

After addressing the phenomenon of the sacred from an individual (*Loneliness and Revelation*, 2010) and interpersonal perspective (*Circles of Meaning, Labyrinths of Fear*, 2012), Canadian philosopher, novelist, poet, gamer, trade unionist and neo-pagan acolyte Brendan Myers tackles it now from a socio-political perspective.

True to his deeply personal, candidly human and academically unconventional approach, the book is written from a first-person perspective, by way of forty meditations, which the author organises into an overture (on the genesis of the book), three main movements (respectively on the definition of civilisation, its woes and its curatives), and two interludes (on the settings and specific circumstances of the development of the author's pivotal thoughts and key arguments).

No pristine, sanitised, minimalistic and seemingly neutral prose is to be found in this book. Rather, although the logical structure and the logical stages of the author's key arguments are visible throughout, the reader encounters regularly lively accounts of lived experiences, explaining the thought processes through which the author eventually entertained certain issues as important, elaborated upon them creatively and critically, and evinced a number of conclusions. The declared stylistic model is Rousseau, and his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* in particular. Indeed, Rousseau's style and concerns inform much of the book, whether intentionally or not on the author's part, and both his *Confessions* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* can be said to have inspired Myers, at least in a formal sense.

As regards the first movement, the author's meditations cover a lot of ground, combining together classical and Christian philosophy, contemporary historiography and anthropology, as well as modern social and political science, in an attempt to distil the definition of civilisation—its essential meaning in a metaphysical sense. After identifying the recurring notion of civilisation as an “event” or “process” of transformation and differentiation (15<sup>th</sup> meditation), the conclusion that the author reaches is the following: “civilization is humanity's most metaphysical activity: it is the activity of humanity realizing itself, that is, making itself ‘real’, by making itself more and more an exemplar of its model of the ideal human being, the fully civilized person.” (16<sup>th</sup> meditation)

The second movement is the most Rousseauvian of all, for it covers as much ground as the

first one, but this time combining together as rich and as diverse a plethora of scholarly, scientific, literary and traditional sources that justify a critique of civilization, which is built also on exclusion, oppression, illusions, lies and extreme violence. The author's extensive knowledge of North-American indigenous culture and pre-Christian Irish mythology proves most helpful in this sense. Building from all of these sources, but especially from recent anthropological and archaeological studies, the author is led into a thought experiment, whereby humankind's state of nature is hypothesised, described and discussed, so as to make sense of the likely development of our most remote ancestors and their gradual establishment of civilization, its life-enabling potential and its life-destructive capacity.

The third and final movement examines the options left open on the table by the previous two movements. Civilization is a fact of human history and, probably, pre-history. Even indigenous, hippy and proto-hippy Romantic escapes from it (e.g. Germany's *Wandervogeler* movement; 38<sup>th</sup> meditation), including some successful ones in South-east Asia, are but attempts to redirect it, i.e. to give shape to an alternative, more humane civilization than the one causing the escaping. Like Rousseau, Myers does not want to reject or abandon civilization, the ills of which he can grasp far too well, but to help a better civilization to evolve from the existing one. Under this perspective, Myers makes use of the now popular concept of "civil commons" developed by fellow Canadian philosopher John McMurtry in the 1990s, namely "society's organized and community-funded capacity of universally accessible resources to provide for the life preservation and growth of society's members and their environmental life-host." (40<sup>th</sup> meditation) It is by focusing upon such life-enabling commons that human freedom, creativity, prosperity and wellbeing can thrive as widely as possible. Beneath and beyond political, religious and moral divides, life-sustaining and empowering commons can foster coherently the better side of civilization.

*Contra* much contemporary political philosophy and environmental thought, Myers' book is sincerely hopeful and optimistic. Fully aware of the past failures of entire civilizations and equally conscious of the momentous challenges facing our own today, he nonetheless acknowledges humankind's resilience, creativity and capacity for constructive coordination in the face of daunting obstacles. He does so upon the admirable basis of a multitude of intellectually intriguing sources that display as much erudition as profound sensitivity in their choice and presentation. It is not just the argumentative content that makes this book noteworthy, but also its literary, even lyrical character. As such, it will appeal to the

admirers of Rome's Lucretius, France's Montaigne and Descartes, Helvetia's Rousseau and, in more recent times, Iceland's Páll Skúlason and Italy's Flavio Baroncelli. I for one, on the most personal note possible, enjoyed reading it.