

THE WISDOM OF HOLY FOOLS IN POSTMODERNITY

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[It has been claimed that in postmodernity storytelling and reason are no longer the way to wisdom. The author argues here that there remains another path to wisdom, namely, that of the holy fool (mōrosophia). This path retrieves the tradition of foolish wisdom from the Bible and Eastern religions, the negative theology of Nicholas of Cusa, and Erasmus's Laus stultitiae. It argues that the wisdom of the holy fool is characterized by irony, fantasy, and knowledge-illuminated-by-love.]

THE WAY TO WISDOM for most people has often been through stories and reasoning. *Mythos*, especially in the form of dramatic narratives explaining the origin and operation of the universe and the place of humans within it, is, in the early stages of humanity, a common medium to express the communal fund of wisdom that, together with rituals and ethics, shapes the social reality and is in turn shaped by it. In addition, *logos*, particularly as practiced in philosophy, not only transmits the perennial truths of the community to successive generations but also inculcates the love of wisdom by which humans can live the good life.

However secure and reliable paths *mythos* and *logos* have been to wisdom for past generations, they have lost much of their appeal in our post-modern age. Contemporary women and men, at least in the West, have become deeply disillusioned with modernity's myth of progress. The "horror" and "terror" of history, the ghosts which modernity claimed to be able to exorcize by means of reason, especially instrumental reason, have not vanished.¹ On the contrary, they have grown exponentially, as was attested by the two world wars and the many genocides of the 20th century. Thanks

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¹ The phrase "horror" and "terror" of history is taken from Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 11; see also Mircea Eliade.

precisely to the technological innovations spawned by the Enlightenment's worship of reason and progress, our capacity for barbarity and inhumanity has been refined to the extreme. While technological reason has no doubt improved the quality of life in many respects, the monumental failure of modernity's myth of progress has rendered any talk of moral progress through the application of universal reason a sick joke. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, there is a widespread sense of hopelessness and fear because of reason's proven inability to predict and control the future. Humans are seen not as subjects but objects of history, driven by an anonymous and despotic power whose intentions and direction are beyond their ken. Out of this rootlessness and despair is born a profound distrust toward reason, both philosophic and instrumental, as a path to wisdom. Forged into a primarily deconstructive tool to unmask oppressive structures, reason remains impotent in offering a constructive vision of reality.

If Enlightenment's goddess of reason has been dethroned, *mythos* fares no better as a pedagogue of wisdom. Postmodernity has been characterized by Jean-François Lyotard as "incredulity toward meta-narratives."² Whereas stories and storytelling thrive only when people preserve an appreciation for the past and the future, postmodernity, with the decline of the myth of progress, has lost a sense of history and is fixated on the present. The past becomes merely a theme park to visit occasionally for entertainment, and the future is reduced to being a momentary prolongation of the present without a meaningful *telos*. Not surprisingly, recent commentators speak of the "end of history" in our contemporary culture with its "compressed time."³ Postmodernity's deconstruction of mimetic imagination leads not merely to the end of this or that "*métra-récit*," but to the end of story *sic et simpliciter*. Thus, in postmodernity, the royal road to wisdom by means of *mythos* and *logos* is barred, at least for those who have experienced the tragic consequences of the modern myth of progress. The question is raised as to whether there remains for them other byways to reach the same destination.

In this article I explore what has been called "holy folly" or "crazy wisdom" or "foolish wisdom" as an alternative route to rekindle the love of wisdom in the hearts of contemporary women and men.⁴ As is well known,

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1984; original French ed. 1979) xxiv.

³ See, for instance, Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free, 1992).

⁴ Note that by exploring this alternative road to wisdom rather than *mythos* and *logos*, I do not necessarily grant the essential point of postmodernity that there are no objective or universal norms that underlie, or ought to underlie, our judgments about what is true and good. For a possible way to overcome postmodern skepti-

the figure of the “wise fool”—alternatively, the paradoxical notion that the fool may be wise and that the wise may be foolish—has a long and distinguished pedigree, not only in the Christian tradition (e.g., the “fool in Christ” or the “fool for Christ’s sake”) but also in other religions (e.g., the Sufi *majzub* and the Hindu *avadhuta*). In some religious traditions, in particular Zen, “holy madness” has been widely used by the *roshi* (teacher) as a shock technique to induce *satori* or enlightenment (e.g., shout, *koan*, hand-clapping, and physical violence). In the political realm, there was the figure of the court fool or jester in his traditional costume of motley, cap and bells, and *marotte* who was allowed to satirize the morals of the powerful and comment on the affairs of the state with impunity. Furthermore, in the West, there exists a large body of writings by the learned and wise in praise of folly, among which Erasmus’s *Moriae encomium* is the most outstanding. Indeed, after the 16th century the figure of the wise fool had become so popular that he was an omnipresent fixture of Elizabethan drama, so much so that—it was once claimed—there was no play of any merit without a fool.

The intention of this article is not to provide an account of how foolish wisdom or the wisdom of folly has functioned in diverse fields of human endeavor but to show how this peculiar way of knowing, which is distinct from *mythos* and *logos*, can, if properly practiced, lead to the recovery of the love of wisdom in our postmodern age. More precisely, I argue that it is not just any kind of foolish wisdom but only the wisdom of the *holy* fool that leads to the love of wisdom. Accordingly, though the approach is primarily epistemological, it will be necessary to describe in some detail the various characteristics that distinguish holy madness from its numerous counterfeits. My article first describes briefly the three paths to wisdom—*mythos*, *logos*, and if a neologism be permitted, *mōrosophia*—and compare their respective characteristics. Secondly, I explicate the epistemological process involved in foolish wisdom and the philosophical and theological foundation for this kind of wisdom. Thirdly, I show how this way of knowing is congenial to the postmodern ethos. I end with the argument that for crazy wisdom to lead us to *philosophia*—the love of wisdom—in postmodernity, it has to be the wisdom of the *holy* fool.

FROM MYTHOS TO LOGOS TO MŌROSOPHIA

Mythos as an Imaginative Way to the Community’s Wisdom

Almost every civilization and religion has stories about the origin of the universe and of the human race. These cosmogonic myths, involving as a

cism and nihilism on the basis of Bernard Lonergan’s cognitional theory, see Hugo A. Meynell, *Postmodernism and the New Enlightenment* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1999) 18–55.

rule supernatural beings, offer “explanations” of the natural order and cosmic forces. In addition, they convey in dramatic form the self-understanding of a particular group of individuals bound together by a common race or language or political arrangement. Periodically re-enacted through rituals, they reinforce the group’s identity and social cohesiveness and, through further re-telling, preserve and expand the wisdom of the community.⁵ Moreover, these stories do not merely transmit a set of ideas clothed in metaphors and allegories but also make a truth claim, albeit implicit, about them as embodying the communal fund of wisdom. Consequently, they also prescribe behaviors that accord with the community’s wisdom and proscribe those that contravene it. Thus, new members are socialized into the community by being told these myths, by taking part in their ritualistic enactments, and by observing the moral code they entail.⁶

Myths do not of course concern exclusively the origin of the universe and the beginnings of a tribe or a nation, nor do they represent a “primitive,” precritical, prescientific stage in the intellectual development of humankind, nor are they always connected with religion and rituals. *Mythos* can mean simply anything delivered by word of mouth, narrative, and conver-

⁵ I prescind here from the debate about the priority of ritual over myth, as proposed, for example, by W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, new ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1914), and propagated by Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, 2nd rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1937) and Arthur M. Hocart, *The Progress of Man: A Short Survey of His Evolution, His Customs, and His Works* (London: Methuen, 1933).

⁶ For studies on myth as a way to transmit the common wisdom of the group, see the classical works of Giambattista Vico, Max Müller, Andrew Lang, Carl Jung, Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mircea Eliade, and George Sorel. According to Vico, myths are neither false narratives nor allegories; they are rather the collective mentality of a given age (“The fables of the gods are true histories of customs”). His view went counter to the Enlightenment’s (e.g., Herder’s) generally negative view of myths commonly regarded as pardonably false beliefs. Müller interpreted mythologies as embodiments of the evolution of language. Lang rejected Müller’s philological approach to myths and saw them as survivals of earlier social norms. Carl Jung’s theory of the collective is well known. For Malinowski, myths express, enhance, and codify beliefs; they safeguard and enforce morality; and they vouch for the efficacy of rituals. Lévi-Strauss placed myths in their social and economic contexts, with special reference to the groups’ kinship systems. In his structuralist interpretation, myths incorporate and exhibit the binary oppositions which are present in the structure of the society and overcome these oppositions by making them intellectually and socially tolerable. In contrast, Eliade relates the content of myths to general human religious interests rather than to their particular cultural and socio-economic contexts. Myth, for him, narrates sacred history; it relates events that took place *in illo tempore*. Sorel distinguished between the truth (or falsity) and effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of myths and regarded them as beliefs about the future (not the past, like most other theorists of myth) which embodies the deepest inclinations of some particular groups.

sation. In contemporary parlance it tends to signify a fiction, but a fiction that conveys a truth too deep to be communicated adequately by means of discursive reasoning.⁷ This sense of myth concerns us especially here. It refers to storytelling not just as an art form but as epistemology and rhetoric, a way of knowing and communicating philosophic and religious truths that affect human living so profoundly and extensively that they cannot be fully known and conveyed by logic and concepts. Myth is the vehicle of ultimate meaning about the divine, the world, the self, and other selves. Rather than relying on discursive reason, myth makes use of the imagination as a means of access to reality. Through its distinctive forms—narratives and symbols—it points to a reality beyond itself and thus contains in itself a “surplus of meaning.”⁸ Because myths concern the fundamental symbols of human existence, and because their function is to “cosmicize” the world, that is, making it understandable and livable, they are taken seriously. However, they are not understood literally, that is, not as reporting the facts as they are. In this sense, myths have been “broken.”

As a way of knowing, myth-making or storytelling presents the wisdom of the community not as a system of clearly and definitively formulated truths but as a dance of metaphors that guide the community’s thinking and acting. Storytelling resists all attempts to encapsulate wisdom in timeless propositions and freeze them in a fixed time and space. Storytellers do not prize uniformity, consistency, and linearity. No story is told the same way twice; rather, the shape of the story depends on the audience, the context, and the purposes for which the story is told. In some way, the story is the common creation of its teller and listeners. The very act of storytelling and myth-making assumes that change, emendation, revision, expansion, and plurality are the stuff of life. Storytelling also presupposes that human beings are primarily agents or doers—storymaking and storytelling—

⁷ Not all theorists of myth accept the explanatory function of myth. Whereas there are scholars who insist on the explanatory power of myth, though not in the literalist way, others prefer to emphasize the social and psychological functions of myth (e.g., B. Malinowski’s functionalism), or to regard myth as a kind of language with a surface and deep structure composed by invariant features. E. Thomas Lawson groups recent explanatory approaches under four types which he terms “the theory of formal continuity but idiomatic discontinuity,” “the theory of conceptual relativism,” “the theory of rational dualism,” and “the theory of situational logic.” See his “The Explanation of Myth and Myth as Explanation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (1978) 507–23. See also Jack Carloye, “Myths as Religious Explanations,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980) 175–89.

⁸ For this concept, see the works of Paul Ricoeur, in particular his *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967) and *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University, 1981).

within the continuum of past, present, and future and that who they are is revealed in their actions that make up their life stories. Moreover, storytelling posits that stories, even tragic or absurd ones, make sense, otherwise they cannot be told with the hope that listeners will get their points. Ultimately, it is assumed that the story of the whole human history will make sense, that at the heart of reality there is wisdom, even though what the universal meaning will be cannot be known now but only at the end, since the story is still ongoing.⁹

Logos as the Way to Wisdom through Printed Texts

If human beings are myth-making and myth-telling animals; if “the symbol gives rise to thought” (Paul Ricoeur); and if human understanding is inevitably an essentially *temporal* event, a dynamic and open-ended process of interpretation upon which history exercises its influence,¹⁰ what has brought about the depreciation of *mythos* as a way to wisdom in the West? Contrary to popular perception, the cause of the eclipse of myth as a way of knowing reality and hence as a path to wisdom is not the contrast between *mythos* and *logos* as epistemological instruments, the former allegedly naive and archaic and the latter critical and scientific. It is now widely recognized that the epistemology of empirical sciences, for all its vaunted claims to objectivity and exactness, is deeply metaphorical. Even the rise of Greek philosophy—the discovery of *logos*—did not come about by leaving *mythos* behind. Indeed, Greek myths such as those in Hesiod’s *Theogony* already contain a striking degree of rationality, as is testified by the fact that among the gods there are personifications of concepts such as wisdom, right, lawfulness, justice, and peace. Whereas it is true that Heraclitus and Xenophanes explicitly attacked the accepted mythologies, Sophists such as Protagoras and Prodicus made use of myth as an explanatory tool.¹¹ Plato himself regarded myth as an ally in the working out of a

⁹ On the art of storytelling, see John Navone and Thomas Cooper, *Tellers of the Word* (New York: Le Jacq, 1981) and Kevin M. Bradt, *Story as a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

¹⁰ For this notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, see the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Truth and Method*, second, revised ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989). For helpful general studies of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, see *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997); Jean Grondin, *Introduction à Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Paris: Cerf, 1999); and Lawrence K. Schmidt, *The Epistemology of Hans-Georg Gadamer: An Analysis of the Legitimation of Vorurteile* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

¹¹ For studies of the Sophists’ use of myth, see Heinrich Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik: Das Bildungsideal des eu legein in seinem Verhältnis zur Philosophie des 5. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1912) and Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals*

philosophy. For him, myth not only offers illuminating insights into realities that elude precise explanations but also is particularly appropriate for expressing changing features of the world of becoming.¹²

It is true that the distinct form of *mythos* is narrative and that of *logos* is discursive reasoning. However, this difference did not of itself lead to the depreciation of *mythos* as a way of knowing. Rather this was due primarily to the move from orality to literacy. With the rise of writing and literacy, orality through which myths and stories are transmitted declined and as the result of this decline the way of thinking in abstract terms and the tendency to viewing the world in mutually exclusive terms increased substantially. Not only the knower became separated from the known, but also the literate from the illiterate. With Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, this separation became vastly exacerbated. As Walter Ong has shown, the printing press diffused knowledge as never before, set universal literacy as a serious goal, made possible the rise of modern science, and altered social and intellectual life.¹³

The invention of the printing press aided and abetted the rise of modernity. In return, modernity favored reading and writing over storytelling and listening; information and proofs over stories; texts, preferably portable (e.g., pocket edition and paperback) that can be read in private and controlled over the free and unpredictable to-and-fro of conversation; the written contract over an oral agreement. The printed text becomes the privileged path to knowledge and wisdom. The truth is now inscribed and located in the text, and because it is written down, the truth remains unchangeable and permanent. Indeed, unless recorded in texts, nothing is reliable, authoritative, and true, as is suggested by the expression "as it is written" (today, the equivalent expression is "as seen on TV"!). Furthermore, those who can read texts are "authorities" and have power over the illiterate. The latter are dependent on the former to know what the text says, or more precisely, what they say what the text says.

of Greek Culture, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford University, 1939) vol. I, book 2, chap. 3.

¹² For Plato's use of myth, see Janet Smith, *Plato's Use of Myth as a Pedagogical Device* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1985); and Nickolas Pappas, *Plato's Use of Myth: Myth and Its Audience* (Gambier, Ohio: s.n., 1981).

¹³ See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1988) 117–18. See also his "Worship at the End of the Age of Literacy," in *Faith and Contexts* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992) 1.175–88; "Writing, Technology, and the Evolution of Consciousness," in *Faith and Contexts*, vol. 3 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995) 3.202–14; *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1982); and *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967).

In the process, the written text itself becomes the channel of truth and wisdom and the source of power and privilege. Coming to know the truth is made possible only through an objective and scientific interpretation of the text, especially classics and sacred scriptures. As a consequence, truth becomes a commodity at the disposal of the intellectual elite and the powerful class, and *logos* is an instrument for reasoned and discursive argument. By the same token, oral myth-making and storytelling are considered an inferior, imprecise, primitive guide to truth and wisdom. It is no accident that since the 19th-century myth has often been sharply distinguished from history which alone concerns with reality. Mythic consciousness is judged to represent an inferior and primitive stage of mental development incapable of expressing an abstract philosophical truth which should now be made accessible by means of demythologization.¹⁴

Even though *logos* as a path to knowledge and wisdom is in practice reserved for a few, it is thought by modernity to be universal, at least potentially, since everyone can be taught how to read and hence have access to texts. Furthermore, when wedded to technology, *logos* became principally instrumental reason, and out of this marriage was born the myth of progress. But as has been hinted, the child has become totally unruly and unpredictable, and its future, to judge from the havoc it has played on the human family in the 20th century, remains under threat.

Mōrosophia: The Path of Foolish Wisdom

The paradoxical idea that the fool may be wise, even though the idea was not to achieve its fullest expression until the Renaissance, was as old as humanity itself, since it is a common experience that the untutored and simple-minded, including children, can penetrate to profounder truths than the lettered and the learned. Jesus alluded to this fact when he gave thanks and praise to God his Father for having hidden from the learned and the clever what he has revealed to the merest children.¹⁵ He himself at the age of twelve amazed the teachers in the Temple with his intelligence.¹⁶ Heraclitus had already observed that much learning does not teach wisdom, implying the reverse that wisdom can be possessed by the unlearned.¹⁷

It is important to note that the “fool” who is said to be wise is not

¹⁴ On demythologization, see Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958) and *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). See also *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

¹⁵ See Matthew 11:25.

¹⁶ See Luke 2:46–47.

¹⁷ See *Fragment 40*. See Heraclitus of Ephesus, *Fragments* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991).

necessarily the same as the empty-headed, the feeble-minded, the dull-witted, the idiot, the simpleton, or the buffoon, though in his or her behavior he or she may resemble any one of these. Because of this similarity, the harmless fool is often tolerated by society, someone to be pitied or to be made fun of, and sometimes even venerated because he or she is thought to be under God's special protection. However, differently from the other kinds of the mentally deficient, the "wise fool" is believed to possess a source of knowledge that is more akin to supernatural and inspired wisdom than to the information accumulated through formal education. Moreover, it is necessary to distinguish fools who are born that way (the "natural") from artificial or professional fools such as court and dramatic fools who affect foolishness for the license to behave and speak as they please with impunity.

Despite all these differences, fools of various types have several things in common. First, fools are considered to lead a carefree and even happy life, since they are not intelligent enough to remember the past and be tortured by the memory of faults and failures or to anticipate the future and suffer anxiety before the unknown. Ignorance is indeed bliss! Second, because fools are not supposed to possess intelligence, they are not expected to abide by the conventions and customs of society. They are "all-licensed," allowed to say and do what they please without fear of consequences. Third, when their foolishness is extrapolated into a wider social context, their non-conformity can be turned into ideological iconoclasm, their naturalism into social anarchy, and their verbal inhibition into literary satire. Fourth, since the fool's wisdom is not derived from normal intelligence, much less formal education, i.e. from *mythos* and *logos*, it is assumed that the fool follows another path to wisdom; that his or her wisdom is not something earned and learned but granted and revealed. More than anything else, foolish wisdom is seen as a gift of knowledge, a flash of intuition, an insight of revelation. To anticipate our discussion of Thomas à Kempis, Nicholas of Cusa, and Erasmus of Rotterdam, foolish wisdom is akin to "holy simplicity," "learned ignorance" or "*stultitia*." Foolish wisdom is not knowledge nourished by myths and stories nor derived from printed texts and reasoned arguments. Rather it is *sophia* or *sapientia* or illumination of the mind, singular and sudden and received, which stands in contrast to the common wisdom of the world, the laborious *scientia* of the learned, and the technical expertise of the specialist.

FOOLISHNESS AS A WAY TO WISDOM

Folly as Virtue

The concept of foolish wisdom, first fully articulated in the Renaissance, has an ancient history. The archetypal wise fool is Socrates who explicitly

claimed that his wisdom derived from his awareness of his ignorance and whose distinctive teaching method consisted in exposing the foolishness of the wise.¹⁸ Jesus, whom Christian tradition proclaims as the *Logos* and the Wisdom of God, was regarded during his lifetime as “insane” by his family and was deemed by his opponents as being possessed by Beelzebub.¹⁹ Not only was his behavior scandalous to the religious establishment, but also his teaching, from his “beatitudes” to his parables, challenged the Sacred Text and offended traditional wisdom.²⁰ Even Peter, who should have known better, was shocked by Jesus’ prediction of his passion and death and had to be reminded that he was judging “not by God’s standards but by human standards,”²¹ an anticipation of Paul’s contrast between “God’s folly” and the “wisdom of this world.” Jesus’ words to those who wish to follow him represent the height of folly: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross and begin to follow in my footsteps.”²²

The Cross of Christ as the paradigm of God’s folly—foolish wisdom and wise foolishness—is elaborated at length by Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians.²³ To the Christians attempting to reconcile their faith with the philosophies of the day, Paul said that he had been sent by Christ to preach the gospel, but “not the wisdom of discourse,” that is, by employing the technique of the philosopher or the rules of studied eloquence and artificial rhetoric (the *mythos* and *logos* of our day) “lest the cross of Christ be rendered void of its meaning.” Quoting Isaiah 29:14, Paul writes that God will “destroy the wisdom of the wise and thwart the cleverness of the

¹⁸ On the Socratic method, see Rebecca B. Pagen, “Socratic Method and Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Early Dialogues.” Ph.D. diss. (University of California, Santa Barbara, 1999); and Kenneth Seeskin, *Dialogue and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1987).

¹⁹ See Mark 3:21–22. I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Irwin Blank, for drawing my attention to the Hebrew tradition of wisdom within which Jesus stood. In this article, because of space limitations, I prescind from this tradition. Perhaps, the fact that wisdom in the Hebrew tradition is often limned in female imagery was an ironic subversion of the androcentric custom of associating wisdom with male figures.

²⁰ For portrayals of Jesus as a Cynic sage, see the works of Burton L. Mack and John Dominic Crossan who attempt to portray Jesus as free of eschatology: Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) and John Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

²¹ See Mark 8:33.

²² Matthew 16:24. For a presentation of Jesus as Foolish Wisdom, see Elizabeth-Anne Stewart, *Jesus the Holy Fool* (Franklin, Wisc.: Sheed & Ward, 1999).

²³ See 1 Corinthians 1:17–25. For studies of Pauline “foolish wisdom,” see David R. Nichols, “The Strength of Weakness, the Wisdom of Foolishness: A Theological Study of Paul’s *Theologia Crucis*.” Ph.D. diss. (Marquette University, 1992).

clever." In the absurdity of the Cross, "a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for Greeks," God's power has "turned the wisdom of this world into folly" since "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom." Paul urges the person who wants to become "wise in a worldly way" to "become a fool" so that he or she "will really be wise, for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."²⁴ Paul himself acknowledges that he has become "a fool for Christ's sake" so that the Corinthians might become "wise in Christ."²⁵

This Pauline "fool in Christ" or "fool for Christ's sake" tradition was later developed into a spiritual discipline and became an important feature of Christian monasticism.²⁶ The Desert Fathers of the third and fourth centuries were enthusiastic practitioners of the foolishness of God. While many of them were illiterate, a few were highly educated. In self-effacement they pretended to be stupid or ignorant so as to learn humility from the contempt of others. This foolishness (Jesus' exhortation to "deny themselves and take up the cross") was not limited to giving up family, material possessions and career but also included the renunciation of the ego-personality, sometimes to such extremes that those practicing fools acquired the reputation of actually being mad.

This spiritual practice of holy folly was continued in the Russian Orthodox Church by those who were called *yurodive* who were prominent particularly during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. After the 17th century, however, the figure of the holy fool vanished from the Russian religious scene, though he lingered on as a character in Russian literature, as testified by Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*.²⁷ Furthermore, with the dawning of the Age of Reason, holy fools virtually disappeared. As Michel Foucault has shown, this is the time of the "great confinement" in which mad people and vagrants were no longer allowed to roam freely but were publicly humiliated, beaten, and locked up in asylums or workhouses.²⁸

So far I have discussed foolish wisdom in Christianity and in the West. But the notion is not an exclusively Christian and Western phenomenon. It is also practiced in Sufism where it is known as "the path of blame." Some

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:18.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:10.

²⁶ For an account of the "fool for Christ's sake" tradition in Christianity, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Fools for Christ: Essays on the True, the Good, and the Beautiful* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1955) and John Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1980).

²⁷ See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett, rev. Avrahm Yarmolinski (New York: Heritage, 1966). For an insightful study of *The Idiot*, see Dennis P. Slattery, *The Idiot: Dostoevsky's Fantastic Prince: A Phenomenological Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983).

²⁸ See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965).

Sufi mystics are known for their strange behavior as well as for their heretical doctrine of their identification with the divine. Like their Christian counterparts, Sufi practitioners of “crazy wisdom” pursued freedom and humility without concern for worldly opposition.²⁹

In Hinduism, there is the figure called *avadhuta*, a Sanskrit term meaning literally “the one who has cast off [all concerns].” The distinguishing characteristic of the *avadhuta*, as implied by the word, is total indifference to one’s fate in the world. Such a person has no spouse, children, home, job, social responsibility, or political obligation. As a symbol of one’s utter detachment, the Hindu renunciate, as some “fools for Christ’s sake” did, would walk about naked. In addition to the *avadhuta*, there is also the figure of the *mast*, a Hindi word meaning “numskull,” God-intoxicated individuals who roam the streets of India and whose behavior suggests psychotic disturbance. Lastly, the *baul*, a Bengali word meaning “mad” or “confused,” are religious eccentrics whose quest for God on the path of devotion [*bhakti*] takes precedence over everything else.³⁰

Tibetan Buddhism also has its share of eccentric *lamas* (gurus) who use weird methods to initiate their disciples into enlightenment and of “mad lamas” (*smyon-pa*) with their rejection of the monastic tradition, ecclesiastical hierarchy, societal conventions, and book learning.³¹ Finally, the

²⁹ On Sufi mysticism, see the two helpful volumes *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* and *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1987 & 1991) with an abundant bibliography on Sufism. See also Krishna Prakash Bahadur, *Sufi Mysticism* (New Delhi: Ess Ess, 1999); H. Wilberforce Clarke, *An Account of Sufi Mysticism* (Edmonds, Wash.: Near Eastern, 1994); Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism and Sharia* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1986); A. J. Arberry, *Sufism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950); and his, *Muslim Saints and Mystics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); and Reynold Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1921).

³⁰ For an informative exposition of the practice of crazy wisdom in non-Christian religions, see Georg Feuerstein, *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus* (New York: Paragon House, 1991) 14–53. My description of the tradition of foolish wisdom in Asian religions owes much to Feuerstein’s work. On the *avadhuta*, see *Avadhuta Gita* (The Song of the Ever-Free), ed. Swami Dattatreya et al. (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1988) and Jaya Chamaraja Wadiyar, *Avadhuta: Reason and Reverence* (Bangalore: Indian Institute of World Culture, 1958).

³¹ On Tibetan or Vajrayāna Buddhism, see John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1995); Robert A. F. Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Surya Das et al., *Awakening the Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World* (New York: Broadway, 1997); Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1995); and Austine Waddell, *Tibetan Buddhism, With Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology, and in Its Relation to Indian Buddhism* (New York: Dover, 1972).

adepts of Zen Buddhism make use of what can be called shock techniques such as sudden shouting, physical beatings, paradoxical verbal responses, and riddles in order to teach enlightenment.³²

Foolishness as a Path to Wisdom

From what I have noted, foolishness, as rejection of the world to concentrate solely on spiritual matters, is practiced as a means to cultivate humility, to imitate Christ, to unite oneself with the divine, or to reach enlightenment. But it is also a pedagogical device to lead others to wisdom. This aspect places the stress on the second member of the oxymoron “foolish wisdom” and is admittedly more emphasized in Eastern than in Western religious tradition. There is no doubt that for the proponents of “foolish wisdom”—Paul, the “fools for Christ’s sake,” the Sufi mystics, the Hindu *avadhutas*, *masts*, and *bauls*, the Tibetan adepts, and the Zen masters—foolishness is a path to true wisdom, however this is defined. The question then must be asked: What is, epistemologically speaking, so distinct about “foolishness” or “madness” or “folly” that it can lead to wisdom, just as *mythos* and *logos* claim to do?

In Christian theology, “negative theology” or “apophatic theology” emphasizes God’s transcendence and our radical inability to know God.³³ Our knowledge of God is limited to what God is not, and therefore must end in ignorance and worshipful silence. This theology, first developed by the Cappadocian Fathers, in particular Gregory of Nyssa, has always been a central feature of the mystical tradition.³⁴ For example, according to the

³² For Zen Buddhism’s techniques of enlightenment, see Garma Chen-chi Chang, *The Practice of Zen* (New York: Harper, 1959); Daisetz T. Suzuki, *The Awakening of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987); Dennis G. Merzel, *Beyond Sanity and Madness: The Way of Zen Master Dogen* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1994); *Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dogen*, ed. Kazuaki T. Dogen (Boston: Shambhala, 1999).

³³ By taking negative theology as an example of “foolish wisdom” I do not intend to mean that the former is to be equated with the latter but only that there is in negative theology a conscious recognition, akin to wise foolishness, that human reason and discourse are ultimately incapable of knowing and speaking about God as God is. On negative theology, see Thomas Edwards, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999) and Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Beverly Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001); and Willi Oehmüller, *Negative Theologie heute: Die Lage der Menschen vor Gott* (Munich: Fink, 1999).

³⁴ See Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nyssa* (Paris: Aubier, 1953) and Walther Völker, *Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1955).

sixth-century mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the union between the soul and God, its “deification,” is achieved by a process of “unknowing,” in which the soul leaves behind the perceptions of the senses as well as the reasoning of the intellect. The soul enters a darkness in which it will be increasingly illuminated by the “ray of divine darkness” and brought ultimately to the knowledge of the ineffable Being that transcends affirmation and negation alike.³⁵ Similarly, according to the English mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*, human reason is radically incapable of knowing God. The “cloud of unknowing” which lies between God and the human intellect is not pierced by the intellect but by “a sharp dart of love.”³⁶ Thus, there is an essential element of ignorance in our knowledge of God.

The philosophical and theological foundation for “foolish wisdom” was established by two men deeply indebted to the mystical tradition of the “Brothers of the Common Life” known as followers of the *devotio moderna*, namely, Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471) and Nicholas of Cusa (ca. 1400–1464). Thomas is probably the author of the influential spiritual manual *Imitatio Christi* in which he urges Christians to emulate Christ the Fool through “holy simplicity.”³⁷ The way of life of pietistic simplicity and humility recommended by Thomas is not very different from that of the “fools for Christ’s sake” and the crazy-wise adepts of Eastern religions. Like them, he believes that nothing is more useful than self-knowledge and self-contempt.

Nicholas of Cusa, the author of *De Docta Ignorantia*, defends two basic principles. First, “*docta ignorantia*” or “learned ignorance” is the highest

³⁵ See Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. G. E. Rolt (New York: Macmillan, 1920). For studies on Dionysius’s negative theology, see Donald F. Duclow, “The Learned Ignorance: Its Symbolism, Logic and Foundations in Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa.” Ph.D. diss. (Bryn Mawr College, 1974); Walther Völker, *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei pseudo-Dionysius* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1958); and Edith Stein, *Wege der Gotteserkenntnis: Dionysius der Areopagit und sein Symbol* (Munich: Kaffke, 1979).

³⁶ See *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1981). For studies on this work, see William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Fordham University, 1967); Constantino S. Nieva, *The Transcending God: The Teaching of the Author of The Cloud of Unknowing* (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1969); and Bradley Holt, *The Wisdom of the Cloud of Unknowing* (Oxford: Lion, 1999).

³⁷ For an English translation, see Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Ronald Knox (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962). For studies on this work, see G. H. Preston, *Studies on Thomas à Kempis (The Imitation of Christ) in the Light of Today* (London: Mowbray, 1912); *Vox Mystica: Essays in Medieval Mysticism in Honor of Professor Valerie M. Lagorio*, ed. Anne C. Barlett et al. (Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 1995); and William Meninger, *Bringing the Imitation of Christ into the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

stage of intellectual understanding accessible to the human intellect, since Truth, which is one, absolute, and infinitely simple, is unknowable to humans. Knowledge by contrast is multiple, relative, and complex, and therefore is at best approximate. For Cusanus the relationship of our intellect to Truth is like that of a polygon to a circle. The resemblance increases as we multiply the angles of the polygon, but no multiplication, even if it were infinite, will ever make the polygon equal to the circle. Therefore, the path to Truth leads beyond reason and the principle of non-contradiction. Only by intuition can we discover God, in whom there is *coincidentia oppositorum*, the unification of all contradictions, that is the second principle of Cusanus's philosophy. Human reason, confined by the principle of non-contradiction, is demonstrably incapable of giving rational expression to the Infinite who is the unification of all contradictions. Herein lies our ignorance. The fact that we are aware of our ignorance and the basic reason for it elevates our ignorance to the status of *docta ignorantia*. The more we learn this lesson of ignorance, the closer we draw to Truth itself.³⁸

In these two paradoxical principles of Cusanus's philosophy, namely, the *docta ignorantia* and the *coincidentia oppositorum* the Renaissance elaboration of the wise fool, both substantively and stylistically, finds its chief inspiration. Cusanus's questioning of the possibility of knowledge, his antithesis between irrational absolute and logical reason, his affirmation of knowledge beyond reason through intuition, his insistence on the necessity of a conscious recognition of the limitations of our intellect as a condition for wisdom, and his unification of all contradictions in God, all of these elements pave the way for the "coincidence" of foolishness and wisdom, *ignorantia* and *scientia*, in *docta ignorantia*.

No doubt the work that embodies these ideas par excellence is Erasmus's *Encōmion mōrias* or *Laus stultitiae* written in 1509 and first published in 1511.³⁹ Foolishness, personified as Lady Stultitia, praises "foolish wisdom" or "wise foolishness" as a way to truth because truth, which is never simple,

³⁸ For studies on Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of *docta ignorantia*, see Edmond Vansteenbergh, *Autour de la Docte Ignorance: Une controverse sur la théologie mystique au XVe siècle* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1915); Ulrich Offermann, *Christus, Wahrheit des Denkens: Eine Untersuchung zur Schrift "De Docta Ignorantia" des Nikolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1991); Hans Joachim Ritter, *Docta ignorantia: Die Theorie des Nichtwissens bei Nicolaus Cusanus* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927); and Joseph Lenz, *Die docta ignorantia oder die mystische Gotteserkenntnis des Nikolaus Cusanus in ihren philosophischen Grundlagen* (Würzburg: C. J. Becker, 1923).

³⁹ For an English translation of *Laus stultitiae*, see *The Praise of Folly*, translated with an introduction and commentary by Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University, 1979). Critical studies include: Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1963); *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Praise of Folly*, ed. Kathleen Williams (Engle-

cannot be known by either knowledge or ignorance alone, but only by a combination of both.

In *The Praise of Folly* the learned and wise do not praise foolishness but foolishness that praises foolishness. The subject and object of the encomium is the same. Hence, it is a mock encomium. Here lies the profound irony of Erasmus's work. If foolishness gives itself a mock praise, then it censures itself. But if foolishness censures itself, it is really wise because it recognizes foolishness for what it is, which is possible only to the wise. Thus, foolishness's mock praise of itself is really a praise of wisdom. Thus the path to wisdom is foolishness mockingly praising itself. Irony is displayed again when at one point in her eulogy, Stultitia says that what she is saying may appear at first sight foolish or absurd, and yet it is really profoundly true. But if this statement is true, then it cannot be said by a foolish person. However, if it is false, then it has been uttered truthfully and wisely by a foolish person. What is implied here is that a wise person may be foolish, and the fool may be wise, and hence foolishness may be a way to wisdom. Here, Cusanus's *docta ignorantia* and *coincidentia oppositorum* find a perfect literary embodiment. Like the professional fool whose function is to make people laugh, and the wise person whose role is to teach the truth, Erasmus, by combining laughter with seriousness in his use of irony, develops the oxymoronic concept of the wise fool. Thus, folly is necessary to reach wisdom, and to be human is to play the fool, to be wise is to acknowledge this truth.

Stultitia proceeds to apply this technique of reversal to all that society holds as true, noble, and beautiful. Not unlike the fools for Christ's sake and adepts of Eastern religions who use shock tactics to flout the conventions of society, Stultitia scorns the pretensions of learning, especially in its medieval and Scholastic forms, and shows the limitations of worldly wisdom. Thus she praises the drinking of wine and self-love; she attacks prudence, the enemy of foolishness; she appreciates experience as a mode of knowing and a path to wisdom; and she affirms that pleasure is virtue.

Finally, because Stultitia believes that Christians are fools for Christ's sake, she knows that she is more than a fool. She knows that it is the wisdom of this world that is really folly and that her foolishness is wisdom. Indeed, she says that, for her, "the Christian religion taken all together has a certain affinity with some sort of folly and has little or nothing to do with wisdom."⁴⁰ The fool of fools is the pious Christian who imitates the folly of Christ by accepting the cross of Christ. The Christian is a fool because, in accepting the folly of Christ and in rejecting the wisdom of the world, he or she accepts that "the foolishness of God is wiser than man."

wood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969) and Michael A. Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980).

⁴⁰ *The Praise of Folly* 132.

FOOLISH WISDOM AS IRONY AND FANTASY IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

Foolish Wisdom and the Postmodern World

If foolish wisdom brings about the *coincidentia oppositorum*, if it is rooted in the *docta ignorantia*, and if it flourishes only in the soil of paradox and irony, then arguably it is the most congenial way to wisdom in the postmodern world. Profound parallels exist between the age in which the notion of foolish wisdom was given full articulation and our own age. The Renaissance was a time of transition, when the Middle Ages were dying and modernity was struggling to be born. In this in-between time, what is needed is the ability to hold tensions together—the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the ability to live between jest and earnest, between wisdom and folly, between knowledge and ignorance—the *docta ignorantia*. This interval is, to use the words of T. S. Eliot, “between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,/The future futureless.”⁴¹ In a profound sense, like the Renaissance, our postmodern age is also “between midnight and dawn.” We no longer trust the past because “the past is all deception.” Hence, the postmodern “incredulity towards meta-narratives” and the failure of *mythos* to be effective as a way to wisdom. On the other hand, we can no longer plan for the future because the “future [is] futureless.” Hence, the postmodern suspicion of rationality and instrumental reason as tools to predict and control the future and the rejection of *logos* as a reliable path to wisdom.⁴²

Beside this general similarity between the Renaissance and postmodernity as transitional periods of history, there are also other more specific family resemblances. Both foolish wisdom and postmodernity reject rationality with its logical argumentation as the only or most perfect way of knowing reality. Instead, they place a premium on emotions and intuitions as conduits to knowledge. Furthermore, in the notion of *docta ignorantia*, there is an undercurrent of skepticism and relativism that are the hallmarks of postmodern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty.⁴³ In Stultitia’s impassioned attacks against metaphysics (al-

⁴¹ I am indebted to Walter J. Kaiser for the use of T. S. Eliot’s verse to describe the Renaissance. See his *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1963) 24. The application of this description to postmodernity is mine.

⁴² For a helpful introduction to postmodernism, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) with an extensive bibliography (197–202).

⁴³ See the main works of Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976); *Limited Inc.* (Bal-

beit of the Scholastic kind) one hears echoes of Derrida's call for abandonment of both "ontotheology" and the "metaphysics of presence." Her derision of "wisdom" is similar to Michel Foucault's attempt to unmask human "discourse" as a form of will to power. Even behind the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* there lurks the postmodern celebration of pluralism and diversity, since the *coincidentia* of differences and contradictions fully occurs only in God and not in humans who are for ever condemned to fragmentary knowledge. Finally, irony, which is the favorite literary weapon of *The Praise of Folly*, recalls Derrida's mastery of double-coding and the hidden meanings of the text.

If postmodernity rejects *mythos* and *logos* as ways to knowledge, there remains, I submit, another way to wisdom, and that is *mōrosophia*, the way of foolish wisdom.⁴⁴ As has been shown above, this path has an ancient and distinguished pedigree—from Socrates to Jesus to Paul to the Cappadocian theologians to Dionysius to Nicholas of Cusa to Erasmus of Rotterdam, not to mention adepts of Eastern religions and contemporary philosophers and theologians. I have expounded the philosophical and theological basis of foolish wisdom. It now remains to illustrate briefly how foolish wisdom can function as a literary form. To accomplish this, the concepts of irony and fantasy are helpful.

Irony as a Topsy-Turvy Way of Knowing

The Praise of Folly, as has been noted, is an ironic encomium to folly praising true wisdom, the wisdom of the fool. Clearly, irony plays a central

timore: Johns Hopkins University, 1977); *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978); *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982); *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987); *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University, 1995. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1975); *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1994); *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard and trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1977); *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979); *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).

⁴⁴ I am aware that Stultitia coins the word *mōrosophoi* and uses it in the pejorative sense to refer to learned men who parade their knowledge and who are in fact fools. I am using the term *mōrosophia* in the positive sense to refer to foolish wisdom.

role in foolish wisdom. It is no accident that the prototypical wise fool, Socrates, is best known for his irony ("Socratic irony"). Taking the role of the *eirōn* or "dissembler," Socrates feigns ignorance and foolishness, asks seemingly innocuous and naive questions, gradually undermines the interlocutor's confidence in his knowledge and wisdom, and finally brings him to seeing the truth. More than a pedagogical device, however, irony, as Kierkegaard has shown in his *The Concept of Irony* (1841), is a mode of seeing things, a way of viewing existence. Irony springs from a perception of the absurdity of life in spite of its apparent reasonableness.⁴⁵ It is a perception of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meanings, between actions and their results, between appearance and reality. At the heart of irony is the paradoxical. To put it in the favorite language of postmodern thinkers, at the heart of irony is the *other* or *alterity*.

Because reality is paradoxical, the only way to attain it is through irony, or foolish wisdom. Irony is often the witting or unwitting instrument of truth. As an intrinsic part of foolish wisdom and like the fools for Christ's sake and crazy-wise adepts of Eastern religions, it turns the world upside down; challenges the received wisdom; chides, irritates, deflates, scorns or inspires, uplifts, affirms the listeners and readers. In a word, like shock tactics used by Zen masters, it brings about enlightenment but always as *docta ignorantia*.

Foolish Wisdom as Fantasy

Another way to illustrate how foolish wisdom can be a path to truth in the postmodern age is to consider another literary genre called fantasy.⁴⁶ Different from the "marvelous" which creates an entirely alternative world, coherent in its own right, and totally different from this world, fantasy, as part of the logic of the imagination, starts from the data of this world as we know it but deliberately breaches the principle of analogy by which we know things that are different from one another, and construes events and states of affairs that, on the basis of the accumulated wisdom of human experience, will be judged not only improbable but outrageous,

⁴⁵ See John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000); Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard: From Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University, 1997); Theresa Sandok, "Kierkegaard on Irony and Humor." Ph.D. diss. (University of Notre Dame, 1975); and Peter D. Suber, "Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony Especially in Relation to Freedom, Personality and Dialectic." Ph.D. diss. (Northwestern University, 1978).

⁴⁶ See *Writing and Fantasy*, ed. Ceri Sullivan and Barbara White (New York: Longman, 1998); Colin N. Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1992); and Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1979).

nonsensical, foolish. The fantasist lives in the everyday world but finds it too confining, and therefore seeks to modify it by deliberately flouting conventions and subverting dominant construals of the real and the possible.⁴⁷ Fantasy, in the words of Rosemary Jackson, “takes the real and breaks it.”⁴⁸ Its basic trope is oxymoron, the juxtaposition of contradictory elements without pretension to synthesis, in other words, the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Fantasy belongs to the “rhetoric of the unsayable.”⁴⁹

Like irony, fantasy is an essential part of foolish wisdom. As fantasy is rooted in the real world, so foolish wisdom is part of the world of the wise. But, like fantasy, foolish wisdom breaks the real and creates not an alternative world but an *other* world by turning our view of reality upside down and inside out. It asks us to “imagine otherwise” by considering the possibility that the wisdom of the world may be folly, and that the folly of God may be wisdom.

The Wisdom of the Holy Fool

The history of spirituality in all religions has shown that crazy wisdom or foolish wisdom is a two-edged sword, to be handled with extreme caution. The dividing line between wisdom and foolishness is very thin, and it is not possible to say with certainty when a fool is just a fool, or worse a psychopath, or a fool graced by wisdom, or a wise person touched by foolishness.

Analogously, postmodernity is also a two-headed beast. On the one hand, its critique of the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is always certain, objective, and inherently good is well-taken.⁵⁰ With post-moderns we have to deny that the scientific method is the only path to truth. With them we also have to affirm that no observer can stand outside the historical process and take an absolutely objective and morally neutral standpoint. Furthermore, the “horror” and “terror” of the 20th century have taught us that knowledge can be put to terrible use. On the other hand, we cannot subscribe to the postmodern proposition that since *mythos* and *logos* have failed us in our quest for truth and wisdom, we are condemned to despair about ever reaching wisdom and truth. Nor should we

⁴⁷ The difference between the “marvelous” and the “fantastic” is well explained by Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope* 89–95.

⁴⁸ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981) 33.

⁴⁹ See J. Bellemin-Noel, “Des formes fantastiques aux thèmes fantasmatiques,” *Littérature* 2 (May 1971) 112.

⁵⁰ Hugo Meynell argues that modernity (he terms it “the Old Enlightenment”) has spawned four “monsters”: scientism, utilitarianism, a naive attitude toward the darker human passions, and an uncritical contempt for traditional ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. See his *Postmodernism and the New Enlightenment* 184.

suspect that the only purpose in seeking wisdom is to deceive others or exercise power over them.⁵¹

For postmoderns there is still, as has been argued, the way of *mōrosophia*—foolish wisdom or wise folly. But crazy wisdom is an ambiguous thing, liable to abuse and self-deception, as the history of Christian and non-Christian spirituality has proved beyond a shadow of doubt. Because the line between foolish wisdom and insanity, between genuine quest for enlightenment and spiritual arrogance, is very thin, wise folly needs another force to foster its authenticity and to keep it on the narrow path toward true knowledge, namely, love, which is the hallmark of holiness.

Love, as Karl Rahner argued, functions as the “light of knowledge.” Because the contingent is freely created by God’s love, that is, God’s “luminous will willing the person [*gelichtete Wille zur Person*],” the human person and other creatures can be understood only in the light of God’s free act of love. The finite creatures become luminous in God’s free act of love for himself and for God’s creatures. Conversely, a knowledge of finite realities that is not fulfilled in love for them (Rahner further wrote) turns into darkness, because it will erroneously assume that they are necessary and not contingent, in so far as they come into being in virtue of God’s creative freedom and love. Moreover, according to Rahner, we must ratify and appropriate (*nachvollziehen*) this divine love in our love for it, experiencing it as it were in its origin and its creative act. In this way, “love is the light of knowledge of the finite and since we know the infinite only through the finite, it is also the light of the whole of our knowledge. In the final analysis, knowledge is but the luminous radiance of love. . . . Only in the logic of love does logic reach the understanding of free being.”⁵²

⁵¹ For an effective refutation of Nietzsche’s claim that knowledge is nothing but “the will to power,” see Hugo Meynell, *Postmodernism and the New Enlightenment* 7–8. It is interesting to note that the writings of Nietzsche lie behind not only Barthes, Derrida and Foucault, but also Lacan, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Lyotard. Meynell bases his argument against Nietzsche and indirectly against postmodernists on Bernard Lonergan’s transcendental precepts: “Be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible,” which, if practiced consistently, will, Meynell claims, lead to the knowledge of truth. In Meynell’s view, “the fundamental defect of the Old Enlightenment [i.e., modernity] is not excess of rationality, but the fact that it was not quite rational enough” (186). Because of this diagnosis, his prescription for postmodernity is a better use of reason. My own remedy for postmodern skepticism and despair about the attainment of truth differs from Meynell’s inasmuch as I would recommend not more rationality by means of Lonergan’s cognitional theory, but the practice of foolish wisdom animated by love.

⁵² Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994) 81. Because of the reciprocal implication of human intellect and will, so that “knowledge and love constitute originally the one basic stance of the one human being” (83), Rahner argues that just as humans as spirits have a necessary transcendental knowledge of God as the horizon of being and truth toward which

If behind issues of truth lurks, as postmodernists claim, nothing but will-to-power, manipulation, domination, and rhetoric, and therefore all truth-claims, especially as embodied in metanarratives, must be unmasked for what they are by means of suspicion and distrust, then foolish wisdom animated by selfless and non-manipulative love is the way to counter the will-to-knowledge as the will-to-power with the will-to-knowledge as the will-to-love. Or, to put it in Rahner's words, it must be shown that love, not power, is the light of knowledge. As Anthony C. Thiselton puts it, "a love in which a self genuinely *gives* itself to the Other *in the interests of the Other* dissolves the acids of suspicion and deception."⁵³

In Christian terms, foolish wisdom animated by love is realized in a paradigmatic way in Jesus' death on the cross. It was in his total self-emptying love and utter powerlessness on the cross that Jesus destroyed the powers dividing humanity from divinity and Jews from Gentiles, and revealed God as all-embracing Love calling us to love God and to love one another as God has loved us. Without love, and hence holiness, foolishness is just foolishness, and wisdom mere inflated knowledge. Ultimately, foolish wisdom is a *gift*, a *revelation* received in humility of mind and simplicity of heart.⁵⁴ Only then it has the power to convince and transform, more effectively than the sword and rhetoric. It is no accident that Saint Francis of Assisi, a prototype of foolish wisdom, who regarded himself as a *frater*

they reach out and anticipate [*vorgreifen*], so too in willing any finite object whatever humans necessarily tend toward God as the horizon of goodness, and in this sense are said to have a transcendental love for God: ". . . Our self-actualizing [*sich vollziehende*] standing before God through knowledge (which constitutes our nature as spirit) possesses, as an intrinsic element of this knowledge, a love of God: our love of God is not something that may or not happen, once we have come to know God. As an intrinsic element of knowledge it is both its condition and its ground" (82).

⁵³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 160.

⁵⁴ Jean-Luc Marion argues that in what he calls the "saturated phenomenon" such as intensely packed and vivid historical events, events of great personal significance, like birth and death, love, and betrayal, persons can experience the sense of "gift" or better still "givenness" [*die Gegebenheit*], or the "possibility of the impossible." In such experience of experiences, the experience of the impossible par excellence, one encounters, according to Marion, *id quo major nequit cogitari*, God without being, as testified to in mystical theology. See "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1999) 20–53. See also his earlier work *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991).

minor, a fool deserving nothing but contempt and dishonor, is also celebrated for his tender love for God and for God's creatures, big and small.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Perhaps no other work has shaped the figure of St. Francis as a Holy Fool than Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria's *Actus Beati Francisci et sociorum ejus*, popularly known as the *Fioretti* or *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*. See *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, trans. Raphael Brown (Garden City, N.Y.: Image, 1958). Along with St. Francis mention should be made of one of his followers, Brother Juniper, whose antics embodied the tradition of being a "fool for Christ's sake." I am grateful to my colleague Dr. Berard Marthaler, O.F.M., for drawing my attention to Brother Juniper and the Franciscan tradition of foolish wisdom.