

Tribute to Roger Sworder

An Appreciation

By Harry Oldmeadow

Roger Sworder was an Australian scholar, teacher, poet and author. He was educated in England, studied at Oxford, and as a young man travelled widely in North Africa and the Middle East. He completed a doctorate on Plato at the Australian National University in Canberra. For many years Roger was Head of the Department of Humanities, La Trobe University Bendigo, in south-eastern Australia, and one of the principal architects of a course entitled Studies in Western Traditions. His special interests included Homer, the pre-Socratics, Plato, the philosophy of work in both West and East, more generally the traditions of India and China, and Romanticism (in both its literary and philosophical manifestations). He was deeply influenced by the work of René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy whilst Plato remained the Pole Star of his intellectual life. Roger's sensibility was traditional rather than modern which is to say, amongst other things, that he believed in the Divine, in the Intellect, in Revelation; he "thought" in symbols rather than abstractions; he was immune to what Guénon called the pseudo-mythologies of modern science; he knew, in Frithjof Schuon's words, that "Man's vocation is consciousness of the Absolute" (*The Play of Masks*, 1992, 82).

Roger's published works include *Mining, Metallurgy and the Meaning of Life* (1995), *Science and Religion in Archaic Greece: Homer on Immortality and Parmenides at Delphi* (2009), *A Contrary History of the West* (2011) and *Mathematical Plato* (2013), as well as a collection of poems, *Stop, Don't Read* (2013). His last book was *The Romantic*

Attack on Modern Science in England and America (2015), reviewed in *Sacred Web* 36. After a short illness Roger passed to the Further Shore in October, 2016.

It was my privilege to know Roger as a colleague, mentor and friend. After a funeral service in Bendigo's Sacred Heart Cathedral his family, friends and many former students gathered for a wake where we recalled his abiding influence on our lives. On that occasion I made the following remarks about Roger.

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*There is something obscure which is complete
before heaven and earth arose;
tranquil, quiet, standing alone without change,
moving around without peril.
It could be the Mother of everything.
I don't know its name, and call it Tao.*

What is this Tao? Well, as Lao Tzu also says, “he who knows does not say; he who says does not know”. Of course, Lao Tzu then went on to write a book on the subject! Roger loved these paradoxes which are so abundant in the Chinese mystics; his talks and lectures were sprinkled with Taoist conundrums. In the full amplitude of the term, the Tao is an immutable and ultimate reality, both immanent and transcendent, something which, in different times and places, has been called by many names: Being, One, the Good, the Absolute, God, Brahman, to refer only to those metaphysical and religious vocabularies with which Roger was most closely familiar. For Roger, the contemplation of this Reality, and the consequent alchemical transmutation of the soul, was the highest and most noble form of the human vocation, one which has been so derided, corrupted or ignored in the modern world. The contemplation of the Divine—whether in the natural order, in the “human form divine”, in sacred art, or in wordless meditation—was a *leitmotif* of his life. A formulation from the ancients which comes to mind when thinking about Roger's life and work is the nexus of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. For the postmodern critics and anti-philosophers, these ideals are merely “cultural productions” or “discursive constructs” to be dismantled

and laid bare. Roger had nothing but contempt for these impudent desecrations of the Wisdom of the Ages. He was a tireless advocate for Tradition in all its guises and an implacable critic of modernistic ideologies, especially of their baleful influence on intellectual life. As to the deconstructionists and their ilk, the masters of negation, we need only recall the adage of Roger's favourite poet, William Blake: "A fool sees not the same tree as a wise man". No, for Roger, Truth, Beauty and Goodness, clothed in variegated traditional forms, were timeless verities to which we should, each in his/her own faltering way, conform our being.

I spoke a moment ago about the contemplation of the Divine as the human vocation. But of course, as Roger believed so fervently, we each have a particular vocation, a calling, a form of work best suited to our nature. Roger understood his vocation primarily as a teacher. And what he wanted to teach was not what was fashionable, in vogue in the halls of the Academy at this or that moment, but nothing less than those immutable truths and axioms which are subject neither to the vagaries of fashion nor to the vicissitudes of time — the perennial philosophy, the spiritual patrimony of all humankind. What higher calling could there be? And, as most of you are well aware, Roger was an exceptional and inspirational teacher, whether as expositor, performer, provocateur or interlocutor. In his essay on Coleridge Roger remarks, "Like Plato, Wordsworth and Coleridge are fresh and natural, and find ways of saying the loftiest things in the simplest words". Roger too had this gift.

Roger was a man with a clear and penetrating mind, a creative Imagination, a generous heart and a beautiful soul, a man of noble character. Like all mortals he no doubt had his failings and limitations, but these were of a very minor order. On the death of Mohandas Gandhi George Orwell remarked that the Mahatma's sins and misdemeanours, gathered together, made a very paltry pile. I daresay the same might be said of Roger.

One of the figures who had a profound influence on Roger and whom he admired greatly was the art historian and scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy. Just recently Roger wrote a Foreword for a new edition of Coomaraswamy's classic study, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*. On the occasion of Coomaraswamy's death, one of his friends wrote the following words which I want to share with you. It seems to me

that they apply as well to Roger as to Coomaraswamy, and they express, albeit inadequately, something of my own love and respect for Roger:

Others have written the truth about life and religion and man's work. Others have written good clear English. Others have had the gift of witty exposition. Others have understood the metaphysics of Christianity and others have understood the metaphysics of Hinduism and Buddhism ... Others have seen the relationships of the true and the good and the beautiful. Others have had apparently unlimited learning. Others have loved; others have been kind and generous. But I know of no one else in whom all these gifts and all these powers have been combined ... no other living writer has written the truth in matters of art and life and religion and piety with such wisdom and understanding (Eric Gill, *Autobiography*, 1940, 174).

Roger's life, like Coomaraswamy's, was a rare and precious gift to all those interested in the life of the Spirit, those who hear, however faintly, the Call of the Infinite.

It has been said that the death of a learned and cultured man is akin to a library burning down. In Roger's case we may well say that not only has the library burnt down, but the art gallery and the music conservatorium as well. This afternoon we heard the celestial music of Johann Sebastian Bach. For those of us who quite properly feel sad and sorrowful at Roger's departure, let me conclude by recalling the words of Bach, spoken on his deathbed to his wife: "Don't cry for me, for I go where music is born."