

Tree and Star

The Cultivation of Impossible Good

Like many, I have powerful childhood memories of Christmas. My mother choreographed those long-ago festive scenes with a combination of common sense and theatrical élan which ensured that, whatever the spirit of Christmas might really embrace, its essence would root itself in my and my siblings' longest, deepest and fondest memories. The giddy joy we felt as children inevitably looked to the prospect of heaping up our hauls of presents in that incomparable twilight of illuminated tree and rising dawn,¹ but the build-up to that consummate domestic ritual involved so much more. Like all effective ritual, it wrought magic from the everyday by arranging the latter's elements into fantastical, impossible forms. The houses of my childhood stood on properties well supplied with trees. I knew most of them through smell and feel; a good few I climbed regularly. Familiar playmates and wind-whisperers, their changing foliage canopied my days, from the darling buds of May to the cracked brown leavings underfoot, shaken down by the rough winds of autumn, in whose heaped, fragrant depths we buried one another.²

But a *tree*? In our *living room*? Even though I'd joined the expedition to the Christmas nursery, its packed-earth lot strung with bare light-bulbs that turned our breath white as we cruised the long rows of trees; even though we squeaked our advice to Mom, who appraised each and every candidate with the eye of a dealer in rare antiquities; even though the chosen fir or Scotch pine had stood leaning in a bucket of ice-crusting water outside our back door for a week or more ahead of the great day; despite all this, when *that* tree stood proud in its stand, its outsized, dusky, unadorned majesty all but filling the room, exuding its sweet resinous scent, it seemed as though fairies or poltergeists had played some trick on us. I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd re-arranged the dining-room furniture or stood the refrigerator on its head. Something magnificent that ought not to be, yet there it stood above us, its depths as dark as an entire forest's. It was one of my first encounters with the numinous and the happy sublime.

Mind, the solemn daylight ritual that saw the tree process from *outside* to *in* always took place, by stern decree, on Christmas Eve and never a single day earlier. For us, Christmas was thus a sudden explosion of light and gratuitous abundance that burst into our

¹ About the only time I can think of when a hopeless cliché like 'rising dawn' seems apt.

² A weirdly resonant death-and-resurrection ritual in itself, played out by jack-o-lantern light.

home across a single day and night,³ a miracle of overwhelming delight whose secret lay in its suddenness.⁴ In our present late day of huckster capitalism, when the alchemy of commerce has bloated that moment of wonder to a fraudulent three-month ordeal of pitch and promotion,⁵ my memories of those twenty-four hours in each year, set so utterly apart from its other 8,742, glow like some fairy-light beacon in a very dark night indeed.

And what a paradoxical jumble of the regular and the random those twenty-four hours enclosed! Rituals so carefully observed they seemed, to my six- or seven- or eight-year-old mind, coeval with whatever the druids got up to at Stonehenge or with the rites of Athena in the Parthenon,⁶ yet shot through with that peculiar combination of solemnity and giddy festivity that marks any ritual worth observing. Our rituals would have seemed of little significance to any casual adult observer: the bringing indoors of the tree; the summons from the attic of the big boxes of lights and decorations (in my earliest memories as tall as I was), unseen since the latter had been carefully nestled back into their cardboard-divider-and-tissue nests the year before; the mingled smells of fresh pine, attic dust and chunky 1950's cardboard. The lights went on first, heavy ropes of thickly insulated green wire bearing small, coloured incandescent bulbs screwed into bakelite-ish sockets. First of all, before the clustered coils were unstrung, they got plugged in to check for dead bulbs: bouquets of parti-coloured light you could hold in your hand like flowers, a first taste of the luminous wonder of that day to come.⁷ Bunched like that, the bulbs would click against one another like swarming plump insects, a sound like no other I can recall.

Thus far the scene would have resembled a construction site: loud voices ringing in the air and materials heaped about the room as the wondrous apparition began to take shape before our eyes. At its first lighting, our father would get us to squint at the tree to make the lights go fuzzy. That way, he assured us, you could check whether the lights were evenly distributed and more easily spot vulgar repetitions of the same colour.⁸ The same but

³ Though I'm sure Mom, who had since summer been undertaking all the forward planning, mostly in secret, could tell you a different story about its *suddenness*

⁴ Father Christmas/Santa and the miraculous child in the manger both arrive like the apocalyptic thief in the night, when our daylight consciousness that plans and calculates is sunk in sleep and dream, while no one's looking—Matthew's Magi and Luke's shepherds both miss the magic moment and attest to it only belatedly.

⁵ We might recall here how that miraculous child, grown up, gave the bum's rush to the commercial sorts who'd colonised the threshold of miracle on the porches of his father's house.

⁶ Okay, I didn't *really* think druids and ancient Hellas at that age, but that's the way my older self now registers my childhood sense of how venerable those rituals seemed at the time.

⁷ The tree was the centre and *opus magnum* of the Christmas scene, but there were other equally signal bits of domestic ornament. I can recall an especially evocative set of silhouettes of a sleigh and reindeer, rendered in some sort of dark green foam-like substance, stuck to the wall above the sofa, arched in mid-flight.

⁸ Dad was our lighting-effects boffin, whose real work began only after we'd retired (see below).

different: we lapped those same garlands of light ‘round and ‘round each tree each year, yet the effect was never the same from one to the next. No kabbalist ever contemplated his sephirotic tree of lights with greater awe, care and delight than we did that first illumination.⁹

Then the other sorts of bulbs: the eggshell-thin glass confections, mirror-bright and throwing back reflections of our faces and the room behind us in weirdly distorted perspective; small plaster pears and peaches, blushing with vivid tint and spangled with glittering fairy-dust; heraldic spindle-shapes with pleated indentations like cupcake skirts. In the earliest days we watched Mom and Dad place them with delicate precision among the boughs, following a rigid aesthetic prescription: tiny fairy fruits and the smallest bulbs at the top, biggest at the bottom, and those in between meticulously graded from high to low by size. As each of us grew just tall enough, we were allowed in turn to pitch in with the lower reaches, at first amid many admonitions to take extra special care with each fragile bubble of radiance we bore in awed hands. As we grew old enough to talk and disagree with one another, we occasionally engaged in arguments about size and placement that would have rivalled those of scholastic theologians debating the placement of angels on pin-heads.¹⁰

Like the idolaters mocked by many an Old Testament prophet, our labour complete, we then downed tools to adore the work of our hands. Ever since the Christmas tree became a domestic feature, generations of censorious Puritan killjoys have condemned its heathen origins and gaudy appeal to the senses. And they have been right, at least about its being gaudy and heathen. Ancient pagan Germanic cultures had a thing about trees. In the dark forests of northern Europe the evergreen foliage would have appeared to defy the seasonal cycles of life and death. Such trees must have loomed uncannily in the collective Germanic imagination for ages out of mind, becoming a potent symbol and occult artefact.¹¹ In Scandinavian myth, the cosmic axle-tree and world-ash Yggdrasil thrusts its topmost branches into the heavens of the stars¹² and gods and sinks its roots into Hel, the abode of the dead. Around its bole spreads *miðgarðr* (in Old English *middangeard*), the mid-garth or

⁹ In esoteric Jewish tradition, the kabbalistic ‘tree of lights’ maps out a flow of divine emanation from heaven to earth via ten *sephiroth* (‘emanations’), luminous nodes or confluences of God’s endlessly generative and creative power. Though rooted in wholly different traditions, the Christmas tree and tree of the *sephiroth* share a deep intuition of how a transcendent super-reality can foot the earth of our daily lives.

¹⁰ I suspect Mom and Dad will have conducted some discreet editing of our work in the blessed silence after they’d got us packed off to bed.

¹¹ To be fair, trees appear in almost every *mythos* humans have imagined. But the ancient Germanic imagination does seem just a little more tree-struck than others. ‘O Tannenbaum’ was perhaps fated to be composed by a descendant of the tribes that slaughtered two Roman legions in the depths of the Teutoburg Forest.

¹² Do our fairy-lights preserve an attenuated memory of this association?

middle-yard of earthly human existence. Runes, the very word synonymous with mystery, were inscribed on wooden staves, their lines vertical and diagonal (never horizontal) so as not to be lost in the run of the wood's living grain. Darker rumour hints of human sacrifices to Oðinn being hung from the boughs of the great grove in the precincts of his temple at Uppsala, in the centuries before tidings of the White Christ's birth reached those distant lands. Strange fruits and baubles indeed.

Over long ages, during which the tidal surges of religious and cultural change ebbed and flowed across Europe and the Near East, an astounding transformation of the tree's darker associations took place. In Christian tradition Christ himself became the strangest of all fruits hung from the most cosmic tree of all. Cosmic, but rooted in the history of harsh Roman justice. In the tenth century, an Anglo-Saxon poet composed a dream-vision that precisely charts the metamorphosis of the cross as an instrument of judicial torture¹³ into a scandalously counterintuitive emblem of life and hope renewed. Here is my translation of its opening lines:

Listen while I tell the finest dream,
which came to me in the middle of the night,
when all who speak are plunged in silent sleep.
It seemed to me I saw a glorious tree,
5 thrust into the sky, intensely bright,
wound about with light. All of that sign
was covered with gold and gems whose light flashed forth
to the world's end, five upon the crossbeam.
. . . .
I saw the tree of glory clothed with honour,
jubilantly shining, arrayed with gold,
the Sovereign's tree encrusted with marvellous gems.
But underneath the gold I could perceive
20 the long-ago torments of miserable men.
First it began to bleed from its right side,
and I was utterly racked by many griefs
and fear, in front of that beautiful sight. I saw
that blazing symbol change its raiment and hue:
25 sometimes it was soaked with flowing blood,
completely drenched; sometimes adorned with treasure.

(*The Dream of the Rood*, ll. 1-8 and 16-26)

¹³ The English word 'excruciation' derives ultimately from the Latin *crux* ('cross').

Some tree, huh? Later in the poem it speaks to the dreamer/narrator, telling him the story of its own life, death and resurrection.¹⁴ Not yet a full-on, jolly Dickensian, Yule-log-and-mistletoe spectacle, but you can see it coming.

Of course my siblings and I knew nothing then of comparative myth and religion. No child does. Not consciously, at any rate, though children are instinctive pattern-seekers, a facility that allows big patterns of cultural memory to sink in subliminally, embedding all sorts of antiquities in the attics and cellars of our deeper consciousness—like our Christmas decorations in the attic during their long off-season. Seeds of deep meaning that may not sprout till the end of a long lifetime. As I now recall my childhood responses to the glorious spectacle of those yearly trees of lights, I can feel in them the thrill of something more mysterious and powerful than simply a child’s giddy expectation of eggnog, seasonal sweets and presents, however greatly those material condensations of Christmas appealed. What was it? We’ve not yet got to the full transformation of the wonder-tree, the rest of which took place, like the dreamer’s vision in *The Dream of the Rood*, when we had been sent to bed, in despair of ever seeing the other end of the eight or ten hours that stood between us and all that we *knew* lay in store but could not *predict* in any detail. Further ritual assuaged our impatience, for, over the fireplace,¹⁵ before retiring, we’d have hung our red stockings from the mantelpiece, with no little ceremony, knowing that Santa, in strict observance of Christmas protocol, would fill them with small notions wrapped in white tissue-paper, sweets and an obligatory tangerine down in the toe. Between arranging our serious presents under the tree and eating the cookies we’d set out for him, he would silently deposit our bulging stockings at the foot of each bed. There, when we woke, we could celebrate a private mini-Christmas preview, allowed to eat one sweet and the tangerine—unheard of luxuries that early in the morning in your own room. Sooner or later we’d all gravitate to one of our rooms, comparing our first early gleanings of the rich harvest to come, speculating feverishly about what might await us, our ears cocked for Mom’s call from the living room that would summon us to the main event.

To appreciate what happened next, you need to return to Christmas Eve, after all the most interested parties had trooped off to bed and Mom and Dad could enjoy an interlude of genuinely silent night. I was never present, so I can report only hearsay and obvious

¹⁴ Has any corporate marketing wiz ever pitched a *talking* Christmas tree to his bosses?

¹⁵ Or its equivalent. The house in which I lived my first five years had none.

supposition. Last-minute gift-wrapping no doubt figured prominently on the agenda,¹⁶ along with the careful arrangement of all those parcels under the tree and the tip-toe deposit of our stockings by our beds. Before the end, however, Dad would have had to finish a job he'd have begun some time before—the tinsel. Now, tinsel—long, thin strands of silvered cellophane, barely heavier than air and sensitive to every static electric charge within a five-mile radius—is a substance sent to try most of us mortals. No strand stays where you put it, rearranging itself while you're not looking and forming collegial tangles with all its mates at every opportunity. It would send a saint straight to the bottle. Nearly every other tinselled tree I've ever seen has been festooned with the stuff in chaotically flung handfuls that leave the poor thing looking like a worker in some futurist spaghetti factory after an explosion. But Dad was an artist in tinsel, which he could wield with superhumanly calm confidence. Before trundling off for the night we might glimpse him up a stepladder, laying out the first few strands on the highest branches. By the time he finished, long after we would have dropped off in our beds, whole shimmering curtains of silver would fall from branch to branch like waterfalls and icicles. On that one night of the year Dad simply *was* Jack Frost, and his secret ministry wrought much of the magic that confronted us in our feetie pajamas and bathrobes (with maybe a momentarily forgotten teddy bear dangling from a younger hand), when we entered one of the most familiar rooms in the house to find it all changed, changed utterly.

Never mind that we'd watched the tree go up the night before, gone 'ooh' and 'aah' when the lights first shone, and even helped to hang some of the decorations. What greeted our keen gazes as we entered the room that morning was a vision from another world. The profusion of presents, of course, but rising above them a celestial tree that had somehow taken root in our living room. In the pre-dawn dark, with no other lights on as yet, it always seemed twice as big as the tree we'd said good night to the evening before. Dad's tinsel-cascades shimmered like the aurora borealis, casting flecks of light along the walls, taking up the previous night's work of adornment and amplifying it to a radiant splendour of quasi-angelic kind. For a moment we forgot our itch to get to the foothills of gifts piled below and just gaped at the luminous heights. For a moment . . . but what a moment it seems now.

The rest of Christmas comprised other rituals: the gifts distributed, torn into and exclaimed over, going to mass (which we took in our stride as a kind of contractual

¹⁶ If my own experience as a parent affords any clue.

obligation) and our grandparents' open house, heaving and noisy with uncles, aunts and cousins. Five decades later, it is the elemental theatre of tree and light and the world transformed between sleeping and waking that stands out most vividly in my memories. It was, every time, a concentrated burst of beatitude, a miraculous realisation of possibilities no amount of waking thought and anticipation could encompass.

That vision of a tree lit up like the starry heavens seems to hold at least one key to the whole business. The archetypal Christmas tree is of course an evergreen conifer. Cone-bearing, it is also cone-shaped in a more abstract geometric way, its top a zero-dimensional point, its bottom an encompassing circle. Whether it be a living tree or a simulacrum of plastic, aluminium, junked cars or stacked bagels, no other shape will do.¹⁷ You can create fairy bowers of light by stringing the same bulbs in the boughs of any other sort of tree, but that will be more *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than 'Twas the Night before Christmas'. Puck and Ariel and the angel Gabriel may be distant relations, but many, many times removed. Point and circle, star and tree: pure geometry and organic living form. Any tree joins heaven and earth, its topmost boughs cradling sun, moon and stars while its roots plumb the depths beneath.¹⁸ As well, the tree embodies pure life force in a peculiarly elemental way: it is a slow-motion earth-fountain, drawing fire from the sun, carbon from the air, water and minerals from the earth in which it stands. Our own bodies, though they get around a bit more, must work a similar elemental magic in order to live.

That ability to get around is the better part of what distinguishes us outwardly from trees.¹⁹ And what is it that moves us around? A functioning skeletal and muscular system helps, of course, but those bits answer to other bits, in branching neural networks that lead back to our brains. The star/angel at the top of the tree? Or maybe the tree itself, when active all lit up like a . . . you get the picture. Neuroscientists routinely speak of specific zones of the brain 'lighting up' when certain stimuli impinge or certain actions are undertaken. But *is* that lighting up just so much biochemistry? Can that chemistry account for all we are conscious of being in our own thoughts, our desires, our wills? Modern scientific thought (and the bargain-basement rationalists into which the Enlightenment has transformed most of

¹⁷ Stick a five-pointed star on top of a triangle and—voilà!—you've got yourself a schematic Christmas tree. Bauhaus-minimalist, perhaps, but unmistakable for anything else.

¹⁸ Remember the Old Norse world-tree Yggdrasil (see above).

¹⁹ Why else would *Macbeth's* vision of Birnham Wood come to Dunsinane carry such dramatic force? Okay, Tolkien took Shakespeare to task for cheating (only blokes carrying branches as camouflage—what a con!) and created his Treebeard and the ents as an even more powerful redress.

us) exhibits a chronic inclination toward some such conclusion or other. You can't do modern neuroscience without the heavy artillery (and machinery) of scans and computer modelling, but past ages carried out some modelling of their own, using very different media and sensibilities, of which those illuminated conifers of our childhood stand as critical reminders.

The nativity story itself (at least in the gospel of Matthew) offers us a handy segue into the matter: the Magi from out of the east tell Herod they've read signs of a new king's birth among the stars. Most ancient cultures practiced some form of what we call 'astrology', though the modern click-bait, rent-a-magus sort of horoscope found on countless websites is only a debased and corrupted ghost of the old ways of linking the heavens and the earth. Ancient peoples all around the world, when they looked up into the night sky, beheld a realm up there very different from their own. Its stately and majestic progress across the firmament, counterpointed by sun and moon, probably gave the first deep human thinkers the idea that natural phenomena, messy, chaotic and unpredictable down here on the ground, might answer to some higher level of reality that acted as their lawgiver, template and guide. To inhabit a fragile human body amidst the vagaries of space and time—as daunting now as then, though different vagaries come and go—is to be beset by a thousand accidental ills²⁰ at every turn. It's no coincidence that ancient emperors in what would come later to be known as China proclaimed themselves the 'sons of heaven', who ruled the Middle Kingdom²¹ by the heavenly realm's 'mandate', while the earliest Greek philosophers imagined an ideal reality of perfect forms up there, unchanging and subject to none of the perturbations we must negotiate in this lower world, where the ideal forms cast their imperfect shadows that constitute it.

If you can imagine stars as point-sources of light and of 'influence'²² (as they appeared to the ancients), their radiant emanations would form a cone in space with the star at its point and the earth at its base.²³ A kind of stylised Christmas-tree shape, in fact, which allows you to think of any Christmas tree as an image of the downward-flowing astral radiance or influence that in ancient thought connected the high with the low and the

²⁰ And equally accidental blessings, though we tend to remember the ills a little bit more if they don't kill us outright.

²¹ A pretty exact analogue, by the bye, of the Old Norse *miðgarðr* or the Old English *middangeard*.

²² From the Italian *influenza* (<Latin *in-fluere* 'to flow inward'), adopted as a medical term when the stars' *influenza* was still believed to be a direct cause of good or ill health.

²³ It helps to remember the stars were once commonly thought to stand much nearer the earth than modern measurements place them.

heavenly with the earthly.²⁴ Or, in Christmas-mode, the flashing intervention of the blessedly new and unforeseen in the plodding, down-to-earth, same old same old courses of daily life. Our young, goggle-eyed, pajama-clad selves could scarcely have been attuned to such metaphysical fancies,²⁵ but I reckon the barely containable glee that had us clapping our hands and hopping from foot to foot reflected more than just some balance-sheet calculation of gain. Christmas is not a quarterly dividend report. Sure, we had reasonable expectation of getting stuff we wanted—and the straightforward fulfilment of desire is, all else being equal, a rare enough pleasure in this world, as any child soon learns. But, sometimes, the best presents were the ones we *didn't* see coming: surprise played as great a role in our jumble of happy spirits as gratified desire, and this touches on perhaps the most profound and significant element of the whole Christmas mystery.

In response to their bitter experience of history, and on the back of the texts that had coalesced around the names of their prophets of old, the descendants of the people of ancient Israel constructed a composite figure who, they came to expect, would deliver them from the meat-grinder of historical process. This messiah would be rooted, like a tree, in history,²⁶ a *determined* phenomenon who would, paradoxically, deliver his people from historical necessity and determination. In the Christian inflection of this expectation, of course, Jesus both answers that expectation and defeats it, offering freedom and redemption along hitherto unforeseen axes of possibility. A freedom-fighter of no earthly insurgency. 'My kingdom is not of this world'. I reckon this accounts for something of how the Christmas tree can exhilarate us as a vision. Its physical form, sprung from the earth, answers to a myriad of physical processes that determine it: gravity, weather, soil, light, fluid dynamics and hydraulics, genetics and cell chemistry, and so much more. Yet around that solid piece of arboreal history we weave a shimmering cone of light, topped by angel or star, which speaks of a heavenly, astral influence that draws the tree still higher, far beyond its topmost bough, into realms of grace that escape the chains of cause and effect, rooted not in earth but in gift.

²⁴ Which, after all, is what Christian doctrine insists Christ's incarnation is all about.

²⁵ Though perhaps all the elaborations of Christmas ornament are a form of populist metaphysics, an artist's rendering for the pure and simple at heart of how, in such festive seasons, we unpack the high from the low within which it is implicated. Like unpacking Christmas presents, now I think of it: heaven come wrapped in earth, spirit gift-wrapped in flesh. Isn't the Christ-child in his swaddling just a little parcel with a face?

²⁶ Many medieval manuscripts contain illustrations of the 'Jesse tree', a genealogical tree, rooted in the body of David's father Jesse, which bears the fruit of all his subsequent descendants, with Jesus as its crowning blossom, like the angel or star on the top of a Christmas tree.

Each of us, in getting born, enters a world of hard edges and surfaces and those binding chains of cause and effect. Time, space, and the forces of gravity, climate and biology all weigh on us with, sooner or later, fatal effect. That miraculous scion of Jesse first appears to us bundled in all sorts of circumstance—swaddled like a sprained ankle, slotted into the narrow confines of a feeding trough. He is visited in Luke by shepherds who’ve been given their marching orders by angelic authority, poor men themselves accustomed to the blows of chance and change that life in this world can deliver. In Matthew the new-born king receives a more stately visitation from the gift-bearing Magi,²⁷ astrologers whose art unravels the weft of circumstance and fate that swaddles the whole world, spun by the stars as they turn and turn about the world that thus receives their *influenza*. The child in *that* manger, paid court by *those* astrologers and *those* poor shepherds, came to represent (and, in Christian teaching, to enact) a new, unforeseen, impossible and impossibly joyful *escape* from all victimage to mere circumstance. Like him, each of us is born to circumstances that determine the better part of our lives to come before we’ve even soiled our first nappy. We’re dealt a hand and handed a script, both of which allow for only a little bit of improv.²⁸ The wheres and whens of our birth permit some possibilities but foreclose infinitely more. Born as I was, on Long Island in 1957, I could not aspire to be a Roman legionary or sybil, a courtier to Louis XIV or Eleanor of Aquitaine, an Aztec king or a Maori warrior, or an ancient Chaldean astrologer. The list goes on All that we are *not* looms far larger than all we are. Or does it?

This is what formal astrology has sought inside information on through all its permutations ancient to modern. But the first witnesses to respond to the man *that* child became told stories of his working miraculous escapes from the harsh demands of bodily necessity that beset others.²⁹ He healed: from disease, from madness, from death itself.³⁰ Some declared him the messiah and liberator predicted by Israel’s prophets. That he was, and that he wasn’t. The healer and comforter who turned up did not quite answer the agenda of the old prophets, as they were taken at that time. Those who looked for a new David who

²⁷ Isn’t it interesting how every popular Nativity tableau (from early medieval art to today’s primary-school plays) conflates Luke’s and Matthew’s accounts? No Magi in Luke, no shepherds in Matthew, but there they are, shoulder to shoulder, pastoral bumpkins and regal astrologers jostling for a better view.

²⁸ What theologians call ‘free will’

²⁹ As if Harry Houdini had helped his *audiences* to escape from swaddlings of straitjackets and chains.

³⁰ The Latin *salvator* (from which we get our *saviour*) comes from *salus* (‘health’) and literally means ‘healer’. The Anglo-Saxons knew this and translated it into their own language as *hælend* (literally, ‘healing one’, ‘healer’), from the Old English verb *hælan* (‘to heal’). The old Christmas wassail-bowl, as well as the activity celebrated in the carol ‘Here We Go A-Wassailing’, takes its name from an Old English greeting, *wes hæl* (‘be well’ or ‘be healthy’).

would rout the new Latin-speaking Philistines from their land and re-establish his earthly father's kingdom were not looking for him as a swaddled infant in a feeding-trough cot. And this, in the end, may be the ultimate nub of the business concluded that night, whether witnessed by shepherds or saluted by astrologers: Charles Williams' 'excellent absurdity' or Emily Dickinson's 'the truth's superb surprise'. Some superlative good that *no one* saw coming. Custom, historical necessity, cause and effect—all processing horizontally through time and space to fixed, predetermined ends—all at once find themselves crossed by a vertical current from who knows where: timeless, causeless, impossible even. Just like that impossibly towering tree of lights into whose presence my siblings and I entered on Christmas morning, around its foot a horizontal floor strewn with *gifts*, each without cause, answering to no agenda of merit or worth, each a beautifully concealed delight. We hadn't earned them, hadn't worked for them, but there they were for us, a material manifestation of the giddy theological notion of grace, long before our young minds could accommodate such chilly abstractions.

Childhood has its outward term. As a season of my time on earth, mine is long past. The many necessities and inevitabilities of late middle age now hedge me 'round—some of them quite comfortably, I should say. But the money-changers and their marketplace ideology have wrought a dark metamorphosis over much of the Yuletide scene I look out upon today.³¹ So much now subject to calculation and manipulation, in an increasingly insane scramble after material advantage. The false Christmas trees, flashing lights and other seasonal flim-flam crammed into every shopping precinct and mega-mall temple to commerce seem unusually sinister and crude this year, too obviously aimed at manipulating consumer behaviour, at reducing us to rats in a Skinner box, responding to closely calculated stimuli with a suite of pre-programmed responses.³² All predictable. All locked in. All superb surprise and excellent absurdity walled out by the necessities of economic calculation. No visions of sugarplums when you're falling asleep beneath the spread-sheets of Microsoft Excel.

³¹ And many other scenes as well. Most grievously I have had to look on as the *alma mater* ('gracious mother') of the modern university, where I have worked most of my adult life, has succumbed to the bean-counters' baleful *influenza*, turning her into a take-no-prisoners, power-dressing, aims-and-outcomes-spouting boardroom exec. *Sic transit gloria mundi*. . .

³² It doesn't help that I now encounter all the tinsel and trash under the sometimes harsh glare of an Australian summer, which renders much of the traditional little-light-in-big-darkness Christmas aesthetic a bit thin and brassy.

Yet my memories of the magic and miracle wrought upon my senses in those childhood scenes flare in my mind's eye from out of the past like the scything beam of a far-off lighthouse. Sure, all the appurtenances of those long-ago Christmases—tree and lights, presents and food—in actual fact came from the belly of the same beast of capital and industry that now rampages without let or hindrance across the land, through scenes of post-modern irony and invisible-hand, beggar-my-neighbour predation.³³ But we stood protected from all that by our own innocence and awe, sustained by the magic theatre of bough, light and gift Mom and Dad orchestrated for us, like a pair of Prosperos magicking up living pageants of wonder and goodness, keenly anticipated yet somehow wholly unlooked for.

And over all there stands the tree, luminous, endlessly evocative. Like all of us, a child of both heaven and earth. In a world of grinding mechanism, a beacon signalling possibilities not yet conceived, hopes not yet entertained, joys not yet imagined. A star on its crown and gifts at its feet. Ordained by venerable tradition, yet answering to nothing but the shining eyes and delighted voices of children. I know. I was there.

³³ Those Germanic tribes in the depths of the Teutoberg Forest look like rank amateurs of plunder and rapine next to a modern-day asset-stripper or any old multi-national. Kids with toy swords playing dressups. *God geol, Æbelwulf!*