

Beautiful Days

An extract from **Warwick Fox's** new book *On Beautiful Days Such As This: A Philosopher Sings the Blues and Restores His Soul in Greece*

I have long been drawn to the Tang dynasty poet Li Po's way of describing our predicament and pointing towards its remedy:

*Since water still flows,
though we cut it with swords,
and sorrow returns,
though we drown it with wine;
since the world can in no way
answer to our craving,
I will loosen my hair tomorrow
and take to a fishing boat.*

I follow Li Po's example in my fashion: after getting through another dreary English winter, and another round of coping with the too-muchness of things in my working life, I have come once again to the Greek islands in order to restore myself. More positively, I have come here in order to feel more alive. Yes, *that*, ultimately, is why I return again and again to the Mediterranean, the 'middle of the earth', and to Greece in particular, the mother of the Western adventure, because it quickens my sense of being alive. Although moments of feeling truly alive seem to come unbidden, somehow there just seems to be a greater chance of being struck by them here. This has been true of my visits to Greece over many years now and it remains true notwithstanding Greece's current difficulties.

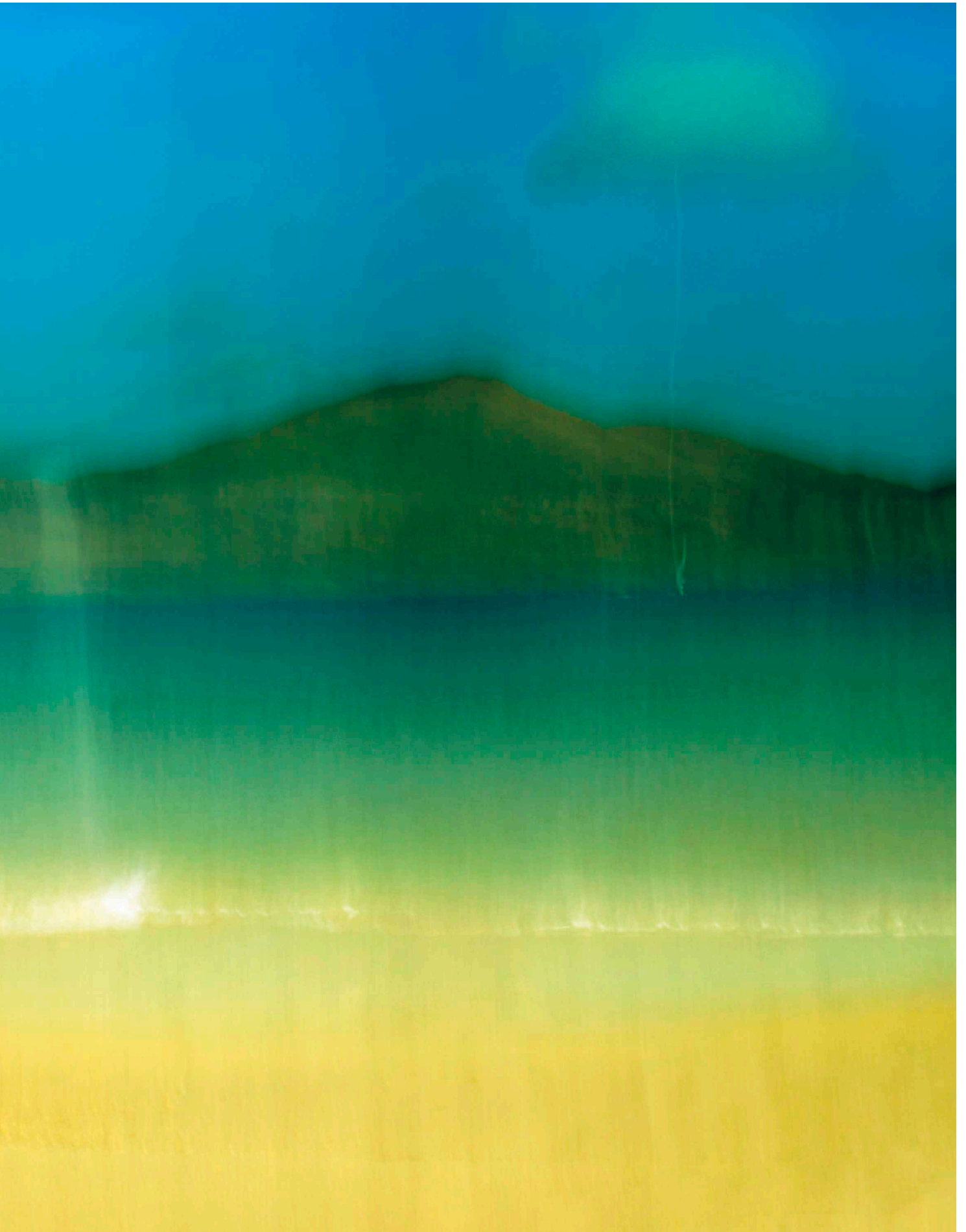
The irony here, though, is that I, a latter-day example of the Western philosophical tradition, have returned to Greece, the birthplace of that tradition, in order to *escape* from my philosophical work for a while – or at least from its workaday institutional pressures. Even so, taking to a fishing boat in this way allows me to look back at the shoreline in a more detached and appreciative way than I was able to manage before I left it. It allows me the time and space in which to remind myself of what it was that drew me to philosophy's kaleidoscopic halls of enchantment, enlightenment and perplexity in the first place, and of why I came to do the kind of philosophy I do.

I remember that I began my university career by pursuing not philosophy but rather experimental

psychology, and by doing so in a 'tough-minded' way too: my fourth-year undergraduate honours dissertation was a heavy number-crunching experimental study entitled *The Alpha Rhythm as an Electrophysiological Indicant of Hemispheric Specialization in Humans*. (Let's face it: some of us just have a gift for titles, right?) But then I drifted, maybe not as far as Mae West of "I used to be Snow White, but I drifted" fame, but I drifted nonetheless. I become lured, initially, by philosophy of science: Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, Paul Feyerabend, and all the rest. Although I'd also studied philosophy as part of my undergraduate degree, the intense interest that was being focused on and generated by the philosophy and sociology of science at the time – the mid-1970s – led me to move, via philosophy and sociology of science initially, more and more towards philosophy in general.

But how to pursue philosophy in the contemporary world, with its many pressing problems, without getting lost in undue abstraction, logical mazes, and intellectual forms of smoke and mirrors? You know the old joke, "How many philosophers does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer (delivered in one's best Oxbridge accent): "Well, it rather depends on what one means by 'philosophers', and 'change', and 'light bulb'."

Or consider this example of 'what can happen' if you get your philosophical light bulb working but forget to turn it off. Once, I happened to be walking along the same street as another philosopher I knew. After our preliminary hellos, I ventured to make casual, passing-the-time-of-day conversation with him by asking how his wife (of 20 years) was. (My wife and I had recently been introduced to her at a dinner party.) He then proceeded to talk quite seriously about the 'epistemic problem' of knowing how one's partner is. I could see his point, up to a point, of course, and, indeed, I have written on 'theory of mind' – that is, our ability to be aware of the awareness of others – myself, but, you know, there's *a time and a place*. Or so I tend to think, yet some philosophers seem always to



Returning to the roots of philosophy to discover a new way of thinking

Vatersay 4 by Kevin Marston/www.kevinmarston.com

be 'on'. In my colleague's case, this matter seemed to vex him so much that he dilated on the subject for the full five minutes or so that it took us to walk from one end of the street to the other, and I never did get a clear answer to my casual enquiry as to how his wife was.

When we reached the end of the street and were about to head off in our different directions, he suddenly thought to enquire, by way of social reciprocation I suppose, how my wife was. "Fine," I said. And he seemed momentarily stunned by the surety with which I could be so casually certain that my wife was indeed 'fine', which indeed she was. (*Get a grip, man.*) I double-checked when I got home, too: "Fine," she said.

How, then, to pursue philosophy in this day and age without getting 'lost in (philosophical) space'? *That* was the question. For me the answer was to wed my interest in philosophy with my 'real world' concerns about the state of the world around us. I knew then, and it has been becoming even clearer since, that the life-sustaining capacities of the planet on which we live are being threatened on a planetary scale by the sheer ongoing impact of our human numbers, rates of consumption, and technologically amplified power. In their line of work, human ecologists do not worry about the real-world implications of the $E = mc^2$ formula so much as those of the $I = PAT$ formula, which is far less well known but at least as important in the larger scheme of things. What human ecologists mean by this formula is that human impact (I) is a combined function of population (P), multiplied by affluence (A) (which refers to the average level of consumption), multiplied by a factor that is weighted so as to reflect the environmental impact of the technology (T) that we employ to produce, transport and dispose of the goods and services we use. And ecologists know that the world as we know it can just as 'easily' end in a long, painful whimper as in a more or less instantaneous bang. (Y'all have a good day now, hear?)

If we think of Robert Oppenheimer as "the father of the atomic bomb", then there is a strong argument for thinking of Rachel Carson as "the mother of the environmental movement". Historians of ideas and others who study social and political developments typically date the birth of the environmental movement as a vigorous, temporally continuous, geographically widespread and increasingly well-organised social and political phenomenon to the virtual explosion of interest that attended the 1962 publication of Carson's book *Silent Spring*. It is therefore not surprising that Robert B. Downs included Carson's book – along with the Bible and works by such figures as Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Marx and Freud – as the most recent of the 27 entries in his many times republished *Books That Changed the World*.

In *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, my first book (which, of course, did not change the world), I noted in the opening chapter that,

Although *Silent Spring* was primarily concerned with the question of the biological damage we were doing to the world and, particularly, to ourselves, it was clear that, at another level, Carson's book was also

an indictment of our arrogant conception of our place in the larger scheme of things. For Carson, our ecological thoughtlessness was matched only by our lack of philosophical maturity. In the last paragraph of her book, Carson concluded that "the 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man." The effect of Carson's critique was to suggest to many people that what was needed first and foremost in regard to ecological problems was not bigger and better technical solutions but rather a thorough rethinking of our most fundamental attitudes concerning our place in the larger scheme of things.

Coming of age in the context of the threats posed by both environmental destruction and nuclear weapons, which is to say, as part of a generation that was informed by Rachel Carson's legacy just as much as Robert Oppenheimer's, I felt profoundly alienated by the kind of 'instrumental rationality' that could view the making of weapons of mass destruction as a 'technically sweet' problem (Robert Oppenheimer's term for the challenge of building the first atomic bomb) and that turned the world around us, including human beings, into just so many 'resources' to be utilised. I therefore experienced a palpable sense of

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relief, and even liberation, when I came across the then newly emerging area of 'environmental philosophy', and particularly the ideas associated with an approach within that field known as 'deep ecology'.

These ideas not only expanded and amplified Carson's critique of what she referred to as the "Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man", but also offered the "thorough rethinking of our most fundamental attitudes concerning our place in the larger scheme of things" that I was looking for. They were life-enhancing rather than life-threatening; 'vitality rich' rather than 'technically sweet'. As far as I was concerned, they had a real 'charge' about them, an intellectual sex appeal.

They still do, even if I'm no longer living with them in the way that I used to. Instead, I have gone on to develop more detailed ideas of my own – I discuss these in a later chapter in the book from which this section has been extracted – but first loves in anything are owed their due, and I'm more than happy to pay mine here. R

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Gather yourself, O Poet and arise.
If you have courage bring it as your gift.
There is so much sorrow and pain,
a world of suffering lies ahead –
poor, empty, small, confined and dark.
We need food and life, light and air,
strength and health and spirit bright with joy
and wide bold hearts.
Into the misery of this world, O Poet,
bring once more from heaven the light of faith.

– Extract from *Call Me Back to Work* by Rabindranath Tagore