

**Line of Despair, II**

Last time we began to look at *Escape from Reason* and *The God Who is There*. We also looked at Schaeffer's general analysis of what has happened in the West in the twentieth century. We started by looking at the line of despair.

I made two introductory comments, one being that we need to understand our culture in order to communicate to it; otherwise we will equip ourselves to work in a period that no longer exists or simply talk to ourselves. Second, we need to resist the spirit of the age for ourselves; otherwise we will find ourselves washed away by the culture. T. S. Elliot said, "Behavior is as potent to affect belief as belief is to affect behavior." If we do not understand our culture and why people live the way they do, we will be washed away simply by conformity to the culture. We need to resist the spirit of the age. In my introduction I also made a distinction Schaeffer makes between rationality and rationalism. Then we began to look at the line of despair and what Schaeffer meant by it.

At the end of class I started giving you some examples of art and literature below the line of despair. We looked at Stephen Crane as an example from the end of the nineteenth century in the United States. He was well ahead of the date of 1935 that Schaeffer gives. He was not suggesting in giving that date that there were no individuals who thought this way before that time. Rather, there was a shift in the culture as a whole somewhere around 1935 or so. These are only approximate dates.

Another example we might think of from the nineteenth century in the United States would be Herman Melville around the turn of the century and his novel *Moby Dick*. In that there is a tremendously grim view of line communicated. We looked at the example of the poems of Thomas Hardy. I pointed out how early those were written (sometime in the 1860s) and that at the time his poetry was not popular. Since that time it has become very popular. His poems read as modern poems that have been very recently written. They really ring a bell today, but at the time many people did not understand them.

Let us look at another example from the nineteenth century from Britain. This is a poem of Matthew Arnold called "Dover Beach." This is a very famous poem, and it is one that it repeated over and over again in anthologies of nineteenth-century poetry. That is interesting, because Matthew Arnold is not primarily known as a poet but rather as an essayist and a commentator on the culture. This particular poem is known in places where people have never heard of Matthew Arnold as a poet. They know this poem because it summed up very dramatically what took place in Britain and throughout the Western world in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The poem begins with his listening to the sea withdrawing down the shore as the tide goes out. Already in the first stanza he uses the sea and its retreat as an image for the sadness of the human condition. The last few lines of the first stanza say,

Listen! You hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Then there is a brief stanza that looks back at the ancient Greeks and how Sophocles has understood this same dilemma of human misery. Let us note the last two stanzas where Matthew Arnold expresses

where he sees his culture to be. He talks about the loss of confidence in Christianity, and he understood very well that it shaped the whole of Western civilization. These stanzas say,

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

It is a very powerful statement of the loss of confidence of a whole culture because of the loss of faith. There is nothing to replace it. That is from the latter part of the nineteenth century, though it is before that date that Schaeffer gives of 1890. It predicts what happens, and those who were careful observers could see already where the culture all over Europe and the United States was going. Hardy and Arnold are two examples from Britain from the nineteenth century.

Let us come up to the twentieth century and look, first of all, at a couple of poems. For example, there are two poems by Ted Hughes, who is the British poet laureate at the moment. He published at least half a dozen books of poetry and is very well known, not only in England but elsewhere. The two poems I want to look at are both poems that are fairly typical of his writing, "A Wind Flashes the Grass" and "Pibroch." They both start from some distressing scene in nature. One is a windy day, and the other looks at the sea in Pibroch. He uses both of them to describe the painfulness, misery, and absurdity of the human condition.

Many of his poems are like this, and he is an unusual nature poet in the sense that there is nothing ever sweet or pleasant about his poetry of nature. This is a dramatic change from poems written around 1800 or even up until the end of the nineteenth century. We see the kind of thing Hughes does in Thomas Hardy. That is one of the reasons why Hardy was ahead of his time. It was an unusual way to write about nature and use it as an image of the absurdity of the human condition. This is very common in Hughes' writing. Some of his poems are much more direct, and they say very bluntly how completely hopeless the human situation is. Perhaps another time we can look at one of those. These are far more powerful because they communicate to the imagination rather than making a straight statement that life is meaningless. These will leave you feeling much sadder than the other poems if you read them with any sensitivity. They create images that stay in your mind and affect the way that you look at nature, too. Let us look at "A Wind Flashes the Grass."

Leaves pour blackly across.

We cling to the earth,  
With glistening eyes,  
Pierced afresh by the tree's cry.

And the incomprehensible cry  
From the boughs, in the wind  
Sets us listening for below words,  
Meanings that will not part from the rock.

The trees thunder in unison, on a gloomy afternoon,  
And the ploughman grows anxious, his tractor becomes terrible,  
As his memory litters downwind  
And the shadow of his bones tosses darkly on the air.

The trees suddenly storm to a stop in a hush  
Against the sky, where the field ends.  
And crowd there shuddering  
And wary, like horses bewildered by lightening.

The stirrings of their twigs against the dark, traveling sky  
Is the oracle of the earth  
They too are afraid, they too are momentary  
Streams, rivers of shadow.

Hughes does this all the time. For him nature is personified and expresses the pain of the human condition.

The second one, "Pibroch," is a particularly dramatic poem, because he consciously and repeatedly sets out his position over against Christianity. You will notice that the two last lines are taken from the book of Job. It talks about all the angels singing and the morning stars shouting together when God created the universe. As you read through this you will see how Ted Hughes uses that. He knows the Bible very well, and his poems are filled with references to Scripture. "Pibroch" says,

The sea cries with its meaningless voice  
Treating alike its dead and its living,  
Probably bored with the appearance of heaven  
After so many millions of nights without sleep,  
Without purpose, without self-deception.

Stone likewise. A pebble is imprisoned  
Like nothing in the Universe.  
Created for black sleep. Or growing  
Conscious of the sun's red spot occasionally,  
Then dreaming it is the fetus of God.

Over the stone rushes the wind  
Able to mingle with nothing,  
Like the hearing of the blind stone itself.  
Or turns, as if the stone's mind came feeling

A fantasy of directions.

Drinking the sea and eating the rock  
A tree struggles to make leaves-  
An old woman fallen from space  
Unprepared for these conditions.  
She hangs on, because her mind's gone completely.

Minute after minute, aeon after aeon,  
Nothing lets up or develops.  
And this is neither a bad variant nor a tryout.  
This is where the staring angels go through.  
This is where all the stars bow down.

It is a very powerful way to finish the poem. In the second to last stanza, he uses a tree to describe the human condition, and he says the only reason she hangs on in the struggle for life is because her mind is gone. No one except those who are insane would continue to try to exist at all. That is what Hughes means. This is an example from Britain today.

Let me turn to a different example, which is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Let me read something from a British newspaper called *The Independent* that came out last Christmas. This article describes not just modern philosophy with its loss of belief that truth can be found but also the way that has influenced every area. This is a fine expression of the dilemma of our culture and of what Schaeffer means by people being below the line of despair. The article reads,

*In Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the dodo introduces Alice to the notion of a Caucus-race. He marks out some space with no particular shape, various creatures stand around in it here and there, and in quite random fashion some of them run about. There was no one, two, three, and away. But they began when they liked, left off when they liked, so it was not easy to know when the race was over. It is an irrational way to run a race—a race with no center, no rules, no authority, no purpose. The dodo decides that as there are no criteria by which he can choose a winner, they may as well all be winners. But that decision, too, is arbitrary. They might just as well be losers. The very concepts winners and losers seem a matter of convention dictated by the dodo's whim.

I think Lewis Carroll actually intended when he wrote this account of the Caucus-race in *Alice in Wonderland* to be a description of where our culture was already headed. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* are brilliant books. They can be read simply as children's stories, but they can be read at another level as well. Lewis Carroll knew very well what he was doing when he described this Caucus-race. The author of this article uses this as a metaphor for where our culture is:

The Caucus race is an apt metaphor for the postmodern, a style of thinking in which there are no winners or losers but only unrooted conventions, all equally valid. Or invalid because, of course, once you have said things are all equally valid you might just as well say they are equally invalid. The whole concept of validity has disappeared and all equally devoid of meaning. It is the style which has undermined sound common sense in nearly every field of contemporary culture. The philosophy is one of despair, and it is rooted in the deeply nihilistic trend within professional philosophy. It is only through understanding the nature of this trend that we can fully appreciate its sweeping implications. There are no such things as truth or goodness, and

philosophers who search for them are in error. Every value is equal to every other value. Nothing is real or natural or authoritative. Everything is up for interpretation: goodness, God, literary meaning or merit, artistic or architectural standards, even gender. Though called variously deconstructionists, post-structuralists, pragmatists, or simply nihilists, together the new anti-philosophers have defined the characteristic postmodern style of thinking. The modern against which they are pitted is the humanist framework of the Enlightenment. Though humanism itself denied there were any god-given foundations for eternal truth and value, it did believe passionately in the universal capacity of reason to illuminate and determine all problems. The Enlightenment faith and the perfectibility of man lead to a whole-hearted belief in progress. The anti-philosophers deny both.

This is what Schaeffer gets at when he talks about the way our whole culture has changed. He calls this the shift in modern thought. Schaeffer makes the point that the whole history of thought since the Enlightenment in the West has been turned on its head by what he calls the coming of the line of despair or the change in the way of thinking. He used the image of philosophy up until this period of postmodernism and said that, while it did not necessarily have all the answers, philosophers believed that there were answers to be found. Simply starting from the human person, which the article talks about as the Enlightenment, with the aid of reason we will be able to find all the answers to the questions that face us. There was tremendous confidence in the power of reason. At the same time, there was a confidence in the human person that people will get better and society will get better. There will be real progress. What has happened, and now that we are under the line of despair, there is a loss in the power of reason, a loss in the goodness of man, and a loss in the possibility of progress. It is really impossible to understand our culture unless we see that that is where so many people are. That is the whole drift of the culture in which we live.

Let us look at another example from the United States today. We looked at an article from *The Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* the other day where we looked at the loss of truth. What is true for one person is quite different for someone else. The article said a child asked his dad who God was, and the father was humbled to say that people believe all different things, and what is important is that it is valid for you at your age, as who you are, and with the problems that you face. It was not a question of truth at all. I thought of the example of Woody Allen and his film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. I encourage you to see this film, because it is a very sensitive exploration of our dilemma today. It looks at the dilemma of our culture and of the loss of meaning. That is really the theme of the film. Woody Allen's hero in the film is a philosopher who eventually commits suicide. He looks to himself as the person who has the answers to life, but then the philosopher kills himself because he discovers he does not have any answers at all. In Schaeffer's terms, the hero in the film is below the line of despair. He finds no answers ultimately.

Another film I remember seeing several years ago that I would encourage you to see is a foreign film called *The Exterminating Angel*. It is an amazing film, but if you already feel depressed, do not go and see it! Wait until you are fairly together, and take a friend when you go. Make sure you discuss it afterward. The film starts in a concert, a wonderful classical concert. There is someone playing the piano, great musicians at the violin and cello, and all kinds of beautifully dressed society people who came together into a gorgeous room. It is an image of the wonderful things that Western civilization has produced. The people there are tremendously good mannered, polite, courteous, and respectable. They have absolutely everything going for them: money, art, good looks, power in society. Suddenly they are in the middle of this party, listening to a concert, and they find they cannot get out of the room. The door is open, but they cannot get out. They are stuck in the room. You see their lives gradually falling apart as they realize that there is no exit at all. That is really the problem—there is no exit from their lives. They are stuck in this room, and you see everything breaking down. They make a fire with the beautiful

musical instruments. They start being incredibly rude to one another. The facade of culture just completely disappears. It is rather like *Lord of the Flies*, except these are sophisticated adults, rather than children, whose lives fall apart. Some of them die, and it is really appalling.

The director uses this film as an image of the human condition. We are trapped in a situation that makes no sense and from which there is no escape. Toward the end of the film the people are able to get out of the room. In the last scene of the film, which is the most dramatic part, they are in a church having a memorial service for the people who died while they were in the room. Then at the end of the film they cannot get out of the church. They are all there: the priest, the choir, town dignitaries, and so on. That is where you are left, and it is a very powerful statement. The point is that the church does not have any answers either.

That is the theme of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem. We will not read it now, but he wrote a poem called "Sometime During Eternity," which is about Christ. He says quite simply that we no longer believe that He has any answers to the dilemma either. Ferlinghetti finishes the poem by saying Christ is dead. There is no resurrection, and there is no hope from there either.

As we think about the line of despair, Schaeffer says that there is a loss of truth. We cannot find truth any longer. There is no truth to be found, and there is no objective knowledge. The only things we can know are subjectively apprehended. Perception is reality; that is where our culture is. The second thing he says is there is a loss of moral certainty. There are no objective moral values, but there is simply personal choice.

I had lunch with a friend today, and he quoted an opinion poll he saw that said 70 percent of the American people believe that abortion is wrong. But the great majority of those think that people should choose what they do at the same time. Even where people say that they have moral values, they do not carry it through. This belief that in the end morals are purely personal is even more fundamental in our culture. A very good example is that what is taught in most schools for morality is what is called values clarification. The idea is that the children should be taught how to learn to make their own moral decisions. What they actually do is choose impossibly difficult moral situations to give to little children to try and figure out. They are basically saying, "Since we as adults are not going to tell you what is right and wrong, you have to decide for yourself." That is the strongest thing that comes across. Even beyond that, because they choose such impossible situations that are difficult for anyone to deal with and there are easy answers, the child ends up with the feeling that moral certainty is something that cannot be had anyway. You might do one thing, but you might do another. It is very destructive, because it puts kids in the position of thinking that it does not matter what other people say. They think in actual fact that there are no moral certainties at all.

The third thing Schaeffer says is that there is a loss of meaning to history. Are we going anywhere? There is profound skepticism about that. One illustration of that is a few years ago when there was such a strong sense of doom about the possibility of a nuclear winter or all-out nuclear war. You might say that it is reasonable to fear something like that in one sense. But if there were any confidence whatsoever in the culture that there is a God who rules over history, you know that is not how history will end. Most of the people who had that sense of doom would have said at the same time that they believed in God. The fear of nuclear disaster fed right into that sense of uncertainty about the future. It is a fundamental part of our culture.

The fourth consequence is a loss of purpose in the individual. What am I here for? Is there really any transcendent purpose to my life that gives me any meaning? That leads to all sorts of practical idolatry:

money, pleasure, sex, drugs. Those are four of the consequences of what Schaeffer means when he says our culture is below the line of despair. We could give many more examples of the expression of despair.

Let me move to what Schaeffer has to say about the upper and lower story. He uses a similar diagram to the line of despair, but it is not the same line. The line now divides what he calls the upper story and the lower story. Now he deals with the question of how people cope with the fact that they live below the line of despair. How do people cope now that we live in a culture that has lost its confidence that truth and moral certainty can be found, that there is a meaning to history, and that each individual has purpose? How do we cope with skepticism and relativism? He suggests that we cope by making a radical division between reason and faith.

The lower story is the area of reason, the rational, and trying to think objectively and carefully about life, what we face, and what we will do. Living in the area of the rational reason leads us only to pessimism. It puts us below the line of despair. If we think rationally about the human condition, we will come up with no answers at all. We will be driven to postmodernism, where there are no objective values and there is no truth to be found. One opinion is just as valid or invalid as another. We are left in a hopeless situation. We cope with faith and some kind of non-rational answer. This is the only way to have optimism. We will not ever, by reason and reflecting on our situation rationally, come up with an answer that gives us any hope. The only way we will have any hope is by a completely irrational leap. We may put some kind of existential experience in the upper story.

For example, Hemingway's existential experience that gives meaning to life is mostly sex or the macho experience. Another example is Sylvia Plath's "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." Sylvia Plath is an American writer who was married to Ted Hughes, whose poems we looked at earlier. Let me read this poem, and I want you to notice how she contrasts what can be rationally understood and what Schaeffer calls an existential experience. In the poem, the existential experience for her comes from seeing a rook arranging its feathers in the rain. As a Christian one can say that is great because as Paul says in Romans 1, "The invisible things of God, His eternal power and divine nature, are clearly perceived in the things that are made." When someone looks at nature and it gives him or her some kind of hope or experience of meaning, you can say it is good. But for someone like Plath, who does not have any basis for that or belief in God at all, it is a completely irrational experience. It is not something she can predict or produce. She just hopes that it may happen from time to time. Listen to this poem,

On the stiff twig up there  
Hunches a wet black rook  
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain—  
I do not expect a miracle  
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire  
In my eye, nor seek  
Any more in the desultory weather some design,  
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall  
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,  
Occasionally, some backtalk  
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:

A certain minor light may still  
Lean incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair  
As if a celestial burning took  
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then –  
Thus hallowing an interval  
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor  
One might say love.  
At any rate, I now walk  
Wary (for it could happen  
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical  
Yet politic, ignorant

Of whatever angel any choose to flare  
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook  
Ordering its black feathers can so shine  
As to seize my senses, haul  
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear  
Of total neutrality. With luck,  
Trekking stubborn through this season  
Of fatigue, I shall  
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur.  
If you care to call those spasmodic  
Tricks of radiance  
Miracles. The wait's begun again,  
The long wait for the angel,

For that rare, random descent.

Sylvia Plath captures in that poem exactly what existentialism speaks about. There are these events or moments in one's life where suddenly one is invested with a sense that life has some kind of meaning. Rationally you know it has no meaning at all. That is what Schaeffer speaks about here. On the level of reason you know that the sky is mute, it has nothing to say, and there is no voice from heaven to us. You know rationally that this is a dull, ruinous landscape or a season of fatigue, as she expresses it. It leads one to total neutrality and the loss of everything human and hopeful in us. Rationally, that is where we are led, but one has to live in hope, yet with no confidence. It is not hope in the biblical sense at all, which has a surety of something happening in the future when God comes in Christ. There is no hope in that sense at all, but there is a hope against hope. It is random, rare, and you know that it is not anything real. Her words say, "Those spasmodic tricks of radiance." She knows that does not tell us anything real about reality. It is just something that enables her to keep on coping for a while. She cannot expect it, she knows she needs it, and she cannot live without it. As I mentioned the other day, she tried to commit

suicide many times, and in the end she was successful. This poem expresses perfectly what Schaeffer speaks of.

There are all kinds of things you may put in the area of the upper story. It might be drugs, sex, or relationships. For many people, relationships are increasingly temporary rather than anything permanent. If you put your whole hope in a relationship without anything solid to build it on, it will not survive. It is like an idol that destroys itself. People put their hope in anything without any rational basis for doing so. It is astonishing that people will even put their hope in the occult. These are people who may appear to be total rationalists, but you might suddenly find them playing occult games. If you discuss with them on a rational level, they will tell you that we live in a completely material universe. This happened with a lot of my friends at high school and university. We are all taught to be rationalists by our educational system, but a lot of people played with occult things. You do not even think about trying to put the two together, because it is a completely other area. If you stopped to reflect about it, you would say that you do not believe in that. Yet you play these games, and real things take place. They give you a kind of kick.

Much of the growth of the New Age movement fits in here. You have people who, at a level of reason, would say there are only grounds for pessimism. This is what Shirley MacLaine has to say. She says you cannot trust your reason any longer, and this is the answer New Age gives. Because reason only leads us to pessimism and does not give us any meaning or hope, we have to put our hope in a completely different area. That area is increasingly different kinds of New Age thinking.