

## The Ugly Duckling<sup>1</sup>

The morning after the night when I was prematurely ejected from my mother's womb during a violent tempest at the gestational age of 32 weeks and 4 days, I awoke to find myself in many pieces, pinioned to the incubator floor, with my several senses separately trapped in distinct forms of torture: my eyes shut against insufferable brightness, my mouth scorched by dryness, my skin scratched by roughness, the sensitive mucosae of my nose crudely pierced by foreign tubes. Worst of all my ears – the portals of my body's harmony – detected no familiar music, no rhythmic consensus: nothing but a universal blank, with wisdom at all entrances quite shut out. Only pain made any link between my senses so that I could recognize they were all functions of myself, *me*. In contrast to the unnatural alertness of my senses was the moribund heaviness of my body, the deadweight of limbs and extremities which only hours before had danced in the amniotic fluid with surgings of power. Only the night before I had beentreading Placenta's comfortable consistence in our waters dark and deep as half on foot, half flying, I explored the universe that had been created for us.

Now, I found myself wrecked on the shore, with every muscle tightly bound and every orifice exposed to the merciless digital probes and arrows of outrageous beings who stabbed relentlessly at my tissues, causing intense pain despite the immature myelinization of my nervous fibres. No longer a swimmer or a flyer, I lay randomly diffused in all directions, unable to prop my languished head. Though in pain, intimate impulse prompted my eyes momentarily to open of their own accord, and despite the terrible blinding light, I glimpsed with awe the huge and wondrous monolithic forms looming over me. My mouth could almost have gasped in amazement, "O brave new world", could indeed have screamed aloud, were it not that my virginal lungs were held in check by an infrasensuous perception of my own: I suddenly divined that according to the colossal all-knowing all-powerful beings who encircled me, I was monstrously ugly, deformed beyond the power of expectation. I was a horrible mistake born of some hideous intercourse, some unnatural conjunction of the stars. The truth was out – I saw it face to face. I was a creature of the dark, taking the horrid form of darkness visible. And because I was a harbinger of death, with death's odour clinging to me, they pierced my nasal passages – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – and the arrows sunk in deep. I was pinned like Oedipus

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on Cithaeron. There was no venom in the pain they caused me through the immobilization of my muscles and the burning of my senses, for, clearly, I was not one of their own kind; I did not relish or pattern as they. I realized that they were making the preparations for my sacrifice; hence the judgemental severity of those impassive helmeted heads that nodded miles above me.

At this point I believe I must have lapsed into unconsciousness. Certainly it was aeons before I opened my eyes again. That time was spent at first mostly in a state of non-being, when I was perhaps not unconscious but not asleep or awake either, and often exhausted by the meaningless overwhelming stimulation of one or more of my sensuous orifices as fluids were drained in or out of me at feet, nose, or scalp. I was alternately abandoned for timeless periods to wallow in a sensuous desert, and then tossed restlessly on the parching wave of one sense-tip to another, in a way that utterly dislocated my sense of identity. In fact, that was the main cause of my suffering – more than the physical pain (to which I became habituated and which was in any case only intermittent). Yet even when I longed to yield the ghost, the envious air still flooded into my clockwork lungs to insist on my life's mechanical pant; indeed, this now dominated in significance the heartbeat that had always been my personal organic measure of existence. I gave up trying to work out the meaning of all this, or why the preparations for the sacrifice were taking so long – longer than my whole lifetime so far, it seemed. But while fluid still coursed in my veins, however tainted it was by some mysterious leprous distilment of unknown origins, I found myself in calmer moments, through some innate prompting, trying to remember my old life with Placenta in the womb – difficult though it was to use my present experience as a means of recollecting that original world of reality. Perhaps if I could remember what it was like before the shipwreck, I would not be lost in loss itself, condemned to a universe of death where peace and rest could never dwell.

As you can guess from the very fact that I am telling you this story from my now secure and well-established vantage point of three months' post-partum age, being now in complete possession of my mother, I did pull through in the end. Every creature has its home, which gives it its dignity; but after my expulsion I was unhouseld, disappointing, unanel'd; and my very homelessness showed me to be an ugly, worthless, and insignificant being. Gradually, however, the incubator itself became more like home. My left foot (the one that was not bandaged from heelpricks) began to recognize the smooth hardness of its rounded corner, my buttock to snuggle into the fleecy hollow of the mattress with an almost friendly sensation (though it was a sad change from the buoyancy of my amniotic fluid), and even to enjoy the fluctuations from dryness to wetness and squiggling into it; indeed, I found my muscles now seemed to be mercifully bound with elastic rather than rigid wires. Also there was at times a strange and haunting music, reminding me of a humming that I knew from long ago, but much louder, and which gave delight but hurt not. Another astonishing aid to recollection was an ambrosial wetness that occasionally approached my parched lips and was immediately sucked in greedily by my tongue, just as it had

sucked and spouted the amniotic fluid. So I knew there were still riches in heaven. As well as this, I became aware of huge presences brooding motionlessly nearby for long periods, whose mellow omniscient effluence gave me comfort even though I was careful never to open my eyes. These mighty presences seemed to be the source not only of the painful probings to which I was accustomed, but also of other tactile manipulations of a soothing nature, to which I could respond with other pleasant sensations in my tummy and bowels.

It was after a succession of moments like these, which took on the character of a pattern, that a new truth dawned on me: I was not in hell, but in purgatory. For some reason I had been redeemed from death, in spite of my ugliness. My prison sentence was over, and I had entered a chrysalid existence. Now the incubator walls were a permeable membrane that allowed me to ruminate on the scents, sounds, and movements of my life, past and present. These ruminations began during my increasing periods of respite from irritation and dislocation. But it is only now, with mature hindsight, that I can piece together a properly philosophical narrative; and the story of my early life went something as follows.

At the very beginning, then, when the world was created for me shortly after the courtship of my sperm and ovum was consummated, my desire and will were revolved by the love that moves the sun and the other stars; I swam in all directions, and all directions were One. In my boundless wisdom I knew the depth without the tumult of the soul. It seemed I was the first that ever burst into that silent sea. Naturally I was a Pythagorean, guided by my innate sense of harmony, and after each revolution I swam upwards into the sweet-smelling clouds in order to tune my senses to the music of the spheres. It was on one of those regular flights of worshipful exuberance that, to my surprise, I first encountered Placenta, who had been created to be my friend and partner. Very soon I realized how much more satisfactory was mutual exploration than narcissistic reflection; and each day, under the rosy glow that filtered through the eyelids of the womb, we pursued our play hand in hand. How well we came to know and understand the world about us – its contrapuntal rhythms and tastes, pulsations, suckings, and excretions; I measured my newly developing hardnesses against Placenta's unresponsive soft recesses and convolutions; I timed his reassuring soufflé against my own distinct heartbeat; and beyond that, in complex syncopation, the heartbeat and other meaningful rhythms of our eternal Mother. The Sons of Morning sung their solemn music and our fancy was enwrapped. And when the day was over, I floated up into my favourite transverse position, curled over the back of the universe; and Placenta with a weight of pleasure sank down through the clouds and held me like a dream.

You might have thought there was nothing more we could want in life. An infinite variety of sensations were ours, and when the weather was inclement – for even in our womb there were sometimes unpleasant vibrations whose source we could only surmise – we always rode the storm together. If anything, these brief periods of anxiety strengthened our relationship; we were deeply religious and knew every-

thing was conducted in our ultimate interest. We pledged to share our experience in bliss or woe, and I could not imagine our ever being parted. Yet if I recollect clearly, before the great tempest came which shattered our world, there were some rumblings of discontent, some unresolved questionings. For as my own strength and powers increased – as they did steadily – I sensed less willingness on the part of my world to accommodate them: a sort of rebellion, as it were, a jostling for position, even at times a blatant squeezing and constriction that I could no longer interpret as mere playfulness. Somewhere there was hostility. I knew Placenta was not to blame for this, and still every day I journeyed forth, and at eve resumed my position close to him on the back of the universe. But it seemed to me his attitude was becoming more fixed, less imaginative. I wondered if he was capable of the daring strides in speculation that I sometimes found myself engaged in. For by this time I knew our world pretty well, and the pioneering thrill of conquering terra incognita had lost its savour. Rather, I began to feel like the spiritual Cottager who knows that beyond his garden gate there are such things as the Andes and the Burning Mountains with their snowy peaks bright in the sunlight. On top of this, I had qualms about outside elements coming in, wafted on some dubious wave, encroaching on our narrow limits. I began to have suspicions about a third party impinging on our room, in mutual amity too straight, too close. Or possibly more than one: my fertile imagination suggested – and I shuddered to conceive of it – that the seas might be thronged with spawn innumerable.

Were any of these warning signs? I still don't know the answer, or if it would have made any difference. For it is certain that nothing in my tentative fond surmises prepared me for the sudden tempest in which Placenta and I were separated and lost, sent with hideous ruin and combustion down to bottomless perdition. In the terrible confusion of that roar and rout I don't know which of us was expelled first, but my head was rammed into the abyss, and as the life fluids were crushed out of me I saw Placenta in my mind's eye, his visage shattered by forced fingers rude and sent down the stream in bloody spongiform strips. Grim were the punishments meted out to those as evidently ugly and sinful as I knew I must be, left stranded on the shore to be swept by parching winds; while Placenta, I was sure, was discarded to become an island salt and bare, a mere quintessence of dust.

During the following aeons, I suffered in the ways I have already attempted to describe to you. There was one additional factor in my distress, which even now – secure in my rightful empire – I am not sure I have fully catharsized: was there any truth in my speculation that if not Placenta, then some other One, ousted me from my first home? Was that other One perhaps of nobler birth than me (a mere creature of earth), the one They really wanted, even though my ugliness was later redeemed and forgiven? The question arises, indeed, as to who occupies my first home now? Happiest are those who seek to know no more. Suffice it here to swiftly bring my history – which, as you know, is a happy one – to a close, on an optimal note.

For despite the traumatic conclusion of my tale-within-a-tale, this recollection of my early life seemed to have a healing effect on my critical condition as I lay in the

incubator. The process of anamnesis reminded me that my severed senses once had their origin in an organic reality that was me, myself, and that my feeble muscular movements were also, however poor, mine own. Then, strange as it was, the priestly manipulations of the shadowy godlike beings stationed near me increasingly had the effect not of squashing me but of motivating my powers to function independently, even to express distinct propositions. The experience again became mine of more than one sense acting in unison, or at least relatedly, such as when my tongue sucked and my deepest bowels rumbled affectionately in response. To my joy I came to realize that, leading with my left foot, I could swivel my entire body round, until I was lying crosswise from side to side in the incubator, touching at head and feet, just as I had used to lie across the top of the uterus. Placenta had gone for ever, sunk beneath the watery floor; but my horizons had opened, and I began to believe that perhaps another friend might be found.

At the gestational age of 36 weeks and 2 days I reached the turning-point. Even before they came to extubate me, I was conscious of a strange thrill of anticipation, of rousing motions within me which disposed my preconceptions to something extraordinary. I felt barely a pinprick as the familiar tube was withdrawn, and there was only time for a split-second of panic and remorse as I realized how attached I had become to it, when with a sharp intake of breath my lungs filled my chest and head with the delicious taste of empyreal air – tempered by the immortals and never known by me till now. Clouds of glory issued from my whole being: my joy was so intense, bursting its grape against my palate fine, that I knew death could not be far away. Still I demanded one more favour from the archangelic Muse that supported me in the large recompense of its hands. As the hands stroked a line down my back from the nape of my neck, I was struck by the inspiration that I was a creature with a spine, an endoskeleton, an internally sustained identity; and all my senses at once sprang into order at the angelic command. To my terror I realized my eyes were about to open yet once more. I knew it must be death to presume to look into the heaven of heavens. But I had to know. I opened my eyes; I saw the bright stars that flamed in the forehead of the morning sky. In the midst of the dazzling white radiance that enveloped me closely, my mouth latched on to the nipple which was at its core. Simultaneously, the angel looked homeward into my heart of hearts, and I saw that I was a beautiful baby.

### **Quotes in order of appearance**

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*; Milton, “insufferably bright”; Milton, *Lycidas* 77, “trembling ears”; Milton, *Paradise Lost* III.50, “wisdom at one entrance quite shut out”, “universal blank of nature’s works”; *Paradise Lost* II.941, “Treading the crude consistence, half on foot, half flying”; *Paradise Lost* IX.152 “man he made, and for him build/ Magnificent this world”; Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*; Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III.i.58,

“slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”; Milton, *Samson Agonistes* 118-19, “he lies at random, carelessly diffused,/ With languished head unpropped”; *Paradise Lost* I.125, “though in pain”; *Samson Agonistes* 223, “intimate impulse”; *The Tempest* V.i.183, “brave new world”; Shakespeare, *King Lear* I.ii.1-22 (Edmund’s speech) with “whoremaster man [lays] his goatish disposition to the charge of a star”; Bible, St Paul to the Corinthians, “in a glass darkly... face to face”; *Paradise Lost* I.63, “darkness visible”, “horrid”, “burning marl”; *Lycidas* 13, 155, “welter to the parching wind”, “whelming tide”, “where’er thy bones are hurled”; Shakespeare, *Richard III* I.iv.36, “yield the ghost, but still the envious flood/ Stopped in my soul”; *Hamlet* I.v.63-67, “leprous distilment ... courses through/ The natural gates and alleys of the body”; Plato, *Phaedrus*, “every soul has by nature beheld true being... but not every soul finds it easy to use its present experience as a means of recollecting the world of reality”; *Paradise Lost* I.66, 525, “lost in loss itself ... universe of death where peace and rest can never dwell”; Keats, *Fall of Hyperion* I.171, “every creature hath its home”; *Hamlet* I.v.77, “unhousel’d, disappointed, unanel’d”; *The Tempest* III. ii.133-40, “sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not... hum about mine ears”, “riches ready to drop upon me”; *Paradise Lost* I. 21, “Dove-like sat’st brooding on the dark abyss”; III.6, “effluence of essence increate”; Keats, *Fall of Hyperion* I.85, “and still these two were postured motionless”; “Ode to Autumn”, “sitting careless on a granary floor... watches the last ooziings hours by hours”; Wordsworth, *The Prelude* I.425, “huge and mighty forms”; I.490, “ye presences of nature”; Dante: hell, purgatory, heaven; Keats, letter to Reynolds, 11 July 1819, “chrysalis with two loopholes for eyes”; Dante, end of *Paradiso*, “my desire and will were revolved by the love that moves the sun and the other stars”; Bion, *Memoir of the Future* Book III, “courtship of sperm and ovum”; Wordsworth, *Laodamia* 75, “depth and not the tumult of the soul”; Coleridge, *Ancient Mariner*, “the first that ever burst into that silent sea”; Milton, “On the harmony of the spheres”; Meltzer, *The Apprehension of Beauty* p. 43 on Placenta’s “reassuring soufflé”, “ugly clown”; *Paradise Lost* IV.321 on creation of Eve, “hand in hand”, and the harmony of day and night; Milton, *Lycidas* 26, “under the opening eyelids of the morn”; Milton, “At a solemn music” and the “Nativity Ode”, “fancy was enwrapped”; Plato, *Phaedrus*, souls on the back of the universe; Wordsworth, *Prelude* II.177-80, “weight of pleasure... held me like a dream”; Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* II.ii.236, “infinite variety”; *Paradise Lost* IX.831, “share in bliss or woe”; Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, separation of Cathy and Heathcliff; Keats, letter to Rice, 24 March 1818, “spiritual cottager”; *Paradise Lost* II.1042, IV.360, “dubious wave”, “narrow limits”, “our room”, “mutual amity... too strait, too close”; Milton, *Comus* 713, “thronging the seas with spawn innumerable”; *Paradise Lost* I.45, “bottomless perdition”, “roar and rout” (also *Lycidas*); *Lycidas* 4. 62, “forced fingers rude... down the stream”; *Paradise Lost* XI.830, Eden an “island salt and bare”; *Paradise Lost* IX.149, “creature formed of earth”, IV.106, “instead of us outcast... mankind created”; *King Lear* I.i.16 (Edmund and Gloucester) “smell a fault”; *Paradise Lost* IV.774, “happiest if ye seek to know no more”; Plato, *Phaedrus*, on

anamnesis (remembering reality); Shakespeare, *As You Like It* V.iv.57, “poor but mine own”; Keats, notes on Milton, on “stationing”; Milton, *Lycidas* 167, “sunk beneath the watery floor”; *Paradise Lost* VII.12, “into the heaven of heavens I have presumed, and drawn empyreal air, thy tempering”; Wordsworth, *Immortality Ode*, “trailing clouds of glory”; Milton, *Samson Agonistes* 1382-83, “rousing motions... dispose/ To something extraordinary my thoughts”; Keats, “Ode on Melancholy”, “burst joy’s grape”; Milton, *Lycidas* 184-85, “in thy large recompense be good/ To all that wander in that perilous flood”; Keats, “Ode to Apollo”, “that terrific band – spring forward”, “powers of song combine”; Milton, *Lycidas* 1, “yet once more”; 171, “sun flames in the forehead of the morning sky”; 163, “look homeward angel”; *Hamlet* III.ii.71-73 (Hamlet to Horatio), “passion’s slave ... heart of hearts”.