

# The Master and His Emissary

**Iain McGilchrist**

*(From an introductory lecture at Schumacher College May 2011)*

“How did I come to write a book on the twin hemispheres?”

***In this transcribed talk, Iain McGilchrist describes the roundabout way he took to writing *The Master and his Emissary*. First, as a literary scholar, he talks of his discomfort with the way what was beautifully whole was reduced to ‘a handful of fluff’ by the academic process of criticism which led him to write his first book ‘Against Criticism.’***



I was a literary scholar at one point. I had always felt that the world was *more* than a mechanism, though as a child this was what I had heard. This didn't tally with my experience, it didn't tally when we went on holiday to the country and I could tell that what was there was something completely different. There was something living here that I had some sort of a dialogue with and I felt that from a very early age. I learnt the word 'numinous' later which was useful to describe that feeling of something 'other' and 'special' and 'divine', which was sort of hanging around beautiful places. So I suppose that was there from the word go and I found that the world that I was growing up in was increasingly inclined to deny it.

I started off studying the sciences at school. Then I studied history and languages, and later went across to study the classics. At Oxford I wanted to study philosophy and theology, because it seemed to me to be quite arbitrary to cut the idea of God out of things, simply because of all the basic questions that I had asked myself from childhood on, the big ones such as 'Why is there something rather than nothing?', 'What does it mean to *be* at all?' All these questions seemed to me to lead one outside the terms would normally use to construe the world. And what you chose to call it didn't really matter, it was something other and beyond. So theology had a place in philosophy, and vice versa.

I ended up instead studying English literature. I kept thinking all the time I was reading literature, there was something wrong with what we are doing. Fortunately the approach of John Bayley (my supervisor) to literature was very different from that of any kind of schematic, dogmatic, literary critic. He had a marvellously personal and intuitive sort of way of exploring things. He was good at alerting one to the things that were in the tone – of alerting one to the something that was going on which one couldn't really pin down.

Fundamentally, I was constantly questioning what we were doing when we were criticising works of literature. And the reason was that time and again I found that I had enjoyed reading a poem or the works of a poet or I enjoyed a novel (or whatever it was, but particularly this was true of poetry and of the plays of Shakespeare) and when I tried to talk about it, I ended up paraphrasing the content, which meant that it was no longer instantiated in the precise terms and words which constituted the poetry and it became something completely different. This problem besets the whole business of literature, that what you get out of it when you de-contextualise it and you abstract it, it is something completely different from what you have got there in the work itself – concrete, individual, unique, something that is its own best expression.

It struck me that somebody, somewhere, had taken huge pains to make things absolutely unique, concrete and implicit, so that the meanings were interwoven in a way that you couldn't, except with violence, pull apart - and that then, if you did so, you were left with just a handful of fluff. Like pulling apart a beautiful tapestry. That was exactly what I was being asked to do – to de-contextualise, to abstract, to generalise. Another thing

that was striking was that there was a way in which the weaknesses of a poet or a writer were redeemed in the context of the whole. So that when you actually came to look at these bits that weren't really anything special, they were actually not just imperfections that got sort of glossed over in the whole; *they were actually part of why you really liked the whole.*

For example Hardy has a very quirky use of language and he sometimes goes so far as to use phrases that are ungainly when you look at them. He invents words, and sometimes there is a clunkiness about them, and sometimes there is a naivety about his work, and yet what actually attracts one to it is the strange quiddity, the sort of Hardy-ness of it, which is intensely moving.

And then there is something about perfection. In our striving for perfection, for abstraction, for generalities, for certainty, we are missing the implicit, the uncertain, the often far from perfect, that makes the thing valuable in itself, and it was our relationship with it that changed what we found. Because when someone else read it, they found something different. So there is no *one* poem, because it is re-created every time somebody reads it, much as a painting is re-created every time somebody looks at it – there is no single work of art there.

This was all the stuff that was milling around in my mind. And I had the freedom at All Souls College to write a book about it, which was called '*Against Criticism*'.

In this book I tried to show how criticism had to work contrary to itself. It had to work by stealth in order to achieve its end. It had to feign going in one direction, but go in the other direction. I was trying to write about why the implicit was important. Why, when you took something that wasn't in the focus of attention out of where it stood, in context, and placed it, isolated, in the focus of attention, it turned into something completely different. So this business of taking things apart into bits – it wasn't just that they weren't the same as the whole, but you could at least re-achieve the whole by putting them together. It was that, once you had taken any of these 'parts' out, they no longer were what they were at all when they had been in context – they were something quite different. They looked trivial, flawed. This led me to think that this is something to do with the neglect of the embodied nature of these things. The way they work as an embodied thing that can't be turned into any other expression for me as an embodied individual.

I had a huge mental block about Wordsworth. I had to do a special paper on a couple of great poets, from a selection, and I thought I would do 'Wordsworth and Coleridge' because I loved Coleridge. My thought was: Coleridge is terribly interesting, and I know he's got a fascinating mind. But this Wordsworth! For God's sake! Pompous, boring man! And everything he said was so banal! What was it? And yet people whose opinion I really value think he's great – so I must be missing something. I'm going to do this paper with him – I'll have the consolation of Coleridge, and I might even get to understand Wordsworth. So I got into it and what happened was that I ended up thinking that Coleridge is fine, but that Wordsworth was one of the greatest poets that ever lived!

And this turnabout happened actually because of an 'aha' – several 'aha' – moments, and it happened just like that. There was a morning I remember, and I can even remember the window where I was sitting, when it suddenly dawned on me how wonderful this stuff all was! Then there was another occasion when one of my supervisors (for another paper altogether) – we had been talking already for about two hours, in an hour-long tutorial – said 'I'm going to read you a passage from *Tintern Abbey*'. And I almost said to her: 'Look, don't bother reading that, I know it by heart, I've been reading it since I was a teenager!' Anyway, I'm very glad I didn't, because, when she read it, I just thought *I had never read this poem!* It was as dramatic as that. I thought I had just never heard this before.

It changed my life. I remember as I was walking down the street back to College, I was having an epiphany, really – my feet were hardly touching the ground. And I never looked back. That was the sort of 'between' thing that happened. It wasn't the sort of thing that happened by pulling it apart, and trying to work out what was going on in the workings. It seemed to me this 'between' thing happened with an individual, and an individual work. That was unique and I was unique. That was incarnate, I was incarnate, and everything about me couldn't be taken out of context and made explicit, and neither could this work of art. I later discovered that Aristotle had said that works of art are like organic beings, like living creatures.

***Iain then went on to study medicine, from an intuition that the brain held the key to the question of original wholeness and its subsequent dissection. This step into the unknown brought Iain to the relationship between the two hemispheres of the brain.***

When I read John Cutting's book *The Right Cerebral Hemisphere and Psychiatric Disorders* (OUP, 1990) which is still a classic in its field, I thought it was very interesting that he was focussing on the right hemisphere. Because in medical school I had heard a lot about the left hemisphere, and how clever it was, and all the things it did that made us human – language, reason, and so forth. But as to quite what the right hemisphere did, nobody knew. There was a bit of muttering about something visuo-spatial. It did sort of creative things, and fluffy things – but, really, quite honestly, if you were a serious chap, you weren't going to get too interested in all that. But here was a very serious and intelligent man, who had seen something very interesting through sheer pragmatic, empirical observation, as a clinician, and after a lot of research. He had worked in neuropsychiatry with people who had had strokes and tumours, and he had noticed that actually there were very interesting things happening to these people when they had a stroke or a tumour in one part of the brain. It wasn't just a bit of functioning, like language or something, that went off – it was that their whole way of construing the world changed. He did a lot of important research on this, and it eventuated in this book on the right hemisphere.

The context, the 'betweenness', and so on – this all suddenly came at me out of the talk that John Cutting was giving on the right hemisphere. He hadn't quite formulated it that way, but some of the stuff that he was talking about rang bells immediately, because what he was saying was that the right hemisphere is much better at understanding implicit meaning, interpreting body language, at reading faces. It understands the tone of voice, it understands irony, it understands humour, it understands metaphor, and it's in touch with the body more than the left hemisphere. That was just the starting point.

Then I went off to Johns Hopkins and got involved in a neuroimaging project there, and the question that I was intrigued with was the question of the asymmetry of the brain. I saw very clearly, as I sat, day after day, delineating areas of the brain, comparing volumes and so forth, that in schizophrenia the normal asymmetry of the brain is lost. Sometimes it's reversed. Sometimes it's preserved. But generally there is a tendency for it to be lost. *The normal brain is asymmetrical*. But in this situation the brain was no longer symmetrical. I didn't know then, what I learnt later, that there is an adage in the animal literature: 'asymmetry pays'. Asymmetry is very important from an evolutionary point of view, and animals that are properly asymmetrical in their brain functioning gain, and those that don't have differences between their hemispheres don't perform so well. In fact, you can stop a chick's brain from lateralising properly, by exposing it to light on day nineteen of incubation. So you can experimentally look at these chicks, that don't have properly asymmetrical brains, and compare them with those that do. And they don't fare as well. I didn't know that then.

At this point I came across another book. And this was *Madness and Modernism* by Louis Sass (Harvard UP, 1992). He is a psychologist with a very broad background in philosophy, literature and the arts. The subtitle of this book is *Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature and Thought*. The thesis of this book involved recognising something I already knew. And when I read this book the light came on! Because I saw the phenomena that patients with schizophrenia describe (and in those days, because I was working in the NHS, I spent all my time with patients with schizophrenia). The phenomena they describe are exactly the phenomena that modernism has been at pains to re-present, and re-construct, for the viewer and the reader. This is a beautiful and subtle book. What he was really pointing to was that people with schizophrenia have a sense of the alienness of the world, they are frightened of the world, it seems fragmented, it seems flattened and unreal, which adds to the horror of it, they have no connection with it, there's no affect for them, their approach to things is highly technical and rationalistic.

One of the most beautiful things that he points out very early on – and it's so true – is that madness in this sense is not about a *lack* of reason, it's about an *excess* of reason, about taking reason to extremes. No reasonable person ever would do so in context, and no reasonable person would apply reason like this. As soon as you started to see this, and its manifestations in art, you began to see something very profoundly interesting. But it rang even louder bells for me, because I had already been thinking, with the help of John Cutting, that actually schizophrenia mimics the condition where the right hemisphere has gone AWOL. Now that doesn't mean to say that necessarily, when you image the brain of a schizophrenic you see that there is

nothing going on in the right hemisphere, and everything is going on in the left – it's not as simple as that. But if you list the various things that are abnormal about the phenomenological world of the schizophrenic subject, and find out where else in the organic literature (in terms of brain injuries, strokes, tumours) you can find people who have similar changes to their world, those insults, those tumours, those strokes will be in the right hemisphere. So it's people who have right hemisphere strokes who find that suddenly the world is an alien place, that it's gone flat. They lack empathy, they cannot understand the implicit, they can only understand the explicit, they can't understand metaphorical meaning, they misunderstand human relationships, they begin to rationalise in all sorts of improbable ways, they lack common sense. This is exactly like the world of the schizophrenic. So if Louis Sass had hit upon the fact that the modern world looked schizophrenic, and if it was true that schizophrenia looks like a right hemisphere deficit, then perhaps our world had a right hemisphere deficit. That was my thinking in 1992.

That was when I really started gathering information about the two hemispheres. And this was difficult, because all serious neuroscientists had been put off gathering any information, because there had been a story in the 60's and 70's that language and reason were in the left hemisphere, and creativity and emotion were in the right hemisphere, and that this was what differentiated the two hemispheres. But as our knowledge increased, we found that language was served by *both* hemispheres, that reason went on in *both* hemispheres, *both* took part in creativity and *both* dealt with imagery.

***From this circuitous journey, I arrived at the topic of the Master and his Emissary. The two hemispheres, instead of being simply two halves of the processing unit, actually represent two modes of seeing, through two types of attention.***

With animals and birds that have the eyes on the side of the head, there is a straight crossover in the brain. So when you see them turning their heads to use the left eye, you know they are trying to engage their right hemisphere, and vice versa. So you can just observe them, and see what happens. And there are significant, reliable and consistent differences in the way they use their hemispheres. What is that about?

The easiest way to understand this is to think of the conundrum of a bird trying to feed and stay alive. It is a conundrum, because it's got to be able, at one and the same time, to pick out a tiny seed against a background of grit and pebbles that may look very similar, peck it accurately and eat it quickly, and at the same time it's got to keep the widest possible attention open for predators. So it's got to have one kind of attention, that knows what it's after, goes for it efficiently, clearly picks it and consumes it. A kind of attention that is already spoken for, that is acquisitive, and is useful. Then, simultaneously, it's got to have another kind of attention, which is not spoken for at all – this attention must have no preconceptions about what it is going to find: it might be a mate, it might be a foe, it might be almost anything. It's got to be on the lookout, and it could be coming from any direction. These two kinds of attention are very difficult to combine in one mind; and it is my contention that the reason we have two masses of neurones, two cerebral hemispheres, is that we actually need to attend to the world at all times in two different ways.

Now attention sounds boring, because the cognitivists make it sound like just another function. But of course attention isn't like that. A machine can manipulate numbers, but it can't attend. Attention is an aspect of consciousness. Only a conscious being can attend. And it is profoundly creative – it is part of how we actually generate what comes into being for us. So that alerts us right away that something quite interesting might be going on here. And actually, if you look at other things about birds and animals, you find that they have other differences between the hemispheres. They form social bonds better using their right hemisphere; they approach their mates more with their left eye. And they grasp their prey using more their right eye (the left hemisphere) and the right paw, or claw. So there seems to me to be two broad ways of looking at the world. One is a relational consciousness, without preconceptions, which is interested in forming bonds, being vigilant and having a sustained and coherent view of the world. And another that yields lots of little tiny pieces, like the little bits of a mosaic, that are very precise, but on their own mean nothing, but are terribly, terribly important – because without them you wouldn't be able to eat, and you wouldn't be able to live.

So when you come to look at the human situation, does this seem at all in keeping? The first thing I found is that, in humans, sustained attention, and vigilance, and alertness, are better served by the right hemisphere; and narrowly focussed attention, detailed attention, is better served by the left hemisphere. People who have a right hemisphere stroke have what has been described as a pathological narrowing of the window of their attention. Generally speaking the right hemisphere is able to do the things the left hemisphere does, but it

just doesn't do them so well; whereas the things that the right hemisphere does, the left hemisphere can't do at all. It's just that the right hemisphere is not specialised in what the left hemisphere does, and therefore generally we tend to use the left hemisphere for doing them. If the left hemisphere is not able to function, you can produce focussed attention with your right hemisphere –but you normally wouldn't bother.

That is one of the starting points, and that gives rise to the various modes of engagement with the world that distinguish the two hemispheres. The absolutely fundamental phenomenological way of attending to the world leads to a whole coherent picture. If you don't see the whole, you have to build up a world from pieces that are de-contextualised, and that are static, and fixed, and certain, and you have a very useful map of the world, which gives you certain little bits of information, but it doesn't give you any idea of the whole. The right hemisphere sees the whole picture, sees things interconnected, inevitably in a context, as flowing and changing, but the price is that for the right hemisphere nothing is ever certain. There is a trade-off, if you like, between accuracy and truthfulness. We need certainty in order to exist in the world – or at least the illusion of it – and the only way we can get that is by the partial version that is yielded by the left hemisphere.

Now that is very useful. The left hemisphere knows how to enrich what the right hemisphere knows. And the movement is like this: the beginnings of our understanding, the beginnings of our thinking, the beginnings of our awareness of the world, and of everything, is sub-served by the right hemisphere. But then the left hemisphere comes along and does something very important. It unpacks what was formerly implicit, it expands what was before compressed, it makes clear and focussed things that before were complicated and interwoven, and in doing so it helps us to see things that otherwise we wouldn't have seen. But in themselves they are never enough, they are never the truth. And that means that our left hemisphere vision needs to go back into the broad context that the right hemisphere holds and enrich it. It's a dialectic process. You have A followed by B, which doesn't negate B, but it enriches and unfolds an aspect of it, and that's taken up into the synthesis of the two. This is exactly what Hegel talks about as the flowering process – when the bud is opened, it is replaced by the full flower, and the flower can't exist if the bud exists. So in essence it is, in some sense, contrary to the bud; and yet in some ways it is the unpacking or the unfolding of the bud. And, without the flower, there cannot be the fruit. The fruit is, if you like, the negation of the flower, but it is also the fulfilment of the flower. This relationship, where one thing succeeds another by an apparently contrary dialectic, but actually is fulfilling it, is a theme we will keep coming back to.

***Iain arrives at the title of the book, which is how the two modes of attention represented by the two hemispheres have been drawn into a lopsided relation.***

That is imaged in the title of my book which is *The Master and his Emissary*. This was something I found in Nietzsche. In this story there is a wise spiritual master who governs a small community so well that it flourishes and grows. He realises he can't look after all of what's required for the health and well-being of his community; but he also realises something much more important, which is not that he can't do it, but that he mustn't do it, even if he could. *Because if he tried to do it, he would lose something else.* He would be less himself, and not know things that he knows. He had to stay where he was. And he therefore appoints the brightest and best of his ministers to go and do his work on his behalf. This emissary goes off with high hopes from the master to do this work, and the master has to trust his emissary and not know what it is the emissary knows. He knows that. But the emissary doesn't know what it is he doesn't know. He goes off and thinks: 'Look, I'm busy going off around this place, I'm doing all the heavy work here, I'm the one who understands what's going on, I'm the one that makes things happen. And that master, it's all very well for him, to be sitting there back home, squatting there, smiling seraphically – what does he know?' So he pretends on his travels that he is the master, and he puts on the master's cloak. As a result, essentially, the domain falls into ruins, because, in that Rumsfeldian way, this emissary *doesn't know what it is he doesn't know*.

And later I came across this saying of Einstein's, that 'the rational mind is a faithful servant and the intuitive mind is a precious gift: we live in a world that worships the servant and has forgotten the gift'.

**Iain McGilchrist** is a psychiatrist and writer who works privately in London, and otherwise lives on the Isle of Skye. He is committed to the idea that the mind and brain can be understood only by seeing them in the broadest possible context, that of the whole of our physical and spiritual existence, and of the wider human culture in which they arise – the culture which helps to mould, and in turn is moulded by, our minds and brains.

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### Ode to The Master and His Emissary

*Why is the brain divided in two?  
In all birds and animals you'll find this is true  
Insects and reptiles are also thus structured  
Does survival depend on the brain being ruptured?*

*Apparently so Iain McGilchrist discloses  
Unequal asymmetry is what he proposes  
Incompatible forms of knowledge flowing  
Yet two quite essential methods of knowing  
(....more follows)*

**By Val Charlton**