

## *The Dream of Scipio* and the Psychology of Gnosticism

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In *The Dream of Scipio*, Iain Pears's recent novel set in Provence, ideas play a significant role. More precisely, the novel shows how a person's philosophy or religion plays an important part in his or her decisions about what to do and what not to do. Furthermore, this novel contains cases in which a person's world-view is altered by a teacher, or by a written text – or, in the heat of the moment, by an existential life-experience. Finally, the novel suggests that crucial actions by an individual, which proceed from their world-view, can have important effects on subsequent history.

One force which drives this novel is a teacher, or guru, named Sophia. She is the daughter and disciple of a philosopher trained in Alexandria in the fifth century CE; they have migrated to Provence to escape persecution. Sophia's main pupil is a Roman aristocrat and landowner, who is trying to find a way to protect his lands, and the heritage of Roman civilization, from the threat of barbarian invasion. Early in the book it is implied that Manlius, the Roman aristocrat, is successful in preserving elements of his civilization because he has learned important lessons from Sophia's teachings. In this book philosophy is shown to have concrete, and significant, results.

The title of the book is the same as the title of a treatise which Manlius writes, encapsulating the essence of Sophia's teachings. This treatise disappears for nine hundred years, and is recovered by a young poet and scholar in the fourteenth century, who lives in Avignon. Olivier, the young poet, struggles to understand Manlius's writings, and they influence him in his betrayal of his patron in the church hierarchy. This has the result of blocking his patron's scheme to move the papacy back to Rome.

In the third plot of the novel (these three plots run simultaneously, with the author cutting back and forth between them), a young French historian is working on Manlius's treatise, trying to understand how Manlius's outlook, which he learned from Sophia, helped him succeed in preserving Roman civilization in a part of the empire overrun by barbarians. But the treatise also affects the historian himself, who finds himself in a position similar to that of Manlius. The year is 1942, and he is trying to preserve aspects of French civilization, in spite of the fact that the country is being occupied by the German army.

This paper addresses three related questions. What are the key elements of Sophia's philosophy (or religion)? What do her metaphysical beliefs indicate about her psychology and her background? Thirdly, in what way does her philosophy create effects in the later parts of the novel? The unity of the novel might be said to turn on this link between the three plots: a treatise is written in the first plot, it surfaces in the second, and is reinterpreted in the third. It has effects in all three plots.

To deal with the first question, Sophia's philosophy seems to be a combination of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. Her main principles are the following:

1. The soul and the body are distinct and separable. The soul is eternal, and comes from some heavenly place. It "dies" when it falls to earth and enters the corruption of the body. The body is like a prison cell, and only those who have the strength of mind to dedicate themselves to escaping the body can achieve virtue and understanding.
2. The divine is "not only beyond words but beyond meaning; only the process of thought could give an approximation of it" (155).
3. Physical desire of one person for another is an analog of the soul's desire to return to the divine, and a virtuous person will resist physical attraction, and focus on the spiritual.
4. "A good act without understanding is not virtue" (240). Virtue and understanding are the same. When understanding has been achieved, "the soul can take wing" and, after death, be liberated from reincarnation (269).
5. The correct purpose of political action is to allow philosophy to continue to exist, because

without philosophy, human beings will not have access to spiritual reality, and will live like beasts. So civil society needs to be maintained, because the transmission of philosophical ideas depends on it.

In the 1930s, the French historian (whose name is Julien Barneuve) realizes that Sophia's philosophy was at odds with Christian orthodoxy.

At every level, the Bishop of Vaison, Saint Manlius, launches attack after attack on Christianity, contradicting it at every turn. The soul is general, not individual; eternal, not specific in time. The body is a prison, not something meriting resurrection. Faith is corruption, Hope is deception, Charity illusion; all must be surpassed. (269)

Sophia's philosophy is remarkably close to Gnostic beliefs. One anchor of Gnosticism is the doctrine that the world is inherently corrupt and prone to produce suffering, because it was created not by the supreme god, but by an inferior, incompetent god who was in rebellion against the godhead.

What is the psychological reality that is implied by these metaphysical beliefs? Freud gives an example of how to answer this question in *The Future of an Illusion*. In that book he provides a psychological explanation of how and why human beings invented the idea that the world was controlled by a loving God. He essentially said that a child, faced with fear at the insecurity of life, and surrounded by mysteries, manages that fear by relying on, obeying, and placating his father – that is, he turns his father into a god. The adult consciously or unconsciously recognizes that he is in a similar position when faced with overwhelming natural forces and the prospect of illness and death, and engages in a similar process: he invents a heavenly father and tries to foster a good relation with him. Piety and obedience will, he imagines, bring a heavenly reward, if not an earthly one.

Freud's explanation of Christian beliefs in terms of the experience of the infant and child provides a pattern for understanding what kind of human experience may lie behind doctrines such as Sophia's. The Gnostic expectation of suffering in our physical bodies might be the result of an early childhood experience of extreme or repeated trauma. (Sophia says that we are

imprisoned in our bodies as a man is imprisoned in a cell; salvation depends on wanting to escape.) It is easy to imagine that childhood could be horrible at any time in history, and the late classical era is no exception. Sophia's belief that it is possible for the soul to rejoin the divine, like a drop of water returning to the ocean, suggests a period in infant experience in which there is a complete identification with the mother. (The Christian emphasis on the resurrection of the physical body reflects a later period of development, when the child is more aware of his or her own boundaries.) Finally, the idea that an individual can, through hard intellectual work, redeem himself and escape from his prison, reflects a kind of optimism which might exist in an individual in spite of repeated childhood trauma. (This belief in an ability to raise oneself by one's own bootstraps, so to speak, was a common element in some early Christian sects, which were effectively suppressed by the Catholic church. The Thomasines, an early Christian group, maintained that we are all divine, like Jesus, and that we can draw on the divinity within us. We are not dependent on external help, or on the sacrifice of Jesus. Gnosticism promoted a similar kind of self-reliance.)

Freud said that Christianity is esteemed because the fantasy (or illusion) which it presents answers a fundamental human need, the need for security. We could then ask, what human needs might Sophia's beliefs respond to? They could seem attractive because they allow their adherents to feel they can be part of an intellectual elite, and the beliefs also explain quite simply why there is so much suffering in the world: it was made by an incompetent god, not by the supreme divinity. (It is a perennial problem in Christian accounts of the world to explain how a supremely good god could be responsible for so much suffering – in families, in politics, in wars, and in the physical world.) Sophia's beliefs also support the hope that a person can improve his or her position.

The third question which Freud asked about Christianity in *The Future of an Illusion* was, what is the real worth of its central doctrine concerning the nature of God? His answer was that it was an illusion; it was not absolutely impossible, but very unlikely. It was accepted by Christians because of their enormous unconscious need for security. No doubt he would have

said that Gnosticism was also an illusion, though one which satisfied different unconscious needs, such as the desire to feel superior, or to merge with an overwhelming “other.”

I would now like to turn to a question which would arise in formalist criticism of this novel. How is the novel unified? Is there some issue, theme, or aspect of the novel which holds it together? One possibility is that the novel’s unity lies in Sophia’s teachings, and how they play out in the three parts of the novel. In the second plot, set during the Avignon papacy in the fourteenth century, a young poet, in the employ of a powerful cardinal, discovers Manlius’s manuscript, and is fascinated by it. Although he knows the author is a Christian saint, he recognizes that many of the statements in “The Dream of Scipio” are heretical, and he discovers that they are quite similar to Cathar beliefs. (The Cathar or Albigensian heresy flourished in southern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and was to a large extent suppressed by the church, although hidden communities remained during the following centuries.) In the twentieth century plot, Julien, a young historian, tries to understand how Manlius (in the fifth century) used Sophia’s ideas to achieve a compromise with a group of barbarians, in order to preserve aspects of Roman civilization. This becomes highly relevant when Julien becomes a censor in Vichy France: he, too, would like to preserve French civilization in spite of the control of his country exercised by the German army.

One problem with making Sophia’s ideas the centre of the book is that she clearly rejects “The Dream of Scipio” when Manlius presents it to her. She says it is “proud, magisterial and demonstrating only that you have understood nothing at all” (386). If this is the case, it is impossible for the reader to be sure what elements of Sophia’s teachings were embodied in it. Also, the crucial actions of Olivier and Julian, which lead to the maiming of Olivier, and to Julien’s suicide, although consistent with what Sophia says, do not seem directly attributable to her teachings. Instead, they occur in moments of existential choice, in which the actors throw reason and learning out the window, and act as their whole beings (physical, mental, and spiritual) tell them they must.

One clear thematic link between the three plots is the question whether it is acceptable to

perform actions which are clearly wrong, in order to achieve desirable goals. Manlius, thinking he has understood Sophia's teachings, assumes that this is part of making compromises, which are necessary to survival, with the established powers. He becomes a Christian bishop while despising Christianity, and has his best friend, and also his son by adoption, killed, when these actions seem necessary to achieve his purpose of preserving Roman civilization. Olivier and Julien, on the other hand, each reach a point at which, in the moment, they feel they need to perform the "right" action – the action which seems morally right to them – and to reject the possibility of compromise. Each suffers horribly as a result of performing his "right" action.

A third possible focal point for the novel is the character of Sophia. She is other-worldly, highly intelligent, and does not need power in the world, or the luxuries of worldly people. She lays great stress on the unknowable mystery of the divine, and on following the path of virtue. She condemns the compromises involved in utilitarian ethics. Many of these attitudes re-appear in the later plots in two other female figures, who seem like avatars of Sophia. The first is a poor and modest Cathar woman who is thought to be a Jewess, and the other is a Jewish artist who is eventually killed in the holocaust. These women inspire love in Olivier and Julien respectively, and, perhaps more importantly, enable the men who love them to, in the end, ground themselves morally. They discover that they must not compromise with powerful established authorities; they must do what is right, whatever the cost.

Many scholars of the early church have remarked that Christianity changed fundamentally when it was adopted as the official religion of the Roman empire. It then became possible to be both Christian and politically powerful, and the institution of the church became much more complex, hierarchical, and socially important. In *The Dream of Scipio*, the most admirable characters (including Sophia) are all in opposition, in a minority, or on the margins of society. Corruption comes with the compromises necessary to maintain links with power and authority. The other-worldly nature of Sophia's beliefs, which are echoed in other parts of the book, and in other characters, keep her safe from pollution and compromise. Perhaps the essential quality of Sophia's Gnosticism in this book is not the expectation that physical life will be steeped in

suffering, but that her beliefs put her on the margins of society.

To conclude my comments on the search for unity in this novel, I want to admit that perhaps it is *not* well unified. It has many overlapping and interesting themes, and many of the characters are subtly portrayed. But with three plots, in three different eras, linked by a manuscript whose content is uncertain, and which misrepresents the main teacher in the novel—all this tends to submerge a clear meaning in a baroque profusion of detail. To adapt a phrase from *Amadeus*, this may be a novel with too many ideas. But it is fascinating nonetheless.

#### Work Cited

Iain Pears. *The Dream of Scipio*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2002.