

Squeak and Gibber, Aldous Leonard Huxley

Squeak and Gibber

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,

A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,

The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead

Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.

Poetically, of course, they could have done nothing else but squeak and gibber. They could never, for example, have cried and muttered, nor wailed and whispered, still less have indulged in hauntings and direct voice manifestations. The mysterious laws of poetry demanded that they should squeak and gibber and do nothing but squeak and gibber. Squeaking and gibbering are, in the circumstances, artistically inevitable; they are also, as it happens, historically correct. For the Roman dead, at any rate in the earlier, higher, and palmier phases of Roman history, did squeak and gibber. They squeaked as feebly and they gibbered as ineffectively as those poor anaemic ghosts for whom Odysseus prepared, on the border of Hades, that tonic meal of blood. During the millennium which immediately preceded the Christian era, and in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, ghosts were thin, shadowy, hardly personal beings. The dead survived, but wretchedly, faintly, as mere shadows. 'There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in Sheol, whither thou goest.' The words are from Ecclesiastes; but they might have been spoken almost anywhere in the Mediterranean world at almost any time between the Trojan war and the murder of Julius Caesar.

The squeak-and-gibber period of immortality came to an end, roughly speaking, at the beginning of the Christian era. Cicero and Virgil were still believers in the Homeric doctrines; they looked forward to a posthumous existence not more, but much less glorious than life on earth. 'Rather would I live on the ground as a hireling of another, with a landless man who had no great livelihood, than bear sway among the dead.' Their views were fundamentally the same as Homer's.

In this, they were not, for their age, very modern. For Plato and the mystagogues had already, long before, begun looking forward to a posthumous future very different from that which awaited the Homeric and Old Testament heroes. In Cicero's time, the squeak-and-gibber hypothesis was fast becoming antiquated. The rise of Christianity rendered it heretical as well as old-fashioned. The Christian dead were not allowed to squeak and gibber; they had either to sing and play the harp, or else to scream in never-ending agony. And they have continued to make music or scream until very recent times. In the course of the last century, however, very considerable changes have taken place. The fully Christian, fully personal, fully moral dead, with their music and their beatific vision, their deprivation of God's presence and their tortures, are now, I should guess, in the minority. What of the other departed? Many of them are simply non-existent; for the number of people who either dogmatically don't believe in, or else agnostically or uncaringly, simply don't bother about immortality is now considerable. Some, however, are glorious but impersonal survivors, reabsorbed, pantheistically, into a divine and universal Whole.

Others again—the departed ones with whom certain spiritualists establish contacts, live on in an up-to-date version of the Red Indian's Happy Hunting Ground, a superior and slightly less material repetition of the present world complete with whiskies and sodas, cigars and midget golf-courses. The number of believers in this sort of survival seems to be increasing. Finally there is the scientific Psychical Researcher, whose views on the future life (if we may judge from the pronouncements of such eminent authorities as Professor C. E. Broad and M. René Sudre) seem to be almost indistinguishable from those held by Homer and the author of Ecclesiastes. For all that survives, according to these researchers (and the existing evidence, it seems to me, does not justify one in going any further), is what Professor Broad calls a 'psychic factor'—something which, in conjunction with a material brain, creates a personality but which, in isolation, is no more personal than matter.

The dead, then, survive, but only fragmentarily, feebly, as mere wisps of floating memories. In a word, the squeak-and-gibber theory of survival is that which, according to some of the most competent scientific observers, best fits the available facts. Western thought has come back, where the question of immortality is concerned, to the point from which it started. And this is not surprising; for as Professor Leuba pointed out years ago in his excellent book, *The Belief in God and Immortality*, the Homeric conception of survival, the squeak-and-gibber theory as I have called it, is fundamentally scientific—a theory made to fit observable facts. Some of these facts, as we now see, were irrelevant to the question of survival. Others, however, were relevant.

The living sometimes have dreams or waking visions of the dead; sometimes, when they are thinking of the departed they experience the strange and singularly convincing 'sense of presence.' Ingenuous minds interpret such experiences in terms of a theory of survival—a squeak-and-gibber theory; for it is the only one which fits this class of facts, just as it is the only one which fits the facts (if facts they are) of apparitions, hauntings, and the like. The modern psychical researcher bases his squeak-and-gibber theory on this latter class of 'super-normal' facts. The contemporaries of Homer based their similar theory on these same super-normalities (for presumably they manifested themselves then at least as often as they do now); but also on the quite irrelevant normalities of dream, vision, sense of presence, and the like. Old and new, both are scientific theories, that is to say, theories made to fit certain observed facts. The only difference between them is that the Homeric theorists accepted, as relevant, facts which we now see to have been beside the point. It happened, however, that their squeak-and-gibber theory fitted the irrelevant facts as neatly as it fitted and fits the relevant facts. So that their mistake was comparatively unimportant.

The Platonic and Christian theory of immortality—the harp-and-scream, as opposed to the squeak-and-gibber conception of a future life—is in no sense a scientific hypothesis. It was not created to fit observed facts; it was created to satisfy certain desires—some, of the most crassly selfish nature, others, the most loftily idealistic. The existence of these ideals and aspirations and even of these purely selfish longings for a continuance of personal being has been taken by many philosophers as the major premise of an argument, whose conclusion is the proved fact of personal and retributive immortality. But, as Broad has shown, it is hard (though not, in certain cases, impossible) to construct a logical bridge between the world of morality and the world of scientific truth; and anyhow, as a matter of historical fact, such bridges, when constructed, have almost invariably collapsed. Thus, the moral argument

in favour of immortality will not bear the weight of scepticism. This logical bridge is a hopelessly ramshackle structure, and can be crossed only by those who wear the wings of faith and therefore have no real need of its support.

As for the biological argument—that the existence of an inborn desire must imply the existence of an object of that desire, as hunger implies the existence of food and sexual desire that of a possible mate—this would be cogent only if the desire were universal. But it is not and has never been universal; the desire for survival is therefore not analogous to hunger or sexual appetite. Other philosophers have argued from the desire to the fact of immortality by asserting our incapacity even to conceive the cessation of our consciousness. This inconceivability of our own unconsciousness is a fact of psychology, upon which it is interesting and profitable to meditate. But since there is no difficulty at all in conceiving the cessation of other people's consciousness, I do not see that the argument derived from this fact can ever be wholly convincing. Immortality of the Platonic or Christian kind has been and must presumably remain the object only of hope, of longing, of faith; the survival, if survival it is, which is the object of scientific observation is survival of the Homeric kind—the squeak-and-gibber survival of shadowy and impersonal 'psychic factors.' By trying to interpret the facts of psychical research in terms of a modified Christian hypothesis, the spiritualists have involved themselves in inextricable difficulties.

For the facts of psychical research simply do not warrant the adoption of anything remotely resembling a harp-and-scream conception of survival; the only rational interpretation to which they lend themselves is an interpretation in terms of some kind of squeak-and-gibber theory. Which is, admittedly, rather depressing. But then a great many things in this universe are rather depressing. Others, fortunately, are not. What we lose on the swings of pain, pointlessness, and evil, we gain on a variety of aesthetic, sensuous, intellectual, and moral roundabouts. Given a reasonable amount of luck, it is possible to live a not intolerable life. And if, afterwards, we find ourselves condemned to squeak and gibber, why, then, squeak and gibber we must. In the meantime let us make the best of rational speech.

One of the stock arguments in favour of Platonic and Christian immortality is this: if there were no future life, or at any rate no belief in future life, men would be justified in behaving like animals and, being justified, would all incontinently start taking the advice of Horace and the Preacher to do nothing but swill, guzzle, and copulate. Even a man of Dostoevsky's intelligence oracularly affirms that 'all things would be permitted' if there were no such thing as immortality. These moralists seem to forget that there are many human beings who simply don't want to pass their lives eating, drinking, and being merry, or, alternatively, like Russian heroes, raping, murdering, and morally torturing their friends. The deadly tedium of the Horatian and the nauseating unpleasantness of the Dostoevskyan life would be quite enough, survival or no survival, to keep me at any rate (in these matters one can only speak for oneself) unswervingly in the narrow way of domestic duty and intellectual labour.

For the narrow way commands an incomparably wider, and, so far as I am concerned, an incomparably fairer prospect than the primrose path; fulfilled, domestic duties are a source of happiness, and intellectual labour is rewarded by the most intense delights. It is not the hope of heaven that prevents me from leading what is technically known as a life

of pleasure; it is simply my temperament. I happen to find the life of pleasure boring and painful. And I should still find it boring and painful even if it were irrefragably proved to me that I was destined to be extinguished or, worse, to survive in the form of a squeaking and gibbering shade—as one of the 'weak heads,' in Homer's expressive phrase. Nekuōn amenēna karēna—the weak heads of the dead. Those who have attended spiritualistic séances will agree that the description is painfully accurate.

The end