journey of Oedipus, where at a dividing of the road he unknowingly slew his father and so caused a barren desolation of plague to fall upon the people of Thebes. For us now, there is behind us the road from the past, from the unitary culture of the classical world and the renaissance, while to the future lie the two roads of either an empty rejection of anything beyond our own fancies, or a creative engagement within a plurality of ways of knowing. McGilchrist's argument, that by transforming our environment we have disabled the right hemisphere, indicates that there may be no way back along the road from which we have come.

The writer Jacques Derrida, an initiator of the 'deconstruction' school of post-modernism, occupies a defining place at this junction. In many ways he fits McGilchrist's image of left-hemisphere dominance, sometimes approaching the autistic spectrum. He brings forward comprehensive arguments against the supposition that words denote real things or that our verbal accounts can be grounded in absolute real presences. We should note carefully what is being said here: Derrida is not saying that there is nothing out there, or that there is no presencing as it is perceived by the right hemisphere. Rather, he is denying that there are things out there which are both real presences and graspable by language, and he is unfolding the implications of this for our language-based culture. If our

words have no solid ground in reality, then what is to become of the classical concepts of logic and truth? His work was devoted to systematically showing how this approach undermined (deconstructed) the presuppositions of our writings, thus burning the boats that we might naively suppose could achieve a return to the past. This is in some ways a deeper reason for there being no going back, because a return to our past ways of thinking would, in the light of this, be fundamentally inauthentic. George Steiner, after a careful and sympathetic analysis of Derrida in his book supporting Real Presences[8], agreed that *On its own terms and planes of argument ... the challenge of deconstruction does seem to me irrefutable* (his emphasis), and he stressed that in order to go forward we must first be brought to look into the void that remained after the deconstruction of language; otherwise our going forward would remain a sham.

Yet Derrida did not rest at this point. His writings remind me of a tiger constantly pacing round the walls of its enclosure, the boundary of language, seeking, if not a way out, at least a glimpse of something beyond. He points to this in an essay[9] based on a talk given at a conference in 1986 in Jerusalem (the city held sacred by three major religions) entitled 'Languages of the Unsayable'. In opening his lecture, he confessed that "Even before starting to prepare this lecture, ... I knew that I *would have to* do this in Jerusalem. 'This then opened up the topics of obligation and negative theology (theology based on denying any knowledge of the divine), both of which started in language but then went beyond it. He sets out the postulate that an intentional *not-saying*, as in the case of, for example 'a secret' or 'a prayer' which speaks not *of* but *to* the Other, can be a more authentic move than *saying*.

An important role in Derrida's essay is played by Plato, someone whose inner contradictions are eerily reminiscent of those of Derrida, and evocative of our current dilemma. On one hand we have the authoritarian Plato of the *Republic,* castigated by McGilchrist as a strongly left-hemisphere character. On the other hand we have the Plato of the *Symposium* where appeal is made to the woman's wisdom of the seer Diotima, of the *Phaedrus* in which Socrates is depicted as veiling his face in order to engage in a discourse on love, or, as in this essay by Derrida, of the *Timaeus* where Plato struggles to speak the unspeakable in presenting the concept of *chora* (literally, 'place') as something 'apprehended without the help of sense, by a kind of spurious reason, and is hardly real; which we beholding as in a dream ...' *Chora* is a state of absence, of a significant absence that enables form to become present, and Derrida takes this as one model of the way in which a negation can lead to a positive understanding. He then develops this further by examining the sayings of the 'negative theologian' (i.e. apophatic theologian) pseudo-Dionysius. We have here in the detailed reasoning of Derrida a transformation of the nature of (left hemisphere) rationality that enables humanity to go forward to an authentic linking of this rationality with the (right hemisphere) experiential wisdom of subjugated ways of knowing.

Spirituality

Like Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus,* with its renowned ending 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', Derrida in the holy city of Jerusalem points to spirituality (Wittgenstein's 'mysticism') as a way beyond. But whereas Wittgenstein in his later work develops a more fluid use of language, Derrida's limit to the bounds of language remains absolute.

By 'spirituality' here I mean the corpus of know-how passed on through a particular culture that enables its members to engage deliberately and systematically in relationship with the Other via the knowing of the right hemisphere. McGilchrist says little about this, perhaps because spirituality (as opposed to theology) has not played a conspicuous part in the dominant Western culture on which he concentrates. A succession of authors have, on the other hand, explored the similarities and differences between the way Derrida points to spirituality and the way religious teaching points to it, particularly with reference to Nagarjuna's approach to Buddhism[10]. Though the similarities between Derrida's ideas and spirituality are important, so is the difference: it is that the Buddhist and the Christian contemplatives have already made a commitment to engagement with a religious tradition, with its inherited spiritual know-how (even when they go on to revolutionise or subvert this tradition). Derrida seems to have felt a pull towards religion, but it was not a committed engagement. Following the work of Jennifer Crawford, I will argue that it is this dimension of engagement, with its implication of relationship, that allows us to move forward from the hall of mirrors feared by McGilchrist and from the void into which we are plunged by Derrida.

Crawford[11] describes how, when confronted with Derrida's absolute limit to the sayable, we have two alternatives. The first is to simply return to games with connections between words and stories that are thought to be devoid of meaning. 'The second,' she continues, 'is more radical. It involves stepping beyond the limitations of language into the nondiscursive domain that till now, within the Western tradition, has been consigned to the realm of spirituality.' (p. 49) The concept of 'stepping beyond' Derrida's 'limit' corresponds to Isabel Clarke's adoption[4], within the ICS model, of the term 'transliminal' ('beyond the boundary') for this domain, which she shows is the territory not only of spirituality but also of psychosis.

Crawford then goes on to describe how this strategy of stepping beyond has given rise to a wide range of distinct engaged paths within the post-modern movement. It is a strategy based on restoring communication between the left and right hemispheres within the individual. The academic, for example, will not draw an end to her job at the limit of the sayable, any more than a novelist would regard the encounter with mystery as irrelevant to his craft. But to restore this communication between hemispheres in the post-modern age requires a transformation both of rationality (both-and thinking) and of spirituality. Engagement is the key to both.

Engagement consists of a committed attention to one's path. For Crawford the stance involved in stepping beyond the limit defined by Derrida (and beyond the exclusive use of the left hemisphere) is called by her 'attentive love" (p. 51); for the scientist it is more like attentive fascination; and for the political leader (we might hope) attentive action. They have in common the factor of 'attentiveness to the other as Other.' Each stepping beyond the left hemisphere subsequently generates a revised left hemisphere discourse that helps us navigate with greater precision. This process is described by McGilchrist in terms of the right hemisphere passing its insight back to the left hemisphere. The difference from McGilchrist, however, is that, because there is no graspable absolute, no final 'meta-narrative' (in post-modern terminology), the discourses generated will and should be different for each culture. The activity of theology/prayer in spirituality and the activity of theory/practice in science will have their own discourses in

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their respective cultures, and even sometimes within the same person. This is why we have to deal with an essential plurality of cultures.

In a situation of multiple interweaving cultures, the left hemisphere is required to adopt a new logic in order to grasp what is disclosed by the right hemisphere. What Crawford refers to as Other is not an absolute entity as it would be for a unitary culture, giving rise to a single meta-narrative and classical logic. The Other is more like Plato's *chora,* as described by Derrida, manifesting as a quality of object-less relationship. There is a 'real presencing' within each experience beyond the limit, but not an object, no finite real presence of the sort expected by the old rationality. The commitment required in order to take this path effectively and safely is commitment to a practice, a body of know-how, whether it is that of a spiritual tradition, a scientific training, or the uncodified knowledge of living that grows up in a stable and coherent society. What gives this spirituality its strength is that it operates at the inter-personal level, within a culture, as well as at a trans-personal level: my neighbour is also the Other, in Crawford's sense. This is possible because of the nature of right-hemisphere knowing, rooted in relationship.

What makes this more than a pipe dream is the fact that many forms of this engaged knowing are already amongst us, as documented in[7]. They are subjugated, but rapidly finding their strength and voice. The high dyke of modernist left-hemisphere domination has not crumbled, but these ways of knowing are boring the holes that will undermine it.

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