

# Aspects Of The Crisis In Meaning

**Harvey B. Sarles**

## **The Crisis in Meaning**

LIKE THE notion of the best and worst worlds poised on the edge of revolution, the present moment seems at once pregnant and full with meaning, while it seems simultaneously empty and vaguely ominous.

It is easy to proclaim some current crisis in meaning, but the various senses which this announcement provokes are intellectually and psychologically complex. It is, in fact, easier to note some of the apparent features and results of such a crisis - if it is not misnamed - than to specify its ostensive causes.

Consider: Modern Humanism notes an increasing interest in the non-rational, particularly in literal (messianic) religion and various forms of mysticism: New Wave, ESP, witchery, etc. The increasing use of intoxicants and other drugs seems to be associated with a sense of the lack of meaning in life, some wish to "escape from reality." In addition, there is a rising infatuation with nihilism: intellectual, social, and artistic; suicide, as well as various "celebrations" of Satanism.

From "heavy metal" rock music, to various attacks on objectivism, to an increasing distrust of the technologies which had formerly been considered "progressive," science is cast within images of "Dr. Strangelove." The formerly fictional

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technologies which promised to re-place the human with machine, are becoming a daily reality. Where we had (apparently) "solved" the plagues within our medical memory, the development of AIDS plagues our thinking, directing us to visions of holocaust and the reequation of health with morality. The "retrieval" of the body - in opposition to mind and reason, probably indicates a sense of impatience with rationality, as does its accompanying concerns with other species and a return to "nature" - whether or not some of this interest is illuminating and scientifically "legitimate." Other wishful "returns" (retrievals, recollections) to earlier golden ages and classicisms propose solutions to modern dilemmas. A recent best-seller proclaims a solution to the "closed mind" of Americans, by proposing an intellectual-political return to the foundations of Western thought. Similarly, the return of Fundamentalism to the ancient religious tests of the Bible or Koran seem to grant a double promise of truth and salvation. Indeed, the recent conflation of intellection with politics - on both the left and the right - as well as the conflation of intellection, politics, and religion, seem to blur the very possibility of clean, clear thought, leaving us uneasy and off-balance in dealing with present realities and future possibilities.

Finally, there is a mixing of philosophical-theological-medical traditions occurring now, the result of ideas coming to us from the entire earth. Where our concepts of reason had been developed fairly narrowly within a particular history of thought, it had appeared to be definitional of reason, and the single, correct approach to truth. As ideas float in from the other traditions, this seems less certain.

### **Meaning and Futurity**

Recently, I had before me an appalling child-abuse case. Teachers of 8-year old Jason had noted that he often fell asleep in class, looked dirty and smelled of urine. When efforts to persuade him to come to school in more presentable condition failed, school health officials decided to bathe Jason and dress him in clean clothing. They were stunned by the sight of his naked body, which was covered with bruises, scars and fresh wounds; these included lash lines, cigarette burns and curious horseshoe-shaped marks. The last, according to Jason, were the brands left behind when his father

pressed a heated belt buckle against his skin...Jason is now in foster care, and there is no doubt that his physical wounds will heal. But what will we do to heal the wounds to his mind and soul? It is all too possible that we will treat him as we've treated Steven.

Steven is 4 years old. When he was 2, his mother gave birth to a 'cocaine baby' and was imprisoned shortly thereafter. Steven and his infant sister were put into foster care by Hennepin County. The county has since spent nearly \$40,000 per year on these two children, providing fine therapists and special nursery schools to address Steven's behavioral problems and the baby's developmental lag. The baby has been lucky enough to find a loving, stable home. But in the four short years of his life, Steven has lived in at least 10 different households. In the last two years he has lived in seven foster homes. Twice he was moved because foster parents had violated Hennepin County's child-protection rules by hitting children in their custody.

Does anyone care enough about Steven to redress the damage we've done him through our busy, expensive neglect? How can he know he is loveable? Why should he trust adults? Does he feel safe? Does he dare to be gentle? Who has shown him his strengths?

I think that Jason and Steven are probably already lost, because no one will claim them with lasting love and attention. They will grow tall and strong - suspicious, angry, fearful outsiders. They will not get it right. They will drug their pain. They will strive, in self-invented, pathological ways, to work things out. They will fail and fail. In 10 years, or 15, someone will be hurt. Then I'll see Jason and Steven in court; they'll no longer be innocent.

Of course, most abused children do not become criminals. But I do know that virtually every violent criminal was once like Jason and Steven. We must not turn our backs on this reality.

Perhaps our society will do, out of fear, what it has not done out of compassion. I believe Minnesota must grow closer to the norm in incarceration rates and penal spending, in order to live more safely with our most violent offenders. But it is both pointless and wicked to do so without spending at least as much money, en-

ergy, intelligence and time on preventing crime - on all of our children. It is easier and cheaper to see that innocent children grow up healthy than to rearrange the behavior of major criminals and warehouse them when we fail.

Isabel Gomez, Minneapolis.  
Judge of District Court, Hennepin County.  
*Minneapolis Star Tribune.* 4/29/89

Do we gain/lose meaning by focusing on certain aspects of reality to the detriment of others? On which do we not focus? How does it happen that we assign value to certain aspects of our lives, but not to others: politics, culture, the "ghost of time?" Have we already lost meaning by the drop in quality of caring and educating of the young...who are our future?

### **Nietzsche's Prophecy:**

The introductory pages to Nietzsche's last work (*The Will to Power*) discusses the "rise of European nihilism." Nietzsche observed the "death of God." This concept of God had placed some "limits" on life and life's possibilities. As people no longer trusted their belief in such a deity, they would gradually become nervous and unsure, staring into an infinite firmament rather than a universe topped and limited by a living god. In a negative sense, Nietzsche thought that God had provided meaning to peoples' lives. Without such a god concept, they would discover that life is an abyss whose endless paths lead everywhere - yet end nowhere. Nihilism would grow and fester, leading to every form of destruction imaginable: given freedom of self-determination, we would opt for nothing over something. The resulting anarchy - psychologically - would be devastating; set us up for war; for seeking textual truths,...

Nietzsche's work was a critique of the (primarily Christian) "weakening" of the individual, raising to the highest priority the sense of pity. His worry was that we are not sufficiently strong to be self-sustaining, to find and to grant meaning to our own lives. Rather than constructing life in the context of its best, highest, noblest aspirations, we had focused on the least; on pity. His diagnosis and prophecy was that we would opt for nihilism, a strangulating self-defeating outlook through

which we would cave-in to our own fears. Instead of saying "Yes!" to life, we would say "No."

His direction for solution was to "retrieve" the heroic sense of the early Greeks who lived self-consciously within all of life's profundities, from the heights of epic grandeur to the tragedies of cruelest accident. He proposed a "re-evaluation of all values" in which we would learn to "overcome" ourselves. His notion of the "overman" (translated by the Nazis into the notion of the "superman"), was intended to recreate meaning in each of our lives. It was - like Emerson's "Self Reliance" - a transcendent psychology. Each of us could surpass ourselves and our personal history, by delving into the best and worst aspects of our lives, and moving on by "overcoming" ourselves. His sage, Zarathustra, represented the highest, a model of "towardness," towards which we each could aim our own characters: a sense of nobility of self in which we would rethink our lives and move on, in some personal progressive sense; strong and bold. Philosophize with a hammer! If not...then nihilism!

### **Meaning and Reason:**

In earlier times, there was some sense of equation between reason and the meaning of life. Meaning was located in nature, reason was in becoming harmonious with nature, and happiness available, to be derived from entering into this equation.

In the last couple of centuries, the move from objective reason, in tune with nature - to subjective reason which is located in each of us individually, has largely gained sway. Meaning now seems to emanate from each of us, rather than in the attempt to become one with nature. Similar to the attempt to become one with the deity (a "subjugation" of oneself in modern parlance), the question coming into harmony with, of relating to...now both delights and haunts us. It is no longer clear to us that there exists an objective world of nature into which we can enter. Technology has, perhaps, replaced nature. It is tempting to re-invent or rediscover the deity through and in which we can "lose" ourselves. And this is in some uneasy balance with the hubris by which we each arrogate to ourselves the very definitions of reason.

Part of the problematic between reason and meaning, the senses in which the very notion of reason has changed and weakened from its mathematical-logical external and objective

focus to one of the subjectivity of each person, is that reason itself has gradually and subtly taken on new connotations. From Plato's early notion of reason in the context of geometrical proofs, the idea of "reasonable" has become diffused: a reasonable person is someone who will listen to reason, to compromise and not be rigid; someone who is interested in the utility of ideas in various senses, not just in being correct; correct, in the logical sense, has moved toward practicality in the someone who will do as s/he is told, or is easy to work with, to get along with. An unreasonable person is not always wrong, but stubborn.

In the university, as well, the concept of reason has spread in different directions, occurring not only directly in opposition to other uses of the term, but in contexts so different that its uses do not seem to conflict. In the academy, the term reason has become practically identical with rational, and occupies at least four quite different loci. Within Philosophy, the term still seems to refer to logicity in most of its ancient senses. But in Psychiatry, the apparently opposite term - irrational - refers not to someone who is illogical, but to a person who is clinically crazy; someone who can't be reasoned with. In Economics, the term has taken on a kind of psychological, motivational sense: a reasonable-rational person is s/he who works to maximize profits; a greedy person, who in other times might have been unreasonable in the sense of harmony with nature, and is now properly self-serving, and driving the economy in its righteous paths. Lastly, in the world of law, the notion of a reasonable person is utilitarian-pragmatic in another kind of way. Here, a reasonable person whose tastes and outlooks represent the mores of s/his community. And to the extent that each of us knows and identifies with these quite different senses of the term reason, reason itself has ramified within us, not finding any central focus.

A last bastion and outpost of reason can thus be reduced to one's personal taste: a reasonable person is someone with whom I can get along, personally.

In this ramification of reason the amoebic proliferation and spreading of reason from ratio=logical thinking to its more specialized disciplinary meanings, the concept of reason has, I think, lost any focus of its being the heart of the scientific probe of nature. It has, as well, taken on psychological and social meanings which refute the possibility that objectivity and reason are coterminous: reasonable is, in some of its

connotations, precisely a subjective judgement. The earlier idea of coming into harmony with reason and nature as the basis of the good life, is no longer available for most of us. Reason no longer, apparently, can form any certain obtainable basis for bringing meaning to our lives.

In the context of a current crisis in meaning, the sad fact is that the weakening and spreading of the concept of reason no longer provides a base which positively can provide meaning in life. Indeed, the opposite is more clearly the case: namely, that the loss of reason has led to the loss of positive science and a sense of the impossibility of any true objective reason - a skepticism about knowledge - nihilism.

#### **Cultural and Other Realisms:**

Allen Bloom's recent lament on the *Closing of the American Mind*, diagnoses the current crisis (of meaning?) in introducing his book this way:

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative...The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness...Openness - and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings - is the great insight of our times. (25-6)

Not only has truth been relativized, subverting its very meaning, but it has been taken from the realm of intellectual-cognitive truth, and moralized. We have, in Bloom's view abandoned the very pursuit of truth which had resided in considering the "natural rights" of man, and had led to the democracy and liberty of America. In taking up relativism, we are simultaneously abandoning the pursuit of truth in any objective sense, and forsaking the foundations of liberty.

Moreover, the relativism which Bloom condemns invokes body, desires, feelings - all of which work against the Platonic concept of truth which is available only through reason. Consider his damning criticism of Mead:

Sexual adventurers like Margaret Mead and others who found America too narrow told us that not only must we know others cultures and learn to respect them, but we could also profit from them. We could follow their lead and loosen up, liberating ourselves from the opinion tht our taboos are anything other than social constraints. We could go to the bazaar of cultures and find reinforcement for inclinations that are repressed by puritanical guilt feelings. All such teachers of openness had either no interest in or were actively hostile to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. (33)

Another critic of Mead, who attacked her relativism in his own restudy of Samoa, claimed that the truth was fudged in Mead's reporting that Samoan teeage girls got through the "Sturm and Drang" of adolescence quite easily: an argument about the universality of the human experience - what is fixed (innate) and what plastic (cultural)? Is everything up for grabs, or are there some "rules" of conduct which are particularly human? What, of reason; what, of the...heart?

Similarly, the issue of "values" has been played recently in response to an era of "Situation Ethics," a kind of utilitarian pragmatism in which there seem to be no rules for human conduct. These, too, are included as being against reason, in this context of a meaning crisis. Whatever "works," harming the least, helping the most defines reason, and leaves it floating in the river of wishy-washy vicissitudes.

My sense of the battle-ground in this particular form of the crisis, is that the notion of reason itself developed historically on quite narrow grounds. Reason, rationalism, rationality, even the concept of language, developed within a construct of human nature which was compared with other species. This involves a deep-rooted belief that the notion of human carries within it an implicit comparison with others. Humans are special, unique - due to reason.

Much of the present crisis in reason, especially in the context of relativism, has to do with a "residual" and fairly simplistic idea of reason. It leads to a rather fragile concept of reason, whose attack is not refuted by reconsidering reason, but either by abandoning it for ancient texts, or defending it narrowly on political, scientific, innatist, or moral grounds. Reason is not defeated or refuted - but diffused, left hollow.

**The Humanist Dilemma: The weakening of authority; the eclipse of reason.**

*Humanism is (was?) a remarkably successful attempt to place meaning, knowledge, reason, responsibility within human beings, rather than referring and deferring to some "external" authority to "tell us" how to be, what to think, and so on. Humanism has meant, therefore, an increased sense of freedom from authority, an outlook in which all people are able to come together to discuss and to decide how to live and how to govern ourselves. Whether the external authority was a deity or a monarch, each of us was rightfully - by being human - an equal being, deserving of certain inviolable rights and privileges. Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" (following Locke) is a very good example of humanism as it invests our personal and political being in the idea of a social contract among free-thinking persons.*

The dilemma, raised importantly by Rousseau, and elaborated since, particularly by Europeans, is that the concept of "reason" which permits us to be free and responsible, is not a primary human feature. More important are our feelings. Rousseau's fear, whose living hackles rise right now, is that humans cannot handle the sorts of freedom which reason demands. At some levels of our being, we seem to need and desire forms of authority. In modern parlance, we cannot handle unlimited liberty, and remain ungrounded if we depend only upon ourselves. We will be forced to "close" our minds, whenever the going gets tough. The literal religious and neo-conservative response to this loss of faith in ourselves is to "return" to (ancient) texts, whose authority is great/unlimited. "Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so!"

In the slightly earlier Hobbesian formulation of the notion of social contract, we would (voluntarily) replace a monarchical authority which was divinely inspired, with a voluntary monarchy, a state in which we submerged ourselves agreeably to the commonwealth or Leviathan. According to Leo Strauss this was "the movement away from the idea of monarchy as the most natural form of State to the idea of monarchy as the most perfect artificial state." In this idea context, we are enmeshed once again in the question of nature and reason: what is human (and moral) by our nature, and what is artifi-

cial. For Hobbes (and, I think, this is a Hobbesian moment in much of official America), "reason is, in principle, impotent."

For Hobbes - and for us - the nature of "what man is, what forces really determine him" lead us to "rules for the application of the traditional norms...especially the passions...vanity and fear."

One important aspect of the current crisis in meaning, is that we once again see reason as impotent, are pushed by various of the turns increasingly toward power to control the "passions" (passions viewed negatively, primarily vanity and fear). In this context of thinking that reason is impotent, more freedom can only lead to greater abuse and anarchy. Rather than inquire into the nature of reason, of newer ideas on the nature of being human, there is a tendency to react by the imposition of law and control.

*The Importance of being Important:* The Hobbesian response to the (fear of) nihilism is compounded by the recent weakening of belief in the nature of authority. Not only has the concept of the death of God driven us toward nihilism, but the more recent rise of television and other media has somehow "displaced" our experience from what and how we know. It is, at the present time, more important to be a "celebrity" than an authority - a person of some "importance" rather than someone of knowledge. While it doesn't necessarily hurt to know something, it is better to know someone or to be known: to be on "Nightline" or to be in "People" magazine; to be "hot" or "in." In an increasing sense, life has become "show biz." It is more important to be entertaining than anything else - this is what we pay for, and want more and more of, with increasing impatience. For those steeped in the classics, this harkens directly back to Plato whose major concern was to attempt to distinguish between truth and persuasion - certainly, from this point of view, the modern Sophists have captured our attention, and we worship at their shrines.

### **The Undermining of Science:**

For many Humanists, Science has been invoked and used in recent times, to represent reason and truth. The idea of Science has rested on Enlightenment principles that the nature of the human observer-trained as scientist, was to be objective in some clean and clear senses. The idea of Science as representing reason and truth resided, as well, on several

other contextual factors: 1) that Science was improving our lives and the world in "porgressive" ways - truth would set us free from many of life's burdens; 2) that Science is objective, thus apolitical; 3) that Science - rather scientists - would tell the truth accurately and, well, truthfully; 4) Science - rather scientific method - is a kind of changing thing, also progressive and cumulative when applied well through observation, description, experimentation, and so on; 5) probably, for many of its fans, Science has rested on mathematics, especially geometry, which in the Enlightenment meant Euclidean geometry, and where logic meant Aristotelian logic; 6) this concept of Science rests, as well, on the notion of the universe being primarily mechanical-material, where push can come clearly to shove; 7) study in other systems of theology and philosophy causes us to reexamine the very nature of how we have come to think about reality; 8) Scientific authority resides in an Enlightened population... .

Since WWII for Horkheimer in which weapons in their destructive sense far outweigh their progressive possibilities, in which the gossamer veil of world power rests on atomic annihilation, to Love Canal in the late '60's, there is an increasing questioning of what is scientific progress, and what is (ecological) suicide. With increasingly powerful technologies there now arises a serious wondering of whether we will enslave ourselves to the products of our knowledge (especially, perhaps, medical technologies, AI, and genetic engineering), or can use them beneficially. The question of what is beneficial and for whom, arises clearly in the present moment in the context of very divisive arguments about the "beginning" and "end" of life - which contribute in their turn - to religious "returns" to authority.

The issue of objectivity has arisen in several contexts, all of which may undermine the authority of Science. First, probably, has been the willingness of Science to be "used" in furthering the aims of governments: from the Manhattan Project to the present, where the National Academy of Sciences wavers between being the grantor of authority and the place which "brokers" Science, public policy/politics. Secondly, it is clear that military and big business get excited about new technologies, and push big money in the direction of the promoters of Science - it has become unclear where Science serves the truth and where Science serves the money/power interests of the (promoters of) Science. Thirdly, it has become

clear that Science lacks agreement on a series of fairly public issues - on almost any public interest law case, each side in a litigation hires a scientific "expert" as witness. This seems to dilute trust in the authority of Science, to imply that Science is "for sale" in the courts and public places, to the highest bidder...just another form of business.

Kuhn's review of the development of Science seemed, at least, to make Scientific progress as whimsical as the other arenas of life. In reviewing the cumulative progress of knowledge in Science as "revolutionary," he both politicized the methods of Science and hinted that there could be a good deal of whimsy and fashion in its practices and understandings - at least that is what many readers have inferred from reading his work. Success in Science, in this view, is increasingly a bandwagon effect, than a dedicated pursuit of truth for its own sake. Similarly, Watson's "Double Helix" made pursuit of Science's highest prize appear crass and totally opportunist - only heroes of the marketplace here. Doing Science, doing business squeezes truth, representing the highest bidder - the boundaries have blurred, the pursuit of truth either silly, or for suckers who cannot "compete" in the larger marketplaces...which now, at least, seem to control (the definition of) truth, as Plato feared.

Whereas Euclidean geometry seemed, a couple of centuries ago, to provide a very solid grounding to the space of being, there has been a sense of increasing uncertainty, of the conceptual basis of Science resting on sand, since the discovery of other geometries - each resting upon different assumptions of the nature of parallelism. Whereas logic, and reasoning - reason itself, perhaps - seemed to be clean and clear, there are now multiple logics. Each is consistent, perhaps, and clear about how to move through a "proof." Yet, at bottom (is there a "bottom"?), it's all assumption. The religious thinkers, accustomed to this, ask why not assume the deity. If it all rests upon belief, then there is only religion. In effect, Science has been co-opted and placed into an equal-but-different status with religious thinking: Scientific Evolutionism vs. Scientific Creationism. Science has been reduced from a method to probe nature and unpack her truths, to an adjective which can qualify, but can never state.

Since the Enlightenment, which presumed a cosmological model of the universe which is mechanical-material, where causality is notion which is quite clean and clear, the life sci-

ences have entered issues of history, of development and change, of directionality into our thinking and doing Science. The issue of the Human, what part our knowledge plays in observation, where the observer is located, in relation to what, and issues of uncertainty about all of this, now haunts thinking about Science. Science is computed not exactly by mathematics, but by statistics which infer, less exactly. But truth and certainty seem less available than they did, undermining, always undermining the very concept of truth.

As we consider more seriously the effects of the observer, we note that objectivity is also not as clean and clear as we had once assumed. Not only must we be careful to train our senses to read our instruments, but we discover that we have come to observation with particular observational lenses. While I think these can be cleansed and we can learn to see once again clearly, we now become aware that the canons of thought, that the very formulations of notions such as causality, of reason itself, are interwoven with particular (cultural) histories. Language and reason are now being reconsidered in the light, particularly, of new observations and descriptions of other species. Arguments are now occurring between the mechanists ("reductive naturalists") and others who are more "critical naturalists," not to mention those who still think that we reside somewhere outside of nature. Where are we observer-thinkers, passive observers of nature or doers of Science; and how does this affect the very foundations of Science?

Lastly, "faith" in Science seems to rest on people being Enlightened, educated, open, trained to reason and think and distinguish inference from description, knowledge from hearsay. It seems too easy for superstition, the search for nature's truths being abandoned to super-natural meanderings, to regain a hold upon our imaginations. Not a few Scientists these days, seem to be less than thoughtful, as dogmatic about Science as the religionists who feed their faith by reading tests rather than examining nature. When the reasoning reasoners become unreasonable, then one wonders if Science is not more occupied with promoting its enterprise, rather than with promoting the pursuit of truth.

### **The Authoritative Text:**

Historical scholarship - and problems in interpretation...There has been, for the last two centuries a split between the Enlightenment mechanist-materialists who treat the human being primarily as a physical body located within nature, and those who characterize the human particularly as a mind which is somehow "removed" from nature.

From the perspective of the mentalist-textualists, there are two domains of being, which demand separate and independent examination.

There is the domain of the sciences, whose world is made up of mechanical objects, where cause and effect are quite obvious. This is nature - or within nature. It derives from and follows the Platonic dualism of mind and body. Here body is mechanical-material. The observer/Scientist is objective (possibly), the method is empirical, experimental.

There is also the domain of the mind whose world is more-or-less independent of the natural world. Call it "art" or "artificial," it is the world constructed by humans being able to reason. It has assumed that the mental world lies outside of nature: call it "culture," whose history is the development of humans (mostly men) once they "got" language. It derives from the "essentialism" of Plato, in which the ideas or forms of objects is "other" or derived: idealism (formalism, structuralism,...).

As scholarship in the Humanities is principally of tests, this endeavor has been directed toward the reading and analysis of tests.

Authority, in this context, can be examined in terms of its most literal meaning: the author knows, the author means, intends, the author writes down the words s!he received from the deity, etc.

### **The Dilemma of Interpretation:**

A significant part of Western culture consists of literary works. They have become assimilated into that culture and have come to influence people's beliefs and values by being understood in a certain way. If they were understood very differently, our cultural tradition itself would be likely to be or become very different from what it is. The interpretation of literary works is thus

of considerable importance in shaping that cultural tradition. It seems desirable therefore to have a general characterization of what is involved in interpreting a literary work, is saying of a particular literary work that it means so-and-so. (p.3.)

*Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism.*

P.D. Juhl. Princeton:  
Princeton U. Press. 1980.

Here there has also been a blurring and fading of authority, and also for several different sorts of reasons. Within literary criticism, there is a sense that finding the truth, the author's intended meaning, the real meaning,...and so on, is next to impossible. For many thinkers, this is discouraging, or downright debilitation. Do all readings become interpretations? In the Biblical context, it would be very difficult to say what the diety means: all we have is some "claims" about meaning made by very vulnerable humans. If some text is "inerrant" - as literalists say about the Bible - we would not be able to say what reading is correct, or how contradictions would be settled, or if a word had changed in meaning since it was first uttered - no doubt within a different temporal and cultural context. Whom do we then trust to give us the "correct" meaning: the scholar, the preacher, the thinker, the scribe, the prophets, ourselves, our parents, teachers,...? Faced with this problem, many thinkers want to damn critical readings. Others fear that the idea of "claims" to the truth so weaken the possibility of truth, that they find themselves thinking there is no truth.

As historical scholarship has proceeded at an increasing pace, there is a deepening sense that the authority of "original" texts such as the Greek philosophers and the Biblical writings, has been weakened. Throughout history these texts have been altered as they have been translated, interpreted, interpolated. At different times, there have been various practices of translation and understanding: presumably, ancient Aramaic "maiden" becomes early Greek "virgin," opening the possibility of very different religious outlooks and stories. We now understand a fair amount about the nature of what works have meant, and how meanings have changed from time to time and place to place, within different cultural and temporal outlooks. Thus, going back to ancient times, in trying to un-

derstand the author-ity of original texts, we may feel it necessary to alter our present understandings, or to admit that we have (and time has) "played" with the truth and authority of those texts. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to be a "literal" reader of such texts. This has, it seems to me, caused us to wonder a great deal about the nature of ancient authority. Or it may cause us to "damn" time and history, to wishfully return to simpler, purer, surer, innocent,...times.

Do we still have the same enormous respect for Greek, say, or the times of the Hebrew and early Christian prophets? Do we think that Plato or Aristotle was "the" philosopher? Do we think that the Biblical prophets were spoken to directly by the deity? Can we read these authors critically and understandingly without granting them powerful authority, beyond our own? Can we walk through life, arm-in-arm with them, or must we remain their disciples? If we lessen their author-ity, in order to increase our own, do we destroy something about our own lives and destiny? When we call our study, "History," are we yearning for our own vanished parts?

These questions and some others haunt us, particularly in the modern debate about the curriculum in the Humanities: whether the "canon" of Great Books (read: Great Men) should be studied, or whether they should be actively shunned because they have resulted in "harmful" ideas - e.g., to the devaluation of women, to the opiate of religion directed toward those in poverty?

Are these books to be read fairly literally, or can they be read critically? If we are still (according to Whitehead) strongly influenced by Plato's thought, are we better armed to read him critically, or will we be so overwhelmed by his thinking, that we should better avoid him?

For all these reasons - and more - the issue of author-ity has become very complicated. A number of modern scholars have wanted to attempt to "undo" Western thoughts and metaphysics, attempting to go back to the "foundations" of Plato, and take another direction.

Heidegger's concept of a "destruction" and Derrida's notion of "deconstruction" are proclamations that the history of literary language has gotten us into deep waters from which no extrication is possible. In these contests, we now begin to hear of "cultural studies" replacing critical studies, and the written text being replaced by the concept of the "world-as-text."

MILLENNIALISM: the Christian calendar currently reads some 10 years to the next millennium. Tick-tock. Tick-Tock. Tick .....

Can we save ourselves? Who will save us?

The meaning of meaning is adrift, floating not so gently on waves agitated by all those sins, seven, deadly which have plagued the human kind since...time...began!? Greed, avarice, envy, revenge complete with pity and fear for dominance in our lives.

The millennium: the beginning of, the end of time. From skatology to eschatology, Woody Allen is right: love and death, love then death. Time gets framed in the moment of the millennium, like a hand-held mirror which reflects facial features, freezing the moment, freezing facial features, freezing blood's flowing...

Row, row, row your boat  
Gently down the stream,  
Merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is but a dream.  
(A round: around; and around.)

We thought, not so long ago, that we had virtually conquered plagues: polio, diphtheria, all fell to penicillin and to antibiotics. Now AIDS rises not merely to kill but to moralize; our minds turn from life to death. Drugs, crack, they heighten experience and simultaneously heighten fear, racism. Three-mile, Chernobyl, Valdez, there are no longer any islands. Will religion save and grant us grace or oppose, terrorize, fanatize?

Will the real Messiah show up in the year 2000, and save us - from what? From plagues; from ourselves? Will we recognize s!him this "time" - or will we, yet again, proclaim humans over deity? Thus Humanism evolves in meaning; thus Humanism equals hubris, as the clock tick-tocks towards the Millennium .-tockl

### **Rising Expectations:**

Zooml Up, Up and Awayl I want...what there is which I see in and on the NEWS every day.

More, I want more. Why? Why not? Houses and beauty and the largest and the best and...Why not? I want more!

Morel What is clear, what is obvious is that having is being, what I am worth is what I have is worth. If I do not have...everything...more and more, then I am smaller, diminished, decreasing. Unless I have more, am more, then I have less, am less.

My expectations rise when I least expect them to. Great expectations, I tell myself, are silly. What will be will be I tell myself, but the telling spreads itself out and thins, and those who listen hear less, care less. Unless, unless I grow into the expectations which excite, which increase, which...which...

I wonder what they'll write about me when I die: how many, how often, how much I...how much I? First I did, then I couldn't, then it seemed impossible, then I worried that...

I wished, oh I wished that someone would come along and recognize how wonderful..I wished to be. I wished to be. I found myself always smaller, moving, then moving backwards, falling down life's ladders as they sailed and my feet slipped, my hands could no longer grasp.

I wanted, oh how I wanted, and each day I wanted more, and what I had and was, was lessened in contrast to the would have been. The Oz where the rainbow meets the ground of my life which seems now like quicksand. Be still my imagination, be still my heart, which pounds with the excitations of the might have, the would have, the wish overtaking.