

Ecclesiastes 1

In this tightly organized opening our protagonist is introduced by the frame narrator (who appears again in 7:27 and 12:8–14) ‘Qoheleth, son of David’ (1:1). As he is to many simultaneously joyful and miserable, so he is both Solomon and not Solomon, and the playful ascription has cast a peculiar shadow over legion readings. Here also begins his momentous theme of *hebel* (1:2 *et passim*), a word variously translated (e.g. ‘vanity’, ‘futility’, ‘absurdity’), which if nothing else signifies a gaping negation. In the experiences Qoheleth will go on to relate, *hebel* comes to represent the defiance of all reasonable expectation about the world. This is the ‘raw material’ for the most voluminous theme in Ecclesiastes’ reception history, the refutation and contempt of the vanity of the world. My discussion of these two tremendously important topoi of reading is undertaken in the first two sections that follow.

The remaining portion of the first chapter (which will be taken up in a third, distinct section) begins with a programmatic, rhetorical question about the profit of human endeavour (1:3). This is followed by a brief poem on the circuitous behaviour of the sun, wind and sea (the earth is the only thing that stands still here – v. 4; cf. 3:11), with reflections that seem to beg comparison to human experience (4, 8–11). Qoheleth then undertakes his quest proper to examine what God has done, and indirectly how that activity impacts humanity (12–18). The theme of *hebel* courses all through this passage, even when the word does not appear. It is also here coupled with the ‘pursuit of wind’ (14), and in the pages that remain nothing now seems certain except instability and uncertainty itself. It is full of the frustratingly unchangeable – what has been, what will be – the irredeemably crooked and the forever forgotten (8–11, 15). And here the Preacher’s infeasible credentials are placed on show – a man who is full-to-bursting with life experience and has become more wise than all the sages who preceded him (12, 16). This is neatly coupled to Qoheleth’s persuasive and biblically unique epistemological style: ‘And so I found . . .’ (14 *et passim*) – a style that indelibly stamps the whole book.

This brief and memorable overture expresses futility, sorrow and vexation, but it is also undergirded by the diamond-hard intransigence of Qoheleth’s desire to understand, to apply his mind *to know*, even if that knowledge is folly itself, even if in the end it will only bring misery. Already the reader is witness to Qoheleth’s peculiar wizardry, his compelling ability to bring into habitation what should not dwell together (wisdom and sorrow), making them disappear and reappear without apology or condition.

Before addressing the two ‘momentous themes’ of *vanitas* and Solomon, John Trapp, ‘M.A. Pastour of Weston upon Avon in Glocester shire’, in his *A Commentary or Exposition upon Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher* (1650) offers a suitable note of fanfare to introduce ‘*The words of Qoheleth*’:

The words. Golden words, waighly and worthy of all acceptation, grave and gracious Apophthegmes, or rather Oracles, meet to be well remembered: *Solomon’s* Sapientall Sermon of the Sovereigne good, and how to attain to it; *Solomon’s* Soliloquie, so some style it; others, his Sacred Retractions; others, his Ethicks, or *Tractate de Summo Bono* [marg. reads ‘[John] Serranus’], of the chieftest good, compiled and composed with such a picked frame of words, with such pithy strength of sentences, with such a thick *series* of demonstrative arguments, that the sharp wit of all the Philosophers compared with this Divine discourse, seems to be utterly cold, and of small account; their elaborate Treatises of *Happinesse* to be *learned dotages*, and *laborious losse of time*. (1650:1–2; in fact, most of the second half of this sentence is derived from the Preface to Serranus 1587)

The Life and Death of Solomon the Author: 1:1 et passim

A. ALIVE AND WELL IN PRE-MODERNITY (–1500)

Of course, the first verse of chapter 1 provides the ‘raw materials’ for the premise of Solomonic authorship. It is notable, however, that even Qoheleth’s first interpreters, the Septuagint translators, who had opportunity to mask the authorial ambiguity to a non-Hebrew-reading public, resisted a clear ascription to Solomon by rendering the first verse as ‘The words of Ecclesiastes’ (‘*rēmata ’Ekklēsiastou*’) and not ‘of Solomon’ (on the tenor and style of the Septuagint’s rendering of Ecclesiastes, see Fox 1999: 349). This may be understood in part by an early strand of rabbinic tradition reluctant to acknowledge the inspiration of Solomon in the composition of Ecclesiastes (and, at the time, the Song of Songs; Halperin 1982: 277).

It is widely held that Ecclesiastes was received into the Jewish canon due mainly to its association with Solomon (e.g. Holm-Nielsen 1976: 55; Salters 1974–5: 340–2; Whybray 1989: 3).¹ Debate about the book in general was abundant, with Ecclesiastes and Esther most frequently coming under the erratic microscope of the rabbis. The real issues of those discussions are, however, not always easy to determine (see Christianson 1998a: 148–9). Rather obliquely, discussions gave great weight to a book’s ability to ‘defile the hands’ (see Leiman 1976: 104–20), or to its inspirational status in general (e.g. *b. Yadayim* 2:14; see below). Take, for example, the following (*b. Yadayim* 3:5): ‘All the holy writings defile the hands. The Song of Songs defiles the hands, but there is a dispute about Ecclesiastes. R. Jose says: Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, but there is a dispute about the Song of Songs’ (also see *b. Yadayim* 2:14; *b. ’Eduyyoth* 5:3; *b. Megillah* 7a; *Midrash Leviticus* 28.1). *B. Megillah* 7a is similar: as learned ‘Rabbi Shimon ben Mennasiah states: Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands since it is the wisdom of Solomon.’ Ultimately, defilement of the hands was probably about the degree of ritual effect a book could muster, and may even have been a roundabout measure to keep scrolls from being stored with sacred food, thus leading to mice and rats (see Broyde 1995: 66).

As Leiman suggests, discussions traditionally ascribed to the Council of Jamnia (c.100 CE) report that Ecclesiastes was in danger of being *gnz* (‘stored away’) since it fostered heretical ideas. But the reported debate probably served to confirm its canonical status early on, since only problematic *canonical* books were at risk of being ‘stored away’ (so Leiman 1976: 79–80, 86, 104–9). In this respect the Solomonic connection faded to the background. In none of the discussions at Jamnia was Solomonic authorship even mentioned, and in the

¹ Some of what follows on Solomonic authorship is adapted from Christianson 1998a: 148–54, 165–71.

end no books discussed at Jamnia were withdrawn from canonical use anyway (see Beckwith 1985: 276–7). Contrary to several studies, Ecclesiastes was spared *gnz*, but not because of any association with Solomon (see Christianson 1998a: 150 n. 75).

In an infamous dispute about Ecclesiastes between the Shammaites and the school of Hillel, Solomonic authorship was not mentioned (see above; *b. Yadayim* 3:5; *b. Eduyyoth* 5:3). Indeed, reference to Solomon may not have been effectual anyway, as the early third-century CE tradition of R. Simeon ben Menasya suggests:

The Song of songs defiles the hands, because it was spoken through Divine inspiration; Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, because it is [only] Solomon's wisdom. They replied: Did he write this alone? Scripture says, 'He spoke three thousand parables, and his songs were a thousand and five' (1 Kgs 5:12), and 'Do not add to [God's] words, lest He rebuke you and you be found a liar' (Prov. 30:6). (*b. Yadayim* 2:14, with variations; *b. Megillah* 7a; tr. by Halperin, 1982: 277)

Compare Jerome, who in his commentary (388/9), steeped in rabbinic tradition, on 12:13–14 states that

The Hebrews say that although [Ecclesiastes] used to be among other writings of Solomon in the past, they have not persisted in memory; and this book seems as if it ought to have been omitted [*oblitterandus*], because it asserts that all God's creations are vain and that he thinks everything is done for nothing, and he prefers food and drink and transient pleasures to all things; thus he takes his authority from this one title [Solomon?], so it is now included in the number of divine books, because he argues well and lists many things . . . and he said that his speeches are the easiest to hear, and to understand. (2000: *ad loc.*)

In other words, what really matters about this extraordinary little scroll is that, Solomon or no, it is 'argued well' and that the words bring pleasure to the ear. The significance of Solomon as author will grow almost grotesquely out of proportion before it returns to this meagre size again.

Often debates focused on some of the acknowledged contradictions of the book (even the 'defiling of hands' debate may have had this problem at its centre). *Midrash Qoheleth* 11.9 records what was perhaps the most serious of debates on Ecclesiastes:

The Sages sought to suppress the Book of Koheleth because they discovered therein words which tend toward heresy. They declared, 'This is the wisdom of Solomon that he said, "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth!"' (Eccl. 11:9). Now

Moses said, *that ye go not about after your own heart* (Num. 15:39) . . . Is restraint to be abolished? Is there no judgement and no Judge? But since he continued, 'But know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement', they exclaimed, 'Well has Solomon spoken.'

The first tractate of the Mishnah states the case in general terms. R. Tanhum of Nave says, 'O Solomon, where is your wisdom, where is your intelligence? Not only do your words contradict the words of your father, David, they even contradict themselves' (in *b. Shabbath* 3). Many of the ancient readers are concerned with content and do not seem to be bothered with the much asked modern question, Why is Ecclesiastes in the canon? (See Christianson 1998a: 153–4 for an overview of some modern attempts to answer it.) And traditionally the question, Why Solomon?, has been answered with the question, Who else but Solomon could have spoken with such vehement denunciation on the vanity of riches, wealth and even human existence? As R. Eleazar is reputed to have so aptly noted, 'but for Solomon . . . I might have said that this man who had never owned two farthings in his life makes light of the wealth of the world and declares, "*Vanity of vanities*"' (*Midrash Qoheleth* 3.11.1; cf. *Midrash Deuteronomy* 1.5). Such a view is articulated in the Christian tradition as well. For example, Bonaventure in the Introduction to his commentary (1253–7) notes that

a poor person with no possessions would not be believed about despising riches since that person *has no experience* and therefore *knows nothing*. So the author of this book had to be a person with experience of all these things, that is, a person who was powerful, rich, voluptuous, and curious or wise. We have not read or heard of anyone who so excelled in all these as Solomon. (2005: 76)

The most substantial biblical narrative about the eventual dispersal of Solomon's kingdom (1 Kgs 11:9–40) is sparse, even ambiguous, and this particular ambiguity may have been the impetus for a number of legends about Solomon (Holm-Nielsen 1976: 71). In those books attributed to him (including Ecclesiastes) early Jewish tradition sometimes made attempts to understand the particular circumstances of Solomon's writing. The most fascinating example is that of Solomon and the demon Asmodai. According to Ginzberg's rendering of the legend, which is known among the talmudim and probably predates them (see Knobel 1991: 22–3), when Solomon gained too many wives for himself and desired too many horses and too much gold, the Book of Deuteronomy (i.e. the Law) stepped before the Lord and requested that Solomon be chastised in the form of dethronement. While Solomon was dethroned, the demon Asmodai assumed his likeness and took his place. During that time Solomon experienced the life of a beggar and consequently

returned to his throne in Jerusalem, a repentant king (see Ginzberg 1968: 4. 165ff; cf. *Midrash Numbers* 11.3; *Midrash Song of Songs* 3.7.5). For *Targum Qoheleth* Asmodai was sent because Solomon became too proud. During his dethronement, Solomon travelled the world weeping and saying, 'I am Qoheleth, who was previously named Solomon', and it was then that he wrote Ecclesiastes:

When King Solomon of Israel was sitting on his royal throne, his heart became very proud because of his wealth, and he transgressed the decree of the Memra [i.e. the 'word', a rabbinic device to 'soften anthropomorphism'] of the Lord; he gathered many horses, chariots, and cavalry; he collected much silver and gold; he married among foreign peoples. Immediately the anger of the Lord grew strong against him. Therefore, He sent Ashmedai king of the demons, against him who drove him from his royal throne and took his signet ring from his hand so that he would wander and go into exile in the world to chastise him. He went about in all the districts and towns of the Land of Israel. He wept, pleaded, and said, 'I am Qohelet, who was previously named Solomon. I was king over Israel in Jerusalem. . . .' (In Knobel 1991: 22)

Targum Qoheleth drives home the notion that Solomon not only wrote Ecclesiastes, but did so by the Holy Spirit: 'When Solomon king of Israel saw through the holy spirit that the kingdom of Rehoboam his son would be divided with Jeroboam the son of Nebat and that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed and the people of the household of Israel would go into exile, he said to himself, "Vanity of vanities . . . of everything for which I and David my father laboured"' (1.1–2, 4). Here we are told to read Ecclesiastes as an exposition of the vanity which is the loss of Solomon's kingdom. The *Targum* continues (1.13), 'And I set my mind to seek instruction from the Lord at the time when he revealed himself to me at Gibeon' (cf. Eccl. 1:13; 1 Kgs 3:5–9). This link with Solomon is subtle. It is not to support a particular rabbinic argument or (as far as one can tell) to correct some previous misunderstanding of Eccl. 1:13, but rather to underscore the presence of Solomon as the primary narrator/author of these words, a perspective maintained throughout the *targum* (see e.g. 3.12; 4.15; 7.27; 9.7).

Among Christians, it was Origen who began the tradition of a 'Solomonic corpus', which included Ecclesiastes and provided a scheme of reading that corresponded to spiritual development (see p. 38). From the paraphrase on Ecclesiastes by Gregory Thaumaturgos (c.245) onwards the Solomonic context becomes more significant than the formulaic 'Solomon said'. As Gregory's paraphrase begins, we are left in little doubt as to the importance of Solomonic authorship: 'Solomon (the son of the king and prophet David), a king more honoured and a prophet wiser than anyone else, speaks to the whole assembly

of God . . . (1.1)' (Gregory Thaumaturgos 1990: 7). John Jarick discusses the influence of Solomon throughout the work (ibid. 314–15):

This presumption of Solomonic authorship gives rise to certain motifs in Gregory's interpretation. One idea referred to throughout . . . is that Solomon lost and subsequently regained wisdom – he had received wisdom from God but had afterwards rejected it . . . And since Gregory sees Solomon as being . . . a prophet, a number of statements are treated as speaking in a somewhat visionary way of the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil . . . this apocalyptic motif reaches its climax in an ingenious paraphrase of the final chapter's 'Allegory of Old Age' as a prophecy of the end of the world.

And Gregory was not alone in finding Solomon's presence worthy of note. In his homilies on Ecclesiastes (c.380), Gregory of Nyssa makes frequent reference to the importance of Solomon's experience, such as the following: 'the condemnation of the attitude to life based on enjoyment and emotion comes from the mouth of Solomon, in order to make its rejection convincing to us; for he had absolute freedom to practise a life aimed at pleasure and enjoyment, and utterly repudiates all that seems to be sought after by mankind' (hom. 3, in Gregory of Nyssa 1993: 59; cf. 62).

Augustine, too, finds it relevant that the figure of Solomon, 'the wisest king of Israel, who reigned in Jerusalem, thus commences the book called Ecclesiastes, which the Jews number among their canonical Scriptures: "Vanity of vanities, said Ecclesiastes . . ."' (*City of God* 20.3, c.410; Augustine 1890: 603). More importantly, however, he rejected Origen's interpretation of Eccl. 1:9–10 (that it suggested the cyclical nature of all things until they returned to their original state): 'At all events, far be it from any true believer to suppose that by these *words of Solomon* those cycles are meant' (*City of God* 12.13 [italics mine], ibid. 338; cf. Origen, *De Principiis* 3.5.3). It may be that the appeal to Solomon here was an attempt to clinch the argument.

Chrysostom (c.370) has unusually high praise for the 'words of Solomon' in Ecclesiastes when he says, in the flow of another topic of discussion altogether, '[Solomon] who enjoyed much security . . . that very sentiment of Solomon . . . so marvellous and pregnant with divine wisdom – "Vanity of vanities"' (*Concerning the Statues*, hom. 15.5, in Chrysostom 1889: 439–40). Jerome, following Origen, grouped Ecclesiastes with Proverbs and the Song of Songs, each representing successive stages of Christian growth. He often used the 'fact' that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes to make sense of certain texts. Following the rabbis, when Qoheleth laments the bequeathal of the reward from his toil to a fool (2:18–19), the fool becomes Solomon's son.

These examples reflect a secure standing in the early church of both the status of the book (Solomon's words are safe) and the notion of Solomonic



PLATE 6 Solomon preaching to the gathered assembly, the illuminated Naples Bible, fourteenth century

authorship in general. That standing is, on the whole, only assumed and not really exploited, which is most evident where allegorical interpretation held sway. With allegory the character of Solomon eventually became lost among other concerns. Indeed, while midrashic interpreters show concern for 'earthly' matters (e.g. expositing the history of Israel), it was more the habit of the early Christians, with their 'Jesus is the Ecclesiast' approach, to allegorize to the extent that a Solomonic framework was rendered unnecessary (Hirshman 1958: 155–7). For example, Gregory of Nyssa identifies the 'Ecclesiast' with the true king of Israel, Jesus (referring to John 1:49; hom. 2, in Gregory of Nyssa 1993: 34, 48–9).² Jewish readers, too, often regarded Solomon's authorship as inconsequential. In *Midrash Qoheleth*, for example, authorship generally is unimportant since the more pressing concern is to create a forum for rabbinic discussion on a vast array of topics. The Solomonic context was only faintly kept.

² Yet another way in which 'Qoheleth as Solomon' impacts Christian tradition is through the *ars praedicandi*, early medieval manuals of preaching that extolled Solomon as the ideal preacher on the 'contempt of the world' (see Eliason 1989: 42).

B. EMBATTLED IN EARLY MODERNITY (1500–1800)

While the relative importance of Solomonic authorship diminished only slightly in the pre-modern period, it is widely held that Martin Luther is the first to challenge the ‘fact’ itself. In Luther’s *Table Talk* he ‘said’ that ‘Solomon himself did not write Ecclesiastes, but it was produced by Sirach at the time of the Maccabees . . . It is a sort of Talmud, compiled from many books, probably from the library of King Ptolemy Euergetes of Egypt.’ This is cited by Barton (1959: 21) and was also cited (with slightly different wording) by Ginsburg (1861: 113). It also has been repeated in scholarship since (e.g. J. S. Wright 1946: 19; Bartholomew 1998: 39; Christianson 1998a: 170 [!]). Preston (1845: 12), however, argues that Luther in *Table Talk* was in fact referring to Sirach (indeed, Preston seems to be addressing a misconception in *his* day). It seems likely that either Preston was right or that Luther did not address the problematic question of authorship of either book.³

If Luther did not in fact ‘discover’ non-Solomonic authorship, in 1644 Hugo Grotius certainly did: ‘I do not believe it was Solomon, but [Ecclesiastes] was written in the name of this king, as being led by repentance to do it. The proof is that it contains many words which can only be found in Daniel, Esdra [i.e. Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah] and the Chaldee paraphrasts [i.e. targumim]’ (1644: 1.521; my tr.). But even Grotius was not the first to air the idea. Roughly 1300 years earlier, Didymus the Blind (c.313–98) in his commentary on Ecclesiastes suggests that either ‘the real author is Solomon, or some [other] wise men have written it. Maybe we should opt for the latter so that nobody may say that the speaker talks about himself’ (on 7:9, in J. R. Wright 2005: 192). The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Baba Bathra* 15a) asks, in its usual interrogative style, ‘Who wrote the Scriptures?’, and answers that ‘Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote . . . Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.’ The view is

³ I have been unable to locate anything like the citation in the 1967 critical edition of *Luther’s Works*. Ginsburg cites the German of the ‘Fösterman and Birdseil’ edition, which clearly indicates that Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes (‘So hat Salomo selbst das Buch, den Prediger, nicht geschrieben’). As Tappert shows in his introduction to *Table Talk* (in Luther 1967: pp. ix–xxvi), earlier editions suffered from significant revisions, additions and deletions. It is quite possible that the editions available to Ginsburg and Barton were of that ilk. To complicate matters, the 1857 edition (first pub. 1848) of Hazlitt, one of the problematic editions identified by Tappert (1967: p. xv; he makes no mention of Fösterman and Birdseil), reports the following: ‘Ecclesiasticus . . . is not the work of Solomon, any more than is the book of Solomon’s Proverbs. They are both collections made by other people’ (Luther 1857: 11). In Luther’s *Notes on Ecclesiastes* (1532) he suggests that ‘[Solomon spoke these things] after dinner, or even during dinner to some great and prominent men . . . and afterwards what he said was put down and assembled . . . This is then a public sermon which they heard from Solomon’ (in 1972: 12; cf. also 22, 28, 38, 144, where Luther appeals to the notion of Solomonic authorship to make sense of what is happening in the text).

repeated in the commentaries of Isaac ibn Ghiyath (1038–89) on Ecclesiastes, David Kimchi (1160–1235) on Proverbs and Samuel ibn Tibbon on Ecclesiastes, c.1200 (see Robinson 2001: 87, 125 nn. 46–9). The premise appears to be that, as Tibbon puts it, ‘it is . . . impossible that Solomon would not require a great deal of free time to construct [*tiqqun*] the allegories and statements said in proper order . . . It is also possible . . . that Solomon wrote the statements and all the allegories together in confused order or [dispersed] in several different places. Hezekiah and his court scholars then came along and set them down in books’ (in Robinson 2001: 104). Neither Tibbon nor Didymus, however, express this view as forcefully as Grotius. As Robinson comments, Tibbon’s ‘explication of Ecclesiastes is rarely affected by this speculation. He explains the order of chapters and verses and even words as if they were chosen precisely by Solomon himself. Samuel’s interest in textual history, nevertheless, is striking’ (2001: 87). It is also an intriguing inversion of the premise of source criticism, that words ‘in confused order’ suggest different sources. Here it is the disparate work of one man that is assumed to have been edited into a coherent whole.

Apart from a few exceptions in the early modern period, therefore, Solomonic authorship was still a given. However, Grotius’s work soon made its impact, as is evident in the comments of Jean le Clerc’s *Défense des Sentimens de quelques théologiens de Hollande sur l’Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* in 1685 (tr. by John Locke in 1690): ‘Grotius is of Opinion that this Book was not writ by *Solomon* himself, but that it is a Work compos’d under his Name, by one that had been in *Caldea*; because there are divers *Caldean* words in it. If this Conjecture be true, as is not impossible, then this Book will be nothing but a Piece of Wit and Fancy, compos’d by some of those that had been in the Captivity’ (1690: 97). Indeed, critical non-Solomonic readings escalated throughout Europe. At least Voltaire could write in the Foreword to his 1759 *Précis* that whether ‘Ecclesiastes was, in fact, written by Solomon or whether another inspired author made the wise man speak, this book has always been regarded as a precious monument, and is all the more so because in it is found more philosophy’ (in Christianson 2005: 475). Of course, Ecclesiastes scholarship would be no less immune than any other arena to the radical shifts in reading brought on by the Enlightenment. Barton (1959: 21–2) lists five authors from the eighteenth century and reports many more in the nineteenth century, when only a few scholars argued seriously for Solomonic authorship – notably (Hermann?) Wangemann in 1856.

C. DEAD IN MODERNITY – SOLOMON’S GHOST (1800–)

Relatively suddenly commentators were free to speak about the disunity of Ecclesiastes as a manifestation of its non-Solomonic authorship (note Paul

Haupt's words in the Testimonia chapter, p. 4). Many writers of the late nineteenth century, however, clearly struggled with taking the 'non-Solomon' fully on board. After outlining the views of 'modern criticism' against Solomonic authorship, James Bennet in 1870 writes, 'Though there are great difficulties in acknowledging Solomon as the author, we may still, in accordance with ancient Jewish and Christian usage, speak of him as the writer. We would not despoil the great monarch of a crown which we can place only on some vague, imaginary brow. It fits no head so well as that of the wise Solomon' (1870: 4–5). E. J. Dillon, writing 25 years later, is hard on those who would still cling to Solomonic authorship, those 'who admiringly attribute to the Holy Spirit a hopeless confusion of ideas which they would resent as insulting if predicated of themselves' (1895: 89 n. 1). In 1909, James A. Greissinger could say that 'There are some who still believe Solomon wrote it. The linguists are absolutely positive it could not have been written by Solomon. But this question of authorship probably will never be settled' (1909: 734). One hundred years later, and Greissinger is right, though Solomon is out of the critical equation entirely. Elias Bickerman's more recent observation that '[Qoheleth is] a scholar turned haranguer' (1967: 143) imagines no royal figure. This general shift in view since Grotius's ground-breaking observation of Ecclesiastes' overall meaning reflects a shift in the 'consensus' perception of the implied author. Of course, there may be much to commend both the new and the old perceptions. One inescapable result, however, is that Qoheleth is no longer sitting comfortably behind any Solomonic mask. That whole conglomerate of protection, criticism and commentary became quite suddenly vacant in readings. Because of the new vision of authorship with which scholars operated (and still operate), the 'remains' of the (oddly unified) author, *as Solomon as Qoheleth*, became much more scattered.

Reading 'Solomonically' does make a difference in the pre-modern period. For example, Gregory Thaumaturgos understood Qoheleth's (read Solomon's) quest for wisdom to be motivated by his (Solomon's) historical loss of a wisdom that was once divinely imparted. Qoheleth *did* seek wisdom, and his search was thwarted. If we read Ecclesiastes, like Gregory, with the idea that Qoheleth, as Solomon, *once had* true wisdom and understanding, his consequent need to find it becomes indicative of the divine punishment inflicted on him, instead of becoming an example of, or even metaphor for, the human condition. In a similarly exhortative mode, John Donne, some 1,400 years later, reads the book, as so many before him did, as Solomon's repentance: 'In [Ecclesiastes] he hides none of his owne sins . . . He confesses things there, which none knew but himselfe, nor durst, nor should have published them of him, the King, if they had knowne them. So *Solomon* preaches himself to good purpose, and poures out his owne soule in that Book' (in Bozanich 1975: 270).

It is worthy of reflection that long after the death of Solomon in academia (and even in most churches and synagogues), in fiction and verse he has lived on oblivious. So Melville, fully aware of Solomon's demise in the academy, still writes about that 'unchristian wisdom' of Solomon, 'vanity of vanities' (see p. 128); for Chekhov, dramatically it can only be Solomon who sits alone to deliver his melancholic monologue (see p. 68); Dali represents Qoheleth with a cosmic royal crown (see p. 78). As discussed in the Introduction (p. 72), A. M. Klein appears to be unique among modern literary or artistic interpreters in recognizing Solomon as a rhetorical device, subtly combining his voice with Qoheleth's:

Koheleth, on his damasked throne, lets weary exhalation follow

...

The glories of the goblet, yea, these, too, have been a part of me,
The ecstasies of damosels, these also have been Solomon's,

(Klein 1974: 20–1; cf. Robert Bridges's 1926
reference to 'Pseudo-Solomon', below, p. 136)

Solomon's survival (or is it his ghost?) in the arts witnesses to his latent persuasive power on readers, but there is something odd about it. Even though 'Qoheleth' can easily be appropriated by readers because he is only playfully attached to history (he is somewhat contextless), he has not been able to rival the dramatic appeal of Solomon.

Vanitas Vanitatum: 1:2 et passim

[Solomon] speakes roundly, that if they read no more, but sleepe all the Sermon after: yet the first sentence shall strike a sting into their heartes, and leaue a sounde behinde to woken them when they are gone, as manie (you know) remember this sentence, which remember no sentence in all this booke beside.

Who hath not heard *Vanitie of vanities*, &c. Though fewe haue conceiued it?

Henry Smith, 'The Triall of Vanitie', c.1590 (in Smith 1592: 832)

Ecclesiastes is a densely thematic text (see Introduction, p. 18). *Hebel* (a word that appears some 38 times and signifies, at the very least, a deficit situation – its translation will be discussed below) is easily the most prominent of its themes, and significantly brackets the book by its appearance in 1:2 and 12:8. Indeed, the recurrence of *hebel* can be somewhat overbearing, as Minos Devine wryly recognized: 'If you can realise what a trial it is to be told forty times that "all is vanity", you may be disposed to exercise some restraint in the repetition

of any one idea, however interesting it may be to yourself' (1916: 14). Many readers have subsequently been polarized in their responses, favouring joy or *hebel* (usually the latter) as the defining theme.

There is no other word more firmly connected to Qoheleth's experience than *hebel*. It is used to judge the experience of his narrated (younger) life as a whole, and it is Qoheleth's experience which defines *hebel* for readers. Qoheleth observes the following to be *hebel* in relation to his experience: all that he observes (1:14); the test that he made of wisdom and folly (2:1); all the deeds he has done (2:11, 17); his fate in comparison to the fool (2:14–15); the fate of his inheritance (2:18–19, 21; cf. 2:26; 4:7–8); the days of his life (7:15); and of course, everything (1:2; 3:19; 9:1; 12:8). All that he does is coloured by *hebel*, and there is no better way to encapsulate his story, as the frame narrator recognized in 1:2 and 12:8. As such, *hebel* is more than just a key word. The potential range of meaning is phenomenal. Michael Fox captures the way in which *hebel* renders the multifaceted nature of experience: 'what is fleeting may be precious, what is frustrating may be no illusion, what is futile may endure forever' (1989: 36). As Douglas Miller (2002) has recently shown, *hebel* functions as symbol for all of Qoheleth's narrated experience under the sun. Qoheleth's earliest readers recognized this centrality of *hebel* to his thought. Indeed, for many *hebel* everywhere crushes Qoheleth's lesser themes under its grievous weight. For legion pre-modern readers it provided a way of seeing the world, its trappings a counterfeit jewel, the embodiment of what is worthless and deceptive. For yet other readers *hebel* has given hope, a base counterpoint that makes death shine more brightly and joy a tangible possibility. As is evident in the overview that follows, some readers' view of *hebel* has reflected their whole approach to the book.

The difficulty of translating *hebel* has long been recognized. There have been some provocative proposals. Frank Crüsemann suggests that Qoheleth's 'summation, "all is vanity" or emptiness, a stirring of the air . . . is really not so different from our modern "everything is shit"' (1979: 57; cf. Elsa Tamez, who separately arrives at the same conclusion [2000: 3, 155–56]). F. C. Burkitt offers 'bubble', and hence arrives at a charming, if innocuous, version of 1:2: 'Bubble of bubbles! All things are a Bubble! What is the use of all Man's toil and trouble?' (1936: 9; 'bubble' was a favourite choice of the Elizabethan paraphrasts and commentators). Miller (2002: 2–14) helpfully delineates the way in which *hebel* has forced translators to take three distinctive approaches: abstract (a single, abstract meaning, such as 'incongruous' or 'absurd'), multiple senses (use of multiple terms, depending on context) and single metaphor (a 'live, single metaphor' that has multiple referents). There is at least some consensus on the remarkably broad referentiality of the word, its ability to hold Qoheleth's ideas in tension.

It is indicative of the vagaries of translating *hebel* that in every age interpreters have consistently and explicitly resorted to simile and metaphor to render its inherent complexity. Take, for example, the following from Gregory of Nyssa (c.380), who reflects here on *hebel* in the form of the Greek Bible's rendering, *mataiotēs*:

No substantial object is simultaneously indicated when the term 'futility' [*mataiotēs*] is used, but it is a kind of idle and empty sound, expressed by syllables in the form of a word, striking the ear at random without meaning, the sort of word people make up for a joke, but which means nothing . . . Another sense of 'futility' is the pointlessness of things done earnestly to no purpose, like the sandcastles children build, and shooting arrows at stars, and chasing the winds, and racing against one's own shadow and trying to step on its head . . . 'Futility' is either a meaningless word or an unprofitable activity, or an unrealized plan, or unsuccessful effort, or in general what serves no useful purpose at all. (*Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, hom. 1, in Gregory of Nyssa 1993: 35; he goes on to develop the sand aspect of the metaphor at length, p. 41)

Not only does Gregory note the symbolic meaning to be developed by Miller (one of Miller's key tenets is that, in Gregory's words, *hebel* refers to no 'substantial object', and its referentiality is radically open), but where *hebel* appears to refer to things with no reason or 'point', Gregory develops this with a series of striking images (sandcastles and flung arrows – which, suitably, could in turn cause injury). Karaite commentator Yepheth ben 'Ali, c.990, also recognized the appropriateness of metaphor to unpack *hebel*: 'It is generally held that [*hebel*] is an appellation for a ray of sunlight in which something like dust becomes visible. You stretch out your hand and grasp at it, but there is nothing in your hand' (in 'Ali 1969: 146). Ramban (1135–1204) offered a comparable notion: *hebel* 'is a noticeable mist, like breath turned to vapour on a cold day, or the polluted, stagnant air trapped at the bottom of a pit. One can see the vapor, feel the heavy air, but both have no substance and swiftly disappear' (in Zlotowitz 1994: pp. xxxvii–xxxviii).

A. DESPISING THE WORLD THROUGH *VANITAS* (–1500)

By far the most influential rendering of *hebel* in all of the book's reading contexts is 'vanity'. Origen's no longer extant commentary is likely to have first expounded the theme. It is there in his Prologue to his Song of Songs commentary in which he articulates a programme of reading:

Therefore if a person completes the first subject by freeing his habits from faults and keeping the commandments – which is indicated by Proverbs – and if after this, when the vanity of the world has been discovered and the weakness of its perishable things seen clearly [in Ecclesiastes], he comes to the point of renouncing the world and everything in the world, then he will come quite suitably also

to contemplate and to long for the things that are unseen and are eternal. (In Eliason 1989: 49)

As he comments in *de Principiis*, ‘Solomon appears to characterize the whole of corporeal nature as a kind of burden which enfeebls the vigour of the soul in the following language: “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity . . .” To this vanity, then, is the creature subject . . . subjected to vanity not willingly’ (1.4.5, in Roberts and Donaldson 1974a: 264; cf. *Contra Celsus* 7.50 and the Romans citation below). But it is Jerome, on whom Origen had a substantial influence, who pursues the theme programmatically, and sees, as Eliason puts it, ‘the goal of contempt of the world . . . as an independent good’ (1989: 51).

Jerome’s framework for understanding the book is in his articulation of its main theme, of vanity as representative of what is to be despised of the world – *contemptus mundi*. As well as in the introductory words of his Preface concerning ‘virtuous Blesilla’s book of Ecclesiastes’, that he ‘taught her to think lightly of her generation and to esteem futile everything that she saw in the world’ (see Introduction, p. 26), Jerome makes his own theme clear in his commentary on Qoheleth’s first words:

Vanity of vanities [vanitas vanitatum] said Ecclesiastes, Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. If all things that God made are truly good then how can all things be considered vanity, and not only vanity, but even vanity of vanities? . . . [H]eaven, earth, the seas and all things that are contained within its compass can be said to be good in themselves, but compared to God they are nothing. And if I look at the candle in a lamp and am content with its light, then afterwards when the sun has risen I cannot discern anymore what was once bright; I will also see the light of the stars by the light of the setting sun, so in looking at the world and the multitudinous varieties of nature I am amazed at the greatness of the world, but I also remember that all things will pass away and the world will grow old, and that only God is that which has always been. On account of this realisation I am compelled to say, not once but twice: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity . . . All things are and will be vain, until we find that which is complete and perfect. (Jerome 2000: *ad loc.*)

Here Jerome shows his nuanced development of the *vanitas* theme. It is echoed in a later letter (c.394) to Pammachius: ‘But if all things are good, as being the handiwork of a good Creator, how comes it that all things are vanity? If the earth is vanity, are the heavens vanity too? – and the angels, the thrones, the dominations, the powers, and the rest of the virtues? No’ (letter 49, in Jerome 1954: 73).

This qualified approach to *vanitas*, which ironically mirrors Luther’s reasons for rejecting Jerome’s reading (see below, p. 106), is found in numerous



PLATE 7 Qoheleth as Solomon, expounding the vanity of worldly riches, thirteenth-century glossed Latin Bible

Christian commentators, such as Augustine (*City of God* 20.3), John Chrysostom (*Homilies on Ephesians* 12) and the later commentary of Gregory of Agrigentum (c.600), who 'agrees with Ecclesiastes that all is vanity, but says that nothing can be totally useless, since God made everything. Gregory even says that the ideal person is one who has experienced reality and still chosen the good' (Ettlinger 1985: 320). It also appears, with little modification, in the *Glossa ordinaria* (c.1100), Rupert of Deutz (c.1110) and Hugh of St Cher (c.1230–5; see Eliason 1989: 51–3). Hugh of St Victor (fl. c.1118–41), in discussing the idea that *omnia* is *vanitas*, marks out his own approach: 'If everything is vanity, then he himself who says this is vanity. And how can what vanity says concerning vanity not be worthless? Because if it is true that what he says is worthless, he ought not to be heeded, but rather rejected . . . What lives in the flesh is worthless. What lives in God is not worthless, but is true, since it comes from truth' (in Eliason 1989: 53 nn. 30, 31). While most Christian commentators undertake this qualified approach to *vanitas*, others can hate the world through Qoheleth's eyes without condition. So the Arab monastic and theologian John of Damascus (c.650–750), in his immensely popular 'romance' *Barlaam and Joseph*, called for the renunciation of the 'corruptible and perishable' world: 'all things are vanity and vexation of spirit, and many are the things

that they bring in a moment, for they are slighter than dreams and a shadow, or the breeze that blows in the air. Small and short lived is their charm, that is after all no charm, but illusion and deception of the wickedness of the world; which world we have been taught to love not at all but rather to hate with all our heart' (12:109–10, in J. R. Wright 2005: 203). Now we are closer to the kind of reading which Luther will target (see below).

The most nuanced form of this qualified approach to *vanitas* is found in Bonaventure's commentary (1253–7; see Introduction, pp. 34–5). Bonaventure exemplified an exegetical style distinct from that of his peers, and his handling of the *contemptus mundi* reading (by then well established) is a sterling example. In his Introduction Bonaventure deals explicitly with the purpose (*finis*) of Ecclesiastes and replies to the objection that contempt of the world is by necessity contempt of its creator. His elegant reading is worth citing at length:

First, about *the purpose*. For it is said that the purpose of the book is *contempt of the world* . . .

But against this: . . . [T]o despise a work reflects back on the worker. So the person who despises the world, despises God . . . Likewise . . . [S]omething directed towards its goal [i.e. creation directed towards God] should not be despised, but rather accepted and loved. Therefore, this world, with all that is in it, is to be loved.

I reply: It should be said . . . that this world is like a ring given by the bridegroom to the soul itself. Now the bride can love the ring given her by her husband in two ways, namely with a *chaste* or an *adulterous* love. The love is *chaste* when she loves the ring as a memento of her husband and on account of her love for her husband. The love is *adulterous* when the ring is loved more than the husband, and the husband cannot regard such love as good . . . Contempt for a ring by treating it as a poor and ugly gift reflects on the husband, but contempt of a ring by regarding it as almost nothing compared to the love of a husband, gives glory to the husband . . . It is of such contempt that we are speaking, and so the matter is clear. (2005: 77–9; cf. Smalley's discussion, 1950: 44–5)

Like Donne later (see below), in Bonaventure's hands the *contemptus* reading is transformed. He further develops his reading by noting that while truth exists '*in itself*', vanity can exist 'only by reason of the truth'. That is, 'the person who knows true principles also knows false principles' (2005: 83). Vanity, then, can only be understood in relation to its antithesis, an idea that will, centuries later, be articulated so lucidly by Michael Fox (1989).

The contrast of the most convincing appearance of Qoheleth in the New Testament to Jerome's programmatic reading is worth noting here: 'The creation was subjected to futility [*mataiotēs*], not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope' (Rom. 8:20; cf. J. R. Wright 2005: p. xxiii for

other brief NT parallels). This text appears repeatedly in pre-modern Christian commentaries on Ecclesiastes, all of which equate its vanity to that of Qoheleth.

Jerome himself played a key role in the history of Christian monasticism (Hirshman 1996: 97), and his approach to Ecclesiastes would remain hugely influential until at least the age of reform. Early Christian writers by and large followed the broad contours of the reading with little variation. So for Augustine, vanity represents the world itself, for the Church prays ‘that it may be brought out of prison, that is from this world, from under the sun, where all is vanity’ (*On the Psalms*, Ps. 142:8; in Augustine 1956: 651). Indeed, in the abbeys of medieval Europe, the reading of Jerome was inescapable. Eric Eliason, in his magnificent survey of medieval *vanitas* readings (in an unpublished thesis from 1989), summarizes the remarkable level of agreement among commentators regarding the *contemptus mundi* theme:

There was very little disagreement concerning what Solomon taught in Ecclesiastes. His subject was contempt of the world. The opening of Ecclesiastes, with its universal judgment of ‘vanity’ on everything, and its descriptions of the world in constant but unproductive change suggested to medieval readers very good reasons for withholding one’s trust in the *temporalia* which made up the world. As a result, the major enterprise in commenting on Ecclesiastes in the Middle Ages was the effort to distinguish between those things which last and those things which don’t. (1989: 51)

For all its popularity, however, one finds significant departures from Jerome (cf. Hirshman 1958: 139).

Jewish authors had their own take on the *vanitas* reading. German rabbi Lipman Mühlhausen, for example, begins his polemical work against Christianity (c.1399) as follows: ‘Vanity of vanities . . . Forbid it that such a thought should ever enter into the heart that the works of the blessed God in the creation of the world are vanity! for he has created all things for his glory . . . The meaning is, that all the labour wherewith one labours to acquire and enjoy the things which are under the sun is utterly vain and profitless’ (in Ginsburg 1861: 64). This seems to have the Christian *contemptus* reading in its sights (compare Luther’s rejection of the reading on similar grounds, below). Earlier Jewish readings seem entirely unaware of Jerome’s approach and relate *hebel* particularly to death (and in a sense thereby anticipate seventeenth-century *vanitas* still life painting – see below). So the Talmud (*b. B. Bathra* 100b) notes that ‘No less than seven halts and sittings are to be arranged for the dead, corresponding to Vanity of Vanities, saith Koheleth; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ That is, the mourners were to halt, sit and stand again to provide opportunity

to comfort mourners, and the significance of 'seven' is to do with the number of times *hebel* occurs in 1:2 (three in the singular and two in the plural, each of which count as two). Commenting on a popular talmudic passage ('When R. Johanan finished the Book of Job, he said, "The end of the human being is to die, the end of the beast is the slaughter; thus all are doomed to die . . .";' *b. Berakoth* 17a), Turkish preacher Elijah ha-Kohen of Izmir (c.1645–1729) noted that it would have been 'more appropriate for him to say this at the end of the Book of Ecclesiastes, for Kohelet, who reigned in realms above and below [*b. Sanhedrin* 20b], still considered everything vanity, as he said: *Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity* (Eccles. 1.2). There it would be pertinent to say that the end of the human being is to die, remembering that even Solomon ultimately died, despite his glorious stature' ('Restoring the Soul: Eulogy for Jacob Hagiz', 1674, in Saperstein 1989: 304).

On the whole, Jerome's *vanitas* reading would be adapted, transformed and resisted in various measures through the centuries, but, until relatively recently at least, always reckoned with. (It can still occasionally be found, although not necessarily in Jerome's terms; e.g. see Zlotowitz 1994: p. xxxvii.) Even in the political realm Qoheleth's theme may have had its place. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon suggests that Gelimer, the defeated Vandal king, in March of 534 processed in a dignified retreat from Numidia, to which he had fled:

A long train of the noblest Vandals reluctantly exposed their lofty stature and manly countenance. Gelimer slowly advanced: he was clad in a purple robe, and still maintained the majesty of a king. Not a tear escaped from his eyes, not a sigh was heard; but his pride or piety derived some secret consolation from the words of Solomon, which he repeatedly pronounced, Vanity! Vanity! All is vanity! (Gibbon 1909: 4.314)

The *contemptus mundi* reading had been popularized in the Middle Ages by a proliferation of *De Contemptu Mundi* works, none so popular, however, as Pope Innocent III's *De Contemptu Mundi sive de Miseria Condicionis Humane* (1195; see Introduction, pp. 46–7). Early on (1.10) Ecclesiastes rears its apropos head in order to establish the broad theme:

There is nothing without labor under the sun, there is nothing without defect under the moon, there is nothing without vanity in time. For time is the period of motion of mutable things. 'Vanity of vanities, says Ecclesiastes, and all is vanity.' O how various are the endeavors of men, how diverse are their efforts! Yet there is one end and the same consequence for all: 'labor and vexation of spirit.' (Innocent III 1978: 108)

In a similar vein, another widely disseminated work fostered the *contemptus mundi* reading in the centuries to come. Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (c.1440) pronounces the theme as an overture:

'Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity', except to love God and serve Him alone. And this is supreme wisdom – to despise the world, and draw daily nearer the kingdom of heaven. It is vanity to solicit honours, or to raise oneself to high station. It is vanity to be a slave to bodily desires, and to crave for things which bring certain retribution. It is vanity to wish for long life, if you care little for a good life. It is vanity to give thought only to this present life, and to care nothing for the life to come. It is vanity to love things that so swiftly pass away, and not to hasten onwards to that place where everlasting joy abides. Keep constantly in mind the saying, 'The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.' [Eccl. 1:8] Strive to withdraw your heart from the love of visible things, and direct your affections to things invisible. For those who follow only their natural inclinations defile their conscience, and lose the grace of God. (Bk 1, ch. 1, in Kempis 1976: 27–8)

Poets, too, often approached the theme, although many would take little liberty with its conception. In the third and final stanza of William Dunbar's (c.1460–c.1530) 'Of the World's Vanitie' (c.1500?), the world reflects the instability of *vanitas*:

Heir nocht abydis [Here nought remains], heir standis nothing stabill.
This fals warld ay flittis [always wavers] to and fro:
Now day up bricht, now nycht als blak as sabill [sable],
Now eb, now flude, now freynd, now cruell fo,
Now glaid, now said, now weill, now into wo,
Now cled in gold, dissolvit now in as [clothed now in ash].
So dois this warld transitorie go:

Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas.

(poem 11 in Dunbar 2004; cf. William Neville's
The Castell of Pleasure, below)

By the time of reform, this way of understanding *hebel/vanitas*, as embodying the world's mutability, and indeed Qoheleth's programme as a whole, was indelibly established.

B. RENAISSANCE VANITAS: DESPISING JEROME AND SUSPECTING THE SCIENCES (1500–1800)

The sixteenth-century reformers held up *contemptus mundi* as an exemplary target. In his preface to his lectures on Ecclesiastes (1532), Luther addresses the *vanitas* tradition and relates it directly to Jerome. Here he calls 'noxious' the

influence of many of the saintly and illustrious theologians in the church, who thought that in this book Solomon was teaching what they call 'the contempt of the world', that is, the contempt of things that have been created and established by God. Among these is St. Jerome, who by writing a commentary on this book urged Blesilla to accept the monastic life. From this source there arose and spread over the entire church, like a flood, that theology of the religious orders or monasteries. It was taught that to be a Christian meant to forsake the household, the political order, or even the episcopal . . . office, to flee to the desert, to isolate oneself from human society, to live in stillness and silence; for it was impossible to serve God in the world. As though Solomon were calling 'vanity' the very marriage, political office, and office of the ministry of the Word which he praises here in such a wonderful way and calls gifts of God! (In Luther 1972: 4; cf. his comments on 2:1–3, *ibid.*, 31–3)

Luther exaggerates the approach of Jerome himself (which is clearly more nuanced) and, of more interest here, regards Jerome's commentary as causing the *contemptus* reading to 'spread over the entire church, like a flood'. Luther's own approach to *vanitas*, which he develops throughout his lectures, is to identify 'the vanity of the human heart, that it is never content with the gifts of God that are present but rather thinks of them as negligible' (1972: 10 *et passim*). The *contemptus* reading is also rejected by two of Luther's Protestant colleagues at roughly the same time: Johannes Brenz (1528) and Philip Melancthon (1550). This veritable onslaught complemented Luther's own strategy to 'overthrow the principles of monasticism and transform theology out of recognition' (Cameron 2001: 88). Yet the *contemptus* reading did manage to survive, evidence that reading paradigms rarely fall into neat periodization schemes.

Luther and the reformers close to him are neither the only humanist-minded thinkers to be drawn to Qoheleth, nor the only to take issue with the monastic reading (which will continue to be understood in exaggerated terms). Scepticism's champion, Montaigne, engaged frequently with *vanitas* and had numerous citations from Ecclesiastes painted on the support spans of his library, including '*Per omnia vanitas*', 'All is vanity' (Cohen-Bacrie 2000). As Rosin points out, vanity 'is only one of Montaigne's many themes, but it represents an important step in his intellectual odyssey' (1997b: 25). Note Montaigne's opening remarks in one of the longest of his *Essays* (composed between 1580 and 1592), 'On Vanity': 'Perhaps there is no more manifest vanity than writing so vainly about it. That which the Godhead has made so godly manifest should be meditated upon by men of intelligence anxiously and continuously. Anyone can see that I have set out on a road along which I shall travel without toil and without ceasing as long as the world has ink and paper' (1991: 1070). It immediately becomes clear that for Montaigne 'vanity' is largely about the unchecked proliferation of knowledge: 'What can babble produce when the

stammering of an untied tongue smothered the world under such a dreadful weight of volumes [as the 'six thousand' books on philology of Didymus]? So many words about nothing but words!' (1991: 1070–1). Indeed, for Montaigne, understanding the true nature of vanity ensures awareness of human limitation and compels one to live *hic et nunc*. Montaigne recognized, suggests Perry, the 'textual absence' of God in Ecclesiastes, an absence of the kind of religious commitment that might impede critical reflection and living in the world. In practical terms this is embodied in scepticism and is set against authoritarian law and religion as represented by the *contemptus mundi* tradition (see Perry 1993a). In a different way to Luther, then, Montaigne has the monastic readings in his sights (further on Montaigne, see the Introduction, pp. 44–6).

Puritan preacher Henry Smith (c.1560–91) offered his 'The Triall of Vanitie' in the unmistakable terms of *vanitas* in his hugely popular volume of sermons (which went through 16 editions): 'This booke begins with *All is vanitie*, and endes with *Feare God and keepe his commaundements* . . . That which troubleth us *Salomon* calles *vanitie*; That which is necessarie, hee calles the *Feare of GOD*: from that, to this, should bee everie mans pilgrimage in this worlde; wee begin at *Vanitie*, and never know perfectly that we are vayne, untill wee repent with *Salomon*' (in H. Smith 1592: 819). T. Fuller wrote of the renowned Smith in 1675 that 'he was commonly called the silver-tongued preacher, and that was but one metall below St. Chrysostom [meaning 'golden-mouthed'] himself . . . His Church was so crouded with Auditours, that persons of good quality brought their own pews with them, I mean their legs, to stand there-upon in the alleys' (in Jenkins 2004). Indeed, the rhetorical force with which Smith handles the theme is more impressive than most in the period. He renders the *whole* book in *vanitas* terms, without apology:

This verse is the summe or contentes of all this booke, and therefore *Salomon* beginnes with it, and ends with it, as if he should saie, First this is the matter which I will prooue, and after, this is the matter which I have proned [proclaimed], now you see whether I tolde you true, that *All is vanitie*. I may call it *Salomons Theame*, or the fardle [bundle] of vanities, which when he hath bound in a bundle, he bids vs caste it into the fire. (in H. Smith 1592: 820)

Like so many others, Smith qualifies the totality of the *vanitas* judgment, for it is the Fall that has caused creation to be vain, and '*Salomon* saith that all are vaine to vs, not vaine of themselves, but because they are not sanctified as they should be' (1592: 827). This gives him grounds to launch his attack on the monastic reading:

[Solomon] shewes a way how we may make profit of all, and reioyce in our labours and finde a lawfull pleasure in earthly things . . . lest wee should erre as

the Monkes and Eremites haue done before, mistaking these wordes, when he saith that *All is vanity*, they haue forsaken all companie, & gouernement and office and trade, and got themselues into the wildernes amongst beasts, to liue in quiet and silence, saying, that men could not liue in the world, and please God, because *All is vanity*. (in H. Smith 1592: 828)

For Smith, real vanity lies in wilful human production of all manner of learning and other forms of 'ignorance' (cf. the epigraph above, p. 98).

Not long after Smith's popular exposition, the French Calvinist Pierre du Moulin (1568–1658) published his *Heraclitus, or, Mans Looking-Glass and Survey of Life* (c.1605; the translator of the 1652 edition informs us that it is '40 years since I translated this piece out of French, and laid it by in loose papers', but there is also a 1609 translation). The work as a whole is a 'Meditation upon the Vanitie and Miserie of Mans Life', which opens with the *vanitas* theme in order to undertake a fairly morbid form of self-examination:

The distracted diversity of the affairs of this World mangles our time in an hundred thousand pieces; every business snatcheth away some part of our life; No time is ours but that which we steal from our selves, robbing some hours to examine our selves apart, and confer with God; there is work enough to be found in these solitary Meditations: But the first work to be considered of is the vanity and misery of our life, not to perplex us for it, but to prepare us to leave it . . . for worldly pleasures nigh at hand dazle & distract the judgement. Now if we would enquire of any that hath trod this path, *Salomon* in the beginning of his *Ecclesiastes* entring into this Meditation cryes out *Vanity of Vanities all is Vanity*. (Moulin 1652: 1–3)

The end goal is soon identified: 'taking the Razour from their hand [i.e. from David and Solomon, who have modelled such reflection], let us Anatomize our selves' (Moulin 1652: 4). Like so many others, du Moulin highlights in the language of Qoheleth the perceived dangers of the pursuit of knowledge:

Now a dayes Vnderstanding consists in the Knowledge of Tongues – the Learned busie themselves to know what the Women of *Rome* spake 2000 years since, what Apparell the *Romans* did wear, in what ceremony Stage-play's were beheld then among the people, and to new furbish over . . . this is to rake a Dunghill with a Scepter, and to make our Vnderstanding . . . a Drudge to a base Occupation . . . *Philosophy* and the *Arts* as they are somewhat higher, so they are somewhat harder . . . so they perplex more; *He that increaseth Knowledge* (saith *Salomon*) *increaseth Sorrow* [1:18]. Ignorance hath some commodity; and when all is done, this Knowledge goes not far: For no Man by *Philosophie* can clearly tell the nature of a Fly, or an Herb, much less of himself; our Spirits travell every where, and yet we are strangers at home, we would know all, but doe nothing,

for (to speak properly) our study is no labour, but a curious laziness which tires it self, and goes not forward, like Squirrells in a cage, which turn up and down, and think they goe apace, when they are still where they were; we learn little with great labour, and that little makes us little the better, nay, many times worse; a drop or dram of divine Knowledge is more worth than all humane whatsoever . . . What are we the better . . . by *Astronomy* to learn the motions and influences of the Heavens, and know not how to come thither? . . . *This is also Vanity and Vexation of the Spirit* [1:14]. (1652: 26–31)

Here there is a hint of the feature that many later interpreters of Qoheleth will recognize: his exasperation with the circular and existentially frustrating nature of knowledge. Like Henry Smith, du Moulin is at pains to attack what he regards as the unjustified application of *vanitas* to monastic life:

This is also Vanity, and a vexatious Corruption. This makes some men, (when they consider that *Vanity* hath over-spread all Worldly things . . .) confine themselves to Deserts and a perpetual solitude, there to remain in extreme silence, and to speak with none but God and themselves . . . and when they think to goe out of the World at one door, they come in at another: for griefs of mind, perplexed thoughts, lumpish laziness, windie *Hypochondriacall Melancholy*, despair, presumption . . . So St. *Jerome* in the midst of the Wilderness, and in abstinent solitude, yet burnt with incontinent affections, and his mind ran most on dancing with Maids . . . what Monk or Cloysterer thinks to goe free? (1652: 33–6)

While the end of the sixteenth century sees a fairly abrupt cessation of the attack on (a caricature of) monastic readings of Ecclesiastes, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that readings of the *vanitas* theme between 1500 and 1600 (as well as the examples above, see the discussion of Damião de Góis in the Introduction, p. 46) signify an allegiance for or against the monastic reading and the religious authority it signifies – a sort of political badge of piety (we might note that later Puritan commentators resume Jerome's reading in the mid-seventeenth century; see below).

Scores of poems in the early modern period are framed and, in the manner of William Dunbar's verse (see above, p. 106), often bound by the language of traditional *vanitas* readings. Notable exceptions grow in number in this period, and include the poetry of William Neville, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Francis Quarles, George Herbert and Anne Bradstreet. Their work marks an engagement with the theme of *vanitas* outside the politicizing context of *contemptus mundi*. William Neville (b. 1497) in his *The Castell of Pleasure* (c.1518) reflects on the world's fickle mutability, but in perhaps the most imaginative locale for *vanitas* to date. In Neville's allegorical dream vision, the dreamer,

Desire, is led by Morpheus to the eponymous castle (see Edwards 2004). But now, in the third and penultimate ‘movement’, Desire is awoken by a ‘storme rygorouse’ and ‘Morpheus vanysshed . . .’:

I intende to wryte the maner herof ryght shortly
 That folkes may consyder this worlde is but straunge
 yet to the wyndowe I walked a softe pace
 Ofte syghyng and sobbyng with an heuy herte
 To se where I coude espye of pleasure the palace
 Or of thynhabytauntes [the inhabitants] therof perceyue ony [any] parte
 Eyther conforte or kyndenes whiche made me to smerte
 Fantasy or eloquence whiche dyd desyre forder [further]

...

I loked for theyr places where they stode in order
 yf I coude se Credence walkyng in ony broder
 I loked for all these yet I sawe none alas
 Whiche brought to mynde wordes of salomo of wysdome recorder
 Vanitas vanitatu[m] & o[mn]ia mu[n]di vanitas.

Where is Sampson for all his grete strength
 Or where is the sage Salomon for all his prudence
 Dethe hath and wyll deuoure all at lenth

...

Where be all the . . . doctours of dyuynyte
 Where is arystotyll for all his phylosophy and logyke.
 Be not all these departed frome this transytory lyfe
 yet theym to dyuers places our creatour dyd name
 With egall Iugement without debate or stryfe

...

Be secrete and stedfast without mutabylyte

(Neville 1530: n.p.)

Seeking out comfort, kindness and even Credence itself on its rounds, and finding nothing, sparks for Desire the memory of *vanitas*. Desire, in its moments of disorientation, realizes the levelling power of death, even the deaths of Solomon, Sampson and Aristotle. Like Qoheleth, the Dreamer offers an answer pitched at the level of private understanding, in this case secrecy and steadfastness in the face of the world’s mutability.

Edmund Spenser imagines an even more fantastic setting for his exposition of *vanitas*. Spenser (and to a disputed degree, his publisher) oversaw the collection of a group of poems entitled *Complaints: Containing Sundrie Small Poemes of the Worlds Vanitie* (1591; the compositions are probably earlier). His printer suggests the motive: ‘finding that [the *Faerie Queene*, 1590] hath found

a fauourable passage amongst you; I haue sithence endeououred by all good meanes (for the better encrease and accomplishment of your delights,) to get into my handes such smale Poemes of the same Authors' (1591: preface, n.p.; the printer, William Ponsonbie, also tantalizingly refers to Spenser's now lost translations of *Ecclesiastes* and the *Song of Songs*). The titular theme is broad and ubiquitous, although in his allegorical 'The Ruines of Time' Spenser imagines Qoheleth's theme proper, spoken by a heavenly voice, and witnesses the ruinous destruction of two bears (which may represent the death of the Dudleys, 'Sidney's noble family', d. 1587):

I saw two Beares, as white as anie milke,
Lying together in a mightie caue,
...
Two fairer beasts might not elsewhere be found,
Although the compast world were sought around.

But what can long abide about this ground
In state of blis, or stedfast happinesse?
The Caue, in which these Beares lay sleeping sound,
Was but earth, and with her owne weightinesse
Vpon them fell, and did vnwares oppresse,
That for great sorrow of their sudden fate,
Henceforth all words felicitie I hate.
...
And I in minde remained sore agast,
Distraught twixt feare and pitie [...] when at last
I heard a voyce, which loudly to me called,
That with the suddein shrill I was appalled.
Behold (said it) and by ensample see,
That all is vanitie and grieve of minde,
Ne other comfort in this world can be,
But hope of heauen, and heart to God inclinde;
For all the rest must needs be left behinde:
(1591: fol. D3)

Here Spenser's 'ensample' of the *vanitas* principle is perfectly couched in the extremity of Qoheleth's thinking – that is, like Qoheleth, he examines the world in a theatre of the absurd, where the pristine bears are crushed by the earth, or where the king, bloated with his own acquisitions, has all that his heart desires but sees nothing but *hebel*.

It may be that in the course of the sixteenth century writers were beginning to draw on the very pervasiveness of the words *vanitas vanitatum et omnia*

vanitas in the fabric of public life, which is nicely illustrated by an anecdote regarding Sir Anthony Cooke (d. 1576), consort to King Edward VI (ruled 1547–53):

A Sussex . . . Knight, having spent a great Estate at Court, and brought himself to one Park, and a fine House in it, was yet ambitious to entertain not the Queen, but her Brother at it; and to that purpose had new-painted his Gates with a Coat of Arms, and a Motto overwritten, thus, OIA VANITAS, in great Golden Letters: Sir Anthony Cooke (and not his Son Cecil) offering to read it, desired to know of the Gentleman what he meant by OIA? who told him, it stood for Omnia. Sir Anthony replied, Sir, I wonder having made your Omnia so little as you have, you notwithstanding make your Vanitas so large. (In Lloyd 1670: 385)

Such knowing reference will become far more commonplace in the modern era, and it is difficult to know the degree to which *vanitas* is known in the population at large, although clearly the influential preachers of the day were making use of it, and literacy was gradually on the rise (McKay 2001).

One of the most popular works of verse in the seventeenth century in England was Francis Quarles's *Emblemes* (1635), a series of engravings with accompanying verse. The images are mainly allegorical, in reference to divine love. The relationship between word and image here is subtle and not simply a matter of text 'commenting' on image: 'the emblem was understood to embody a language *in rebus* mutually interchangeable with the language *in verbis* of the accompanying text' (Gilman 1980: 387). *Emblemes* and *Hieroglyphikes* (the 1638 'sequel') appealed to moderate Catholics as well as Protestants because of their concern for the 'general tenets' of the Christian life as opposed to the detail of doctrine (Höltgen 2004). In Embleme VI, *All is vanity and vexation of spirit*, Quarles reflects on a delicate and transitory world, the vastness of which cannot be measured and which provokes human restlessness:

How is the anxious soule of man befooled
 In his desire,
 That thinks a Hectick Fever may be cool'd
 In flames of fire?
 ...
 Whose Gold is double with a carefull hand,
 His cares are double;
 The Pleasure, Honour, Wealth of Sea and Land
 Bring but a trouble;
 The world it selfe, and all the worlds command,
 Is but a Bubble.
 ...

It [the world] is a vast Circumference, where none
Can find a Center.
Of more than earth, can earth make none possess;
And he that least
Regards this restlesse world, shall in this world find Rest.
(Bk 1, Emblem VI, Quarles 1635: 24–6)

The accompanying image shows an angel who, untroubled and serene, holds the world, an orb on an embroidered table, perhaps suggesting how hopeless would be humanity's attempt to do the same.

Clearly writers leading up to the modern period had in place a tradition of *vanitas* to mine for rich reflection on human experience. The struggle of 'earthly learning' remained, as before, a vital theme, as in George Herbert's 'Vanity (I)' (1633):

The fleet Astronomer can bore,
And thread the spheres with his quick-piercing mind:
He views their stations, walks from door to door,
Surveys, as if he had designed
To make a purchase there: he sees their dances,
And knoweth long before
Both their full-eyed aspects, and secret glances.
...
What hath not man sought out and found,
But his dear God? who yet his glorious law
Embosoms in us, mellowing the ground
With showers and frosts, with love and awe,
So that we need not say, Where's this command?
Poor man, thou searchest round
To find out *death*, but missest *life* at hand.
(In Rudrum et al. 2001: 135)

Like Herbert, Anne Bradstreet also mines the language of *vanitas* to render human experience broadly conceived. And like Thackeray years later, she manages to capture the theme of vanity as emblematic of the whole book quite brilliantly:

As he said vanity, so vain say I,
Oh! vanity, O vain all under sky;
Where is the man can say, 'Lo, I have found
On brittle earth a consolation sound?'
...
What is't in flowering youth, or manly age?
The first is prone to vice, the last to rage.

Where is it then, in wisdom, learning, arts?
 Sure if on earth, it must be in those parts;
 Yet these the wisest man of men did find
 But vanity, vexation of mind.

...

This pearl of price, this tree of life, this spring,
 Who is possessed of shall reign a king.
 Nor change of state nor cares shall ever see,
 But wear his crown unto eternity.
 This satiates the soul, this stays the mind,
 And all the rest, but vanity we find.

(‘The Vanity of All Worldly Things’, 1650,
 in Atwan and Wieder 1993: 352–4)

Here Bradstreet conveys Qoheleth’s theme of vain and vexatious searching while making it uniquely her own. Indeed, this poem, along with her ‘David’s Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan’, is ‘individual and genuine in [its] recapitulation of her own feelings’ (further on Bradstreet, see pp. 236–7).⁴

John Donne in his early years turned his attention to Ecclesiastes in sermons and poems, particularly the *Anniversary* series (see below and Introduction, pp. 52–4). In his *Donne’s Satyr Containing 1. A Short Map of Mundane Vanity, 2. A Cabinet of Merry Conceits . . . Being Very Useful, Pleasant and Delightful to All, and Offensive to None*, which appears to have been composed in the year of his death (1662), his reflections on *vanitas* are more abrasive. The work begins,

A SHORT MAP OF Mundane Vanity.

Vanitas vanitatum, & omnia vanitas.
 Vanity of vanity, and all is vanity.

1. Of Mundane Vanity.

When *Solomon* had tried all variety
 Of mundane pleasures, ev’n to full satiety;
 And after thoroughly weigh’d the worlds condition,
 And therein mans: concludes with this Position,
 All that man can in this wide World inherit,
 Is vain, and but vexation of the spirit.

2. Of the World.

The World’s much like a fair deceitful Nut,
 Whereto when once the knife of truth is put,
 And it is open’d, a right judicious eye
 Findes nothing in’t, but meer vacuity.

⁴ In ‘Bradstreet, Anne’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2004 DVD edn (no author is given).

3. Of the same.

The World's a Book, all Creatures are the Story,
Wherein God reads dumb lectures of his glory.

4. Another of the same.

Earth is the womb from whence all living came,
So is't the tomb, all go unto the same . . .

(Donne 1662: 1–2)

Donne appears to satirize not only the broader *vanitas* tradition in the sheer quaintness of sentiment ('The World's much like a fair deceitful Nut'), but in the structure as well, with uneven stanzas and deliberately mundane headings ('Of the same', 'Another of the same' – and heading no. 5 is the same!). As Peter Kemp (2005) comments, even the projected self-image of satirists of the period in such works may harbour some deliberate parody: 'The satirists popularized a new persona, that of the malcontent who denounces his society not from above but from within, and their continuing attraction resides in their self-contradictory delight in the world they profess to abhor and their evident fascination with the minutiae of life in court and city.' One wonders what Donne is targeting in particular with 'God reads dumb lectures of his glory'. The creatures themselves or the product of their endeavors? If the latter, of science or works that profess to be 'lectures of his glory': namely, treatises of divines?

In his *The Hospitall of Incurable Fooles* (*L'hospitale de' pazzi incurabili*, c.1586), the Venetian humanist Tomaso Garzoni (1549–89, best known for his encyclopedic catalogue of professions, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mundo*, 1585), frames his first section, 'Of Follie in generall: the first discourse', in the terms of *vanitas*:

Considering, I haue taken vpon my selfe this burden, to manifest to the worlde, the prodigious and monstrous kindes of folly . . . with an aspect, and countenance more deformed then *Cadmus* his serpent, more vgly then the *Chimera*, fuller of poison then the dragon of *Hesperides* . . . It sufficeth that with the wise man, euerie one may iustly exclaime . . . I haue perused all things done vnder the sunne, and behold all is vanitie, and affliction of minde . . . [1:14] To conclude, all the world is matter from head to foote, and one beateth his braines about one thing, another, about some other: this man feedes himselfe in worldly glorie . . . another ruffleth in his without-booke-Rhetoricke, as though he had no paragon for Latine and Greeke; . . . another stands vpon puntoes [points of behavior] with his drawn sword, like another Gargantua, in that he is exalted to some catchpoale or hangmans office, as if euerie one knewe not, that to put an office into a Fooles hand, is as much as we should set an asse to play on the harpe . . . And thus euerie one sets both good and bad vpon the boord [board],

not considering what the wise man saith, that *Vanitas vanitatum, & omnia vanitas*: Vanitie of vanities, and all is vanitie: But because we shall the better know in generall, if we discourse in particular, by little and little, let vs examine Fooles in speciall, for thus shal we attaine to the full and perfect knowledge of Folly, we seeke after. (Garzoni 1600: 1, 5, 7–8)

The delightful rhetoric with which Garzoni inveighs against the world is not unlike that of the Elizabethan satirists that Kemp discusses (above). One of the striking features of this ‘first discourse’ is that among the marginal notes indicating the sources of Juvenal, Pliny and the like, only Solomon represents Scripture. Of the biblical voices, then, only Solomon can take his rightful place in this invective.

It is intriguing in an era that in some sense rediscovered the ancient languages beloved of scholastics of the Middle Ages, including Hebrew, that relatively little attention is given to the Hebrew ‘source’ of vanity, *hebel*, but there are some exceptions. Discussing 1:2, John Trapp aptly observes a possible Hebrew wordplay between *hebel* in Ecclesiastes and *hebel* in Genesis 4, namely, Abel: ‘*Adam is as Abel, or Man is like to Vanity*; there is an allusion in the Originall to their two names: yea, *All-Adam is all-Abel*, when he is *best underlaid*, (so the *Hebrew* hath it) every man at his best estate, when he is settled upon his best bottome, is altogether vanity’ (1650: 4–5). He goes on to describe the human proclivity towards vanity, in spite of ourselves: ‘These outward things are so near to us and so naturall to us, that although wee can say (nay swear) with the Preacher *Vanity of Vanities*, a heap, a nest of vanities, *It is naught*, *It is naught*, saith the buyer, yet, when gone apart, wee close with them: albeit wee know they are naught and will come to naught’ (1650: 5). Similarly, few writers of the period are much concerned to reflect on how *hebel* might best be translated. Edward Hyde, however, gives consideration not only to the Hebrew but also to how Jewish interpreters have treated it:

[David] Kimchy in his *Roots* thus expounds . . . *Hebel* Vanity, *Res quae non est quicquam*, A thing which is nothing; and he there tells us that the Jewish Doctors did so call the *Breath* that cometh out of mans *mouth*, for that it is such a thing as presently ceaseth, and cometh to nothing. But in his *Commentaries* upon this place, he saith, *Vanity is that which hath no subsistence; no stability, and will not endure the Touch*, as if you touch a *Bubble* it is gone; wherefore the Ancient Latines properly called man, *Bullam*, a Bubble, That is Vanity, in *Kimchies Gloss*; And *Aben Ezra* goes further saying thus, That *All things are called Vanity, even those which seem most firmly Rooted, and to have the surest subsistence: How much more the Actions of men which are but meer Accidents, and the thoughts of men which are but Accidents of Accidents?* (1657: 11–12)

Also significant here is the use of medieval commentators, which by then represented more reception history than current scholarship.

As remarkable as Hyde's work for its attention to exegetical details is that of Ezekiel Hopkins. His treatise *The Vanity of the World* (1668, reprinted in 1685) promised, his dedication declared, 'to beat down the Price of the World, and to expose its admired Vanities to publick contempt' (1685: n.p.). And still the monastic reading is in the author's sights, although it must have appeared to flog a dead beast: 'We need not shelter ourselves under any Monastick Vow; nor fly to Deserts and Solitudes, to hide us from the Allurements of the World: This is to run away from that Enemy whom we ought to conquer' (1685: n.p.). Hopkins is attuned to the rhetorical features of Qoheleth in a way that marks him out from his contemporaries: 'The whole Verse [1:2] is loaden with Emphases: And it is first observable, That he doth not glide into it, by any smooth connexion of Sence, or sentences; but on a sudden breaks upon us, with a surprising abruptness. *Vanity of vanities*. Which shews a Mind so full of Matter, that it could not attend the Circumstance of a Prologue to usher it in' (1685: 3). He goes on to discuss the significance of the *vanitas* theme expressed in the abstract, so that Qoheleth does not censure 'all things to be vain, but they are *Vanity* it self' (ibid.).

Hopkins's discussion of the appropriate rendering of *vanitas* as 'bubble' sheds some light on its popularity as an Elizabethan rendering:

As Bubbles blown into the Air, will represent great variety of Orient and Glittering Colours, not (as some suppose) that there are any such really there, but only they appear so to us, through a false reflexion of Light cast upon them: so truly this World, this Earth on which we live, is nothing else but a great Bubble blown up by the Breath of God . . . It sparkles with ten thousand Glories . . . If we come to grasp it, like a thin Film, it breaks, and leaves nothing but Wind and Disappointment in our Hands. (1685: 8–9)

From roughly the seventeenth century onwards, 'bubble' signifies that which is 'fragile, unsubstantial, empty, or worthless' (*OED*), and we might add from Hopkins, inherently deceptive, and its extensive application to Ecclesiastes makes perfect sense (as in e.g. Quarles 1635, Hall 1646, Hyde 1657, Wollaston 1691; cf. Anonymous 1765 and Burkitt 1936). William Wollaston's versification, *The Design of Part of the Book of Ecclesiastes* is typical in this regard:

UNHAPPY thought! How like a *Bubble's* all
This *frothy globe* of World, this *empty ball*!
For look how wide's the *view* of Heaven's *eye*,
Or compass of its *spangled tapestry*,
How wide the outmost superface of Place,

That *coops* us in Imaginary space:
So large is VANITY's deceitful *face*.

(1691: 24)

These are probably the best lines of the lengthy poem, which the popular British moralist offered as a 'few indigested materials, which I had collected among my own thoughts in order to a Poem . . . thrown by and forgotten. In this state of neglect they lay for some years; till lately, tumbling over some other trifles, I found them in the heap, and could not let them pass, *inconsiderable* as they were' (1691: 3–4). He may have regretted his decision to publish his 'heap', for he later sought to suppress it, ashamed of its poor poetic quality (Young 2004). At least he had prepared for readers' judgments in the conclusion of his Preface: 'Reader, I beg your pardon, if I have obtruded any thing upon you offensive to your taste and better Judgment. This I hope *the rather* to obtain, because as I was never troublesome to the World by my Poetry *before*, so in probability *never* shall be *again*' (1691: 22).

Another medium that deals with *vanitas* explicitly in the Renaissance period (flourishing c.1530–1650), and which further expositis the scrutiny of human endeavour especially, is the *vanitas* fine art movement. Hans J. Van Miegroet suggests that *vanitas* painting is concerned with human fragility, desires and pleasures in the face of the inevitability and finality of death (1996: 880). Others note the relationship between the words of Qoheleth and the *vanitas* paintings (both still lifes and portraits; see Haak 1984: 125; Cheney 1992: 120; Puyvelde and Puyvelde 1970: 235), but this link is subtle rather than overt. The paintings themselves are largely symbolic representations of a *Zeitgeist*, which, although the themes are present as early as Hans Holbein's celebrated 1533 painting *The Ambassadors* (with its widely acknowledged theme of the futility of human endeavour), is felt most profoundly by the Dutch of the seventeenth century. (That said, several *vanitas* paintings explicitly reference Ecclesiastes and will be discussed below.)

The dangers of an abundance of the good things in life were all too apparent to the Dutch, and to prevent its good citizens from going astray, the teachings known collectively as 'the Wisdom of Solomon' were utilized as corrective guides for moral behaviour. Specially published editions of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Sirach were placed in houses of correction, for the edification of those who had gone astray (Schama 1991: 20). It is reasonable to conjecture that the worldly-wise Qoheleth was a particularly appealing guide to a life that could hold great riches and great misery.

Of the *vanitas* paintings that make direct reference to Ecclesiastes I note David Bailly's *Vanitas Still Life with a Portrait of a Young Painter* (1651), Pieter de Ring's *Vanitas Still Life* (1643) and Petrus Schotanus's *Vanitas Still Life* (not



PLATE 8 David Bailly's *Vanitas Still Life with a Portrait of a Young Painter*, 1651

dated; cf. Haak 1984: 126–8). The works by Bailly (plate 8) and de Ring both have slips of paper bearing the Latin *vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas* (Bailly's painting actually has *vanitas vanitum et omnia vanitas*, but doubtless refers to Eccl. 1:2), while that of Schotanus shows an open book bearing a paraphrase of Eccl. 9:12, the words appearing beneath the feathery bodies of small dead birds. Bailly's work is a particularly intriguing example that reflects both the narrative structure of Ecclesiastes and the self-examining aspects of Qoheleth's text so often discerned by readers. The young artist himself is seated at a table and holds a portrait of an older man, while *vanitas* symbols fill the table surface. As the artist was 67 years old when he painted this picture, the viewer is faced with the ironic double self-portrait: Bailly as he once was, holding the portrait of Bailly as he actually was (note the accompanying comments on the painting at <http://www.wga.hu>; cf. Collier's *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes'*, 1696, which also renders Qoheleth's words and is discussed below, pp. 140–1).

Directly from or alongside the *vanitas* painting tradition emerged *vanitas* choral and string music. In a 1995 recording entitled *Vanitas Vanitatum, Tragicomedia*, a group specializing in seventeenth-century music, performs 11 such pieces (Carissimi et al. 2004), all Italian and dated between 1620 and 1677. The sleeve notes, by *Tragicomedia* co-founder Erin Headley, place the works in their context:

Nearly every native and foreign artist looked to Rome for inspiration, and it was the Roman more than any other European who was confronted daily with the *memento mori* of the past. It is no surprise then that Roman poets, painters and composers of the 17th century should have adopted the *vanitas* theme so ardently and so fruitfully . . . Both in the north and in the south of Europe, artists interpreted the *vanitas* theme according to their own temperaments and traditions. In the north it provided painters with an excuse to detail and classify nature, and through what better vehicle than the still life? . . . [M]usic here proves itself to be the ideal medium for symbolising the *vanitas* theme, since it is an art that disappears as soon as it is articulated. (In Carissimi et al. 2004)

The music indeed captures the complexity and inherent incongruity of *vanitas*: haunting melodies set alongside Qoheleth's words (some of the lyrics are direct renditions of chapters 1 and 2 especially, with long choruses of simply *vanitas vanitatum*), or which could have emerged from the mouth of Qoheleth:

The healthy, the sick
the brave, the defenceless
all come to an end:
you must die.
(from *Passacalli della
vita*, 1677, tr. in the
sleeve notes)

As one reviewer comments: 'Passionate monody, vivid madrigalian wordpainting and lilting *bel canto* airs illustrate both worldly delights and their worthlessness. The colourful *Tragicomedia* continuo – archlute, double harp, keyboard – supports six superbly focused singers and three strings, contemplating the pains of hell in exquisitely sensuous music – delicious irony!'⁵

It is clear that the *vanitas* theme had widespread and enduring appeal. *The Web Gallery of Art* (<http://www.wga.hu>), for example, which archives c.14,500 European fine art works, returns over 35 examples of *vanitas* paintings, and Haak (1984) mentions a dozen more. Cavalli-Björkman (2002) mentions not only Dutch painters but also German, French, Italian and Spanish artists who painted *vanitas*. The impact of the theme continued, with artists such as Van Gogh (*Skull with Burning Cigarette*, 1886/7) and Cézanne (*Nature Morte au Crane* [*Still Life with Skulls*], 1895–1900) producing paintings clearly reminiscent of the *vanitas* still life. In fact, the *vanitas* theme, broadly understood, can still be found in the visual arts. In the summer of 2000, the Virginia Museum of Fine Art held a major exhibition entitled 'Vanitas: Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art'. The accompanying book (Ravenal 2000) has as

⁵ Cited from *BBC Music Magazine*, without issue no. or author indicated, at <http://www.jhadden.freeseerve.co.uk/cds/vanitas.htm>.

its epigraph the opening verses of Ecclesiastes (1:2–4). Ravenal sees the *vanitas* theme as universal and culturally relevant (2000: 13–14). (Also, it is worth noting that a Google or AltaVista image search of ‘vanitas’ yields some extraordinarily rich and diverse results, ancient and modern; further, see section d below.) The appeal of the *vanitas* painting tradition lies in its successful capture of the subtle balance between transient and joyful modes of living, so vociferously endorsed by Qoheleth.

By all accounts the *contemptus mundi* approach to Ecclesiastes dominated Christian exegesis throughout the Middle Ages (note its influence in Thomas à Kempis’s fifteenth-century *Imitation of Christ*, above) and survived the age of reform particularly in moral discourse. As the seventeenth century progressed, the reading faded in poetry but was still typical in the work of pious commentators who closely adapt Jerome’s reading as a framework. So in his *A Commentary, upon the Whole Booke of Ecclesiastes* (1639), under the heading ‘The generall scope of the Booke’, Michael Jermin writes,

It is a mistake, as some thinke, of the meaning of *Epicurus*, to imagine that he [God] placed the chiefe good of man in a sensuall pleasure; but that he intended the sweet delight of vertue . . . Now much more are they mistaken, who thinke that in this booke a luxurious pleasure is commended to us: seeing it is from a discommendation of worldly things, in respect of the vanitie of them . . . as St. *Hierome* speaketh, that the Preacher laboureth to make us to deny the world. (Jermin 1639: 2; cf. similarly, e.g., Granger 1621 and Mayer 1653)

As well as Jerome, Hugo of St Victor features prominently in such *contemptus mundi* commentaries. However, as I have noted in the case of Bonaventure, in the hands of skilled exegetes, even such a tried and tired mode of reading can be transformed. Take the example of a sermon preached to Whitehall by John Donne, who although known now chiefly for his poetry, was one of the most renowned preachers of his day:

Solomon shakes the world in pieces, he dissects it, and cuts it up before thee, that so thou mayest the better see how poor a thing, that particular is, whatsoever it be, that thou settest thy love upon in this world. He threads a string of the best stones, of the best jewels in this world . . . and then he shows you an *ire*, a flaw, a cloud in all these stones; he lays this infancy upon them all, vanity, and vexation of spirit. (2 April 1620, with the main text being on 5:13–14; sermon 140, in Donne 1839: 5.507)

(Further on Donne and Ecclesiastes, see the Introduction, pp. 52–4.)

Examples from a range of forms of writing will help to round off *vanitas* readings from the seventeenth century. John Bunyan, in his morality

work *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), makes iterative use of Qoheleth's theme in the form of his famous site of moral danger: 'the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept called Vanity-Fair. It is kept all the year long; it beareth the name of Vanity-Fair, because the town where 'tis kept is lighter than vanity; and also, because all that is there sold, or that cometh thither, is Vanity. As is the saying of the wise, *All that cometh is vanity* [11:8]' (in Bunyan 1986: 136). That 'town' would later influence Thackeray (see below), but not in a way that precluded the influence of Ecclesiastes itself (Dooley 1971; further on Bunyan, see chapter 12, p. 229). A more personal encounter with the theme can be discerned in the *Memoirs* of Thomas Boston of Ettrick (1676–1732), which closes with these words:

And thus have I given some account of the days of my vanity. The world hath all along been a step-dame unto me; and wheresoever I would have attempted to nestle in it, there was a thorn of uneasiness laid for me. Man is born crying, lives complaining, and dies disappointed from that quarter. *All is vanity and vexation of spirit* [1:14]. – *I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord* [Gen. 49:18]. (In Nicoll and Stoddart 1910: 531)

The tag of Jacob's blessing on the end of Qoheleth's words is intriguing in that Boston leaves himself and his readers still waiting.

Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) in effect takes up Qoheleth's theme of the futility of human desire, as expressed so potently in the *vanitas* tradition in the arts, and applies it to the endeavours of the good and the great of Europe (e.g. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Charles XII of Sweden) as well as to broadly conceived types:

Unnumber'd suppliants croud Preferment's gate,
 Athirst for wealth, and burning to be great;
 Delusive Fortune hears th' incessant call,
 They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall.
 On ev'ry stage the foes of peace attend,
 Hate dogs their flight, and insult mocks their end.
 Love ends with hope, the sinking statemen's door
 Pours in the morning worshiper no more

...

Deign on the passing world to turn thine eyes,
 And pause awhile from letters, to be wise;
 There mark what ills the scholar's life assail,
 Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail.

(ll. 73–80, 157–60, in Johnson 1962: 33, 38)

In *Vanity* Johnson found a way of reflecting on transience and misery without embracing the ‘Graveyard School’ of poetry so popular in his day (British poetry focusing entirely on death and bereavement). As James Clifford comments, ‘Skulls, coffins, epitaphs, and worms were not to his taste . . . [A]nd he remained unmoved by the new literary trends. For him the noblest expression of the old theme of Ecclesiastes – “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” – could be found elsewhere’ (1955: 304). The vanity theme is expressed elsewhere in Johnson, most importantly in a sermon on Eccl. 1:14 (see Introduction, pp. 61–2).

As with Johnson, *vanitas* became a meaningful idea for Voltaire. He makes frequent use of Ecclesiastes in his correspondence, which, suggests Arnold Ages, is ‘largely devoid of the cynicism and hostility which Voltaire manifests in his comments on Scripture in his published works’ (1966: 51). The first reference to Ecclesiastes comes in May 1756, when Voltaire writes to the Marchioness du Deffand, ‘After having previously spoken enough of the pleasures of this world, I now lament its sufferings. I have done as Solomon, without being wise. I have seen that nearly everything was vanity and affliction, and that there is certainly evil on the earth’ (in Ages 1966: 51; my tr.). In 1759, dealing with the health of the Marchioness, Voltaire writes of ‘his new château at Les Délices and the benefits of country life’:

I see now that the poets are right to eulogize the pastoral life, that the happiness that is attached to the cares of rural life is not an illusion; and I have found even more pleasure in work, in sowing, in planting, in harvesting, than in [writing] tragedies and performing plays. Solomon was certainly right to say that there is nothing better than to live with the one you love, to rejoice in your work, and that all the rest is vanity. (In Ages 1966: 52; my tr.)

Ages notes that the most frequently cited Ecclesiastes passage in all of Voltaire’s correspondence with du Deffand (24 times) is ‘vanity of vanities’: ‘Its use is generally a sign of Voltaire’s low spirits or declining health’ (1966: 52). So in April 1760 he writes, ‘After all, it is only about the gentle demise of one’s career. All the rest is vanity of vanities, as the other said [*comme dit l’autre*]’ (in Ages 1966: 52; my tr.). In March 1761 he writes,

After having reflected deeply for sixty years on the foolishness that I have seen, and that I have done, I believe I have realized that the world is merely a theatre for a little battle, continuous, cruel and ridiculous, and a heap of vanities that causes heartache, as was very well said by the good Jewish deist who took the name of Solomon in Ecclesiastes, which you have not read. (In Ages 1966: 52; my tr.)

And again, in April 1769 Voltaire returns to his 'easy flippancy': 'All is good, provided that we seize the objective of the day, that we dine and that we sleep; the rest is vanity of vanities, as the other said: but friendship is a true thing' (in Ages 1966: 52; my tr.).

This way of internalizing Qoheleth's thought continued, it seems, well into old age. So in 1770, at the age of 76, he writes to a Madame Necker concerning Pigalle, the sculptor who had come to Ferney to do a bust of him:

When the people of my village saw Pigalle lay out some of the instruments of his art: 'Why, look', said they, 'he's going to be dissected; that will be curious'. So it is, Madame, as you well know, that any spectacle amuses mankind . . . My statue will make a few philosophers smile, and knit the practiced brows of some villainous hypocrite or some depraved hack: vanity of vanities! But all is not vanity; my fond gratitude for my friends and above all for you, Madame, is not vanity. (In Auerbach 1974: 412)

Qoheleth's main theme here bursts out in a moment of exceptionally witty indignation, calling down his judgment on the world's perception of his burdensome role as 'Voltaire, Innkeeper of Europe'. In what Ages calls 'the most touching use of this verse' ('vanity of vanities'), Voltaire, complaining of his declining health, writes in 1775,

The infinite number of maladies that kill me is too great, and our life is too brief for us to be able to pass through the plague of war. I will soon finish my career at my corner fire-place; extend your [career], Madame, for as great a length as you can. Enjoy all the pleasures that your sad state will permit. The word of pleasure is very strong . . . All is vanity, said the other; and it pleases God that all that is done is only vanity! but most of the time all is suffering. (In Ages 1966: 52–3; my tr.)

In a way, Voltaire marks the beginning of the 'knowing wink' reference to Ecclesiastes – deeply personalized and brought into public and narrative discourse. (Further on Voltaire and Ecclesiastes, see the Introduction, pp. 62–5, and Christianson 2005.)

C. LITERARY VANITAS: NEW POINTS OF REFERENCE (1800–)

I have already noted the way in which the literature of this period makes subtle and often short-hand use of Scripture (see pp. 65–6). As for Ecclesiastes, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63) was exemplary in this regard. Two passages on the subject from his work are relatively well known. The first is the final paragraph of *Vanity Fair* (1847–8). Its position, set off from what precedes it, lends it the place of commentary on the whole narrative: 'Ah!

Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied? – Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out⁶ (ch. 67, in Thackeray 1963: 699; cf. Dooley 1971: 705; note some of the same language in the later *The Newcomes*, ch. 47, in Thackeray 1962: 2.100; cf. McMaster 1987: 31). Earlier in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray shows a subtle grasp of the theme in terms of the debates played out by the medieval and Renaissance interpreters of *vanitas*:

It is all vanity to be sure: but who will not own to liking a little of it? I should like to know what well-constituted mind, merely because it is transitory, dislikes roast-beef? That is a vanity; but may every man who reads this, have a wholesome portion of it through life, I beg: aye, though my readers were five thousand. Sit down, gentlemen, and fall to, with a good hearty appetite . . . Yet, let us eat our fill of the vain thing, and be thankful therefore . . . for these [pleasures] too, like all other mortal delights, were but transitory. (Ch. 51; 1963: 485; cf. Locker-Lampson, below, p. 134)

The second passage is an oft-cited poem (though usually only one verse is cited), *Vanitas Vanitatum*. The collection in which it first appeared was *Ballads and Poems* (Boston, 1855). In her introduction to an 1899 edition, Thackeray's daughter Anne Ritchie describes the collection's origins:

When my father first published his 'Ballads and Poems', he wrote a preface . . . saying 'These ballads have been written during the past fifteen years, and are now gathered by the author from his own books and the various periodicals in which the pieces appeared originally . . . [The author hopes that the public] may be kindly disposed to his little volume of verses'. (In Thackeray 1899: p. xv)

In an 1885 edition, the poem is headed with a sketch (plate 9), which may be by the author himself (the title-page of that edition simply states, 'with illustrations by the author, Mrs Butler . . . [and six others!]', but does not indicate which are whose).

The poem is a careful reading of Qoheleth's themes and I offer a selection here:

⁶ The puppet theme was related to Qoheleth before (see Erasmus, p. 44) and employed later in J. W. Brady Moore's *Koheleth*:

Age after age a never ending flow
Of generations come and toil and go –
But ever Earth remains – a monstrous stage
Where Human Puppets act their little show.
(1924: 4)

VANITAS VANITATUM.

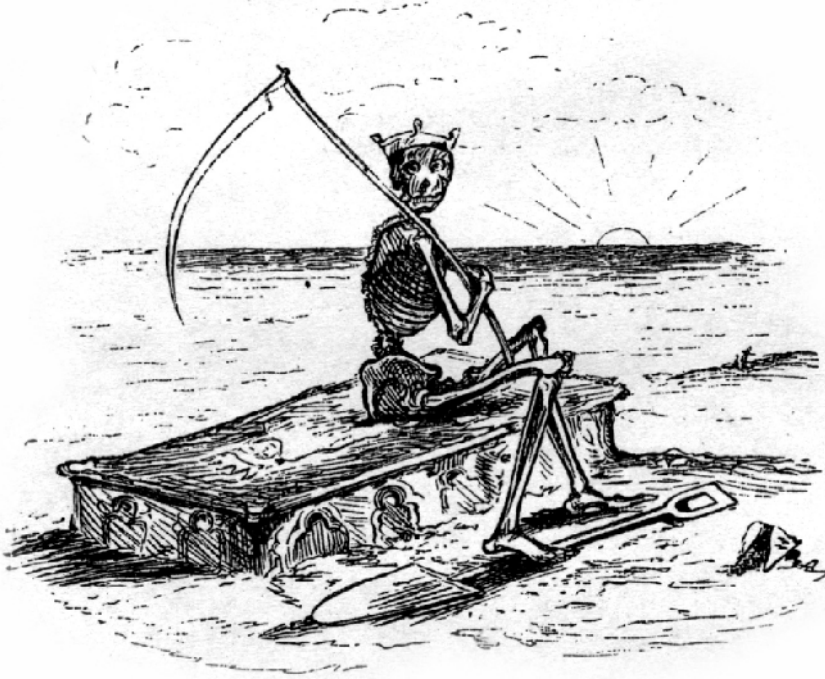


PLATE 9 From William Thackeray's 1885 edition of *Vanitas Vanitatum*

Vanitas Vanitatum

How spake of old the Royal Seer?
(His text is one I love to treat on.)

This life of ours, he said, is sheer
Mataiotes Mataioteton.

O Student of this gilded Book,
Declare, while musing on its pages,
If truer words were ever spoke
By ancient or by modern sages?

...

How low men were, and how they rise!
How high they were, and how they tumble!
O vanity of vanities!
O laughable, pathetic jumble!

...

Oh, vanity of vanities!
How wayward the decrees of Fate are;
How very weak the very wise,
How very small the very great are!
...
Though thrice a thousand years are past
Since David's son, the sad and splendid,
The weary King Ecclesiast,
Upon his awful tablets penned it, –
Methinks the text is never stale,
And life is every day renewing
Fresh comments on the old old tale
Of Folly, Fortune, Glory, Ruin.
Hark to the Preacher, preaching still
He lifts his voice and cries his sermon,
Here at St. Peter's on Cornhill,
As yonder on the Mount of Hermon
(Thackeray 1885: 132–4)

(Further on Thackeray and Ecclesiastes, see the Introduction, p. 67.)

Another oft-cited 'vanity' reference (again usually of only one line) appears in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). At this point in the narrative (ch. 96) Ishmael has just lost consciousness at the helm and nearly capsized the ship, which moves him to issue a warning: 'A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me . . . Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm!' (in Melville 1967: 354). The sun will come in the morning, with a truer light:

The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true – not true, or undeveloped. With books the same. The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All is vanity.' ALL. This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon's wisdom yet. But he who dodges hospitals and jails, and walks fast crossing graveyards, and would rather talk of operas than hell; calls Cowper, Young, Pascal, Rousseau, poor devils all of sick men; and throughout a care-free lifetime swears by Rabelais as passing wise, and therefore jolly; – not that man is fitted to sit down on tomb-stones, and break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon.

But even Solomon, he says, 'the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain' (*i.e.* even while living) 'in the congregation of the dead.'

[Prov. 21:16] Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. (1967: 355)

Here the 'unchristian' wisdom of Ecclesiastes is an illustration of a blistering truth, one that is *willing* to confront the reality of death, 'to sit down on tomb-stones'. Scholars of Melville have suggested not only that this passage is key to Melville's novel, but even that Ecclesiastes is woven into the idea of the whole. So Martin Wank argues that

Like Ecclesiastes, *Moby Dick* is a summary survey of all human history, with the conclusion that man's efforts have been vain and unworthy, leading to disaster, new trials of human effort, and only new disasters . . . This 'sermon' . . . tended to suggest . . . that the nation . . . was on a vain quest for worldly achievement . . . We need not think that Melville was a simpleton in this (or the Preacher, for that matter). Melville foresaw that America . . . was riding toward a great fall in its drive to dominance, and it was this he hoped to forestall by repeating, for his time, the great wisdom of Ecclesiastes. (1995: 3)

Yet quite apart from *Moby Dick* as allegory, Melville cast a raging epistemological battle, one in which, Elisa New suggests, a Hebraic over-Hellenistic model was prevailing. 'Melville's growing faith in the seasonality, or historicity of truth was only enhanced by his readings in Ecclesiastes, a text he found increasingly compelling' (New 1998: 299). Indeed, in the same year as *Moby Dick* (1851), Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne of his deepening affection for Solomon's wisdom:

I have come to regard this matter of Fame as the most transparent of all vanities. I read Solomon more and more, and every time see deeper and deeper and unspeakable meanings in him . . . It seems to me now that Solomon was the truest man that ever spoke, and yet that he a little *managed* the truth with a view to popular conservatism; or else there have been many corruptions and interpolations of the text. (In N. Wright 1949: 96)

Once again, then, *vanitas* provides, in the published work (Wright points to similar Ecclesiastes and vanity themes in *Mardi and a Voyage Thither*, 1849, as well; N. Wright 1949: 98–9), a meaningful language for scrutinizing the enterprise of human inquiry, and, in private, 'unspeakable meanings'.

Appearances of the *vanitas* theme in literature are usually very brief and, more often than not, weighted with memorable significance. So when Prince Andrew at Austerlitz lies wounded in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–9),

he saw nothing. Above him there was now nothing but the sky – the lofty sky . . . 'How quiet, peaceful, and solemn, not at all as I ran,' thought Prince

Andrew – ‘... How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that ... Thank God!’ (Bk 3, ch. 13, in Tolstoy 1942: 300)

Similarly, in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) Thomas Hardy compassionately traces the troubled and ultimately tragic arc of ‘erring milkmaid’ Tess Durbeyfield. One night, reflecting on her loneliness, estrangement from her husband and the pain of her life hitherto, she speaks Qoheleth’s words:

She thought of her husband in some vague warm clime on the other side of the globe, while she was here in the cold. Was there another such wretched being as she in the world? Tess asked herself; and thinking of her wasted life, said, ‘All is vanity.’ She repeated the words mechanically, till she reflected that this was a most inadequate thought for modern days. Solomon had thought as far as that more than two thousand years ago; she herself, though not in the van of thinkers, had got much further. If all were only vanity, who would mind it? All was, alas, worse than vanity – injustice, punishment, exaction of death. (Ch. 41, in Hardy 1963: 353)

Qoheleth would not agree and would, of course, include those final items under the judgment of *hebel*. But this is a remarkably personal appropriation of his words, one that mirrors the self-examining aspects of the *vanitas* arts tradition and is not unlike what we will find in *Babette’s Feast* (below, p. 141). (Intriguingly, Hardy, a fan of Thackeray’s work, attempted in the early 1860s to render Ecclesiastes in Spenserian verse, ‘but abandoned this when he found the original unmatchable’ [Deacon and Coleman 1966: 29]. Further on Hardy and Ecclesiastes, see the Introduction, pp. 67–8.)

Lord Byron (1788–1824) achieves a comparable feat in ‘All is Vanity, Saith the Preacher’ (published in his *Hebrew Melodies* collection, 1814):

Fame, wisdom, love, and Power were mine,
And health and youth possess’d me;
My goblets blush’d from every vine,
And lovely forms caress’d me;
I sunn’d my heart in beauty’s eyes,
And felt my soul grow tender;
All earth can give, or mortal prize,
Was mine of regal splendour.

I strive to number o’er what days
Remembrance can discover,
Which all that life or earth displays
Would lure me to live over.

There rose no day, there roll'd no hour
Of pleasure unembitter'd;
And not a trapping deck'd my power
That gall'd not while it glitter'd.

The serpent of the field, by art
And spells, is won from harming;
But that which coils around the heart,
Oh! who hath power of charming?
It will not list to wisdom's lore,
Nor music's voice can lure it;
But there it stings forever more
The soul that must endure it.

(Byron 1970: 80–1)

One suspects that the voice here, which again captures Qoheleth's sense of poignant failed quest, is Byron's as much as that of his fictive Preacher. Matthew Prior's 'Solomon on the Vanity of the World' (1718) suggests a similar strategy:

Ye Sons of Men, with just Regard attend,
Observe the Preacher, and believe the Friend,
Whose serious Muse inspires him to explain,
That all we Act, and all we Think is Vain.
That in this Pilgrimage of Seventy Years,
Over Rocks of Perils, and thro' Vales of Tears
Destin'd to march, our doubtful Steps we tend,
Tir'd with the Toil, yet fearful of its End.
That from the Womb We take our fatal Shares
Of Follies, Passions, Labors, Tumults, Cares;
And at Approach of Death shall only know
The Truths, which from these pensive Numbers flow,
That We pursue false Joy, and suffer real Woe.

(ll. 1–13, in Prior 1905: 264)

Prior excels at (and is unique in) capturing the tension between the vanity to which all are destined and the depth to which endurance of it compels compliance ('Tir'd with the Toil, yet fearful of its End'). In his 'Don Juan' (canto VII, composed in 1822) Byron manages a less indirect engagement with the theme:

Ecclesiastes said, 'that all is vanity' –
Most modern preachers say the same, or show it
By their examples of true Christianity:
In short, all know, or very soon may know it;
And in this scene of all confess'd inanity,
By saint, by sage, by preacher, and by poet,

Must I restrain me, through the fear of strife,
From holding up the nothingness of life?
(Canto VII.6; 1970: 744)

‘Vanity of vanities’ is exceptionally effective (as it is in Ecclesiastes) as a structuring device, such as in critic and poet William Earnest Henley’s ‘Double Ballade of the Nothingness of Things’ (c.1877–88):

The big teetotum twirls,
And epochs wax and wane
As chance subsides or swirls;
But of the loss and gain
The sum is always plain.
Read on the mighty pall,
The weed of funeral
That covers praise and blame,
The -isms and the -anities,
Magnificence and shame: –
‘O Vanity of Vanities!’

The Fates are subtile girls!
They give us chaff for grain.
And Time, the Thunderer, hurls,
Like bolted death, disdain
At all that heart and brain
Conceive, or great or small,
Upon this earthly ball.
Would you be knight and dame?
Or woo the sweet humanities?
Or illustrate a name?
O Vanity of vanities!

...

Burned in one common flame
Are wisdoms and insanities.
For this alone we came: –
‘O Vanity of vanities!’

(the first two and part of the
sixth of seven stanzas, all of
which are similarly framed
by Qoheleth’s phrase;
in Henley 1898: 94–5, 97)

As in Qoheleth’s narrative itself, as the incongruous events and ideas are displayed, all the ‘-isms and the -anities’, the *vanitas* refrain becomes increasingly

swollen with a host of signifiers. Structurally, other poets have commenced with 'vanity' simply to prompt thinking on a seemingly unrelated subject. So, for example, Robert Browning's 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church, Rome, 15__' begins 'Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity! Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back? . . .' (Browning 2004).

The vanity theme resonated personally and with clarity for poet Christina Rossetti. Her three most cherished books of the Bible, from which she drew significantly in her poetry, were, in order, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Revelation. But as for passages,

Of all the works of Holy Scripture, the passage that Rossetti loved the best and used the most is that which expresses the theme of Ecclesiastes: 'Vanity of vanities: all is vanity'. Not only does she cite this passage more often than any other, but she also quotes other sections from that book, and from others, that stress the same concept: all that makes up life soon vanishes and loses significance. Christina Rossetti is in complete accord with this observation, and like the Koheleth she also pours forth one long drawn out lament of pain and disappointment, for she looks for escape from present misery and finds it not. (Jiménez 1979: p. x)

Like Qoheleth, and indeed the *vanitas* painters, Rossetti was successful at uniting contradictory sides of her nature, and also like Qoheleth, had a strong sense of self-possession and reflection. Note the first half of her 'The One Certainty' (composed 1849):

Vanity of vanities, the Preacher saith,
 All things are vanity. The eye and ear
 Cannot be filled with what they see and hear.
 Like early dew, or like the sudden breath
 Of wind, or like the grass that withereth,
 Is man, tossed to and fro by hope and fear:
 So little joy hath he, so little cheer,
 Till all things end in the long dust of death.

(Rossetti 1979: 72)

'A Testimony' (also composed in 1849) develops the theme at greater length. So, for example:

I said of laughter: it is vain.
 Of mirth I said: what profits it?
 Therefore I found a book, and writ
 Therein how ease and also pain,
 How health and sickness, every one
 Is vanity beneath the sun

...

Therefore the maidens cease to sing,
And the young men are very sad;
Therefore the sowing is not glad,
And mournful is the harvesting.
Of high and low, of great and small,
Vanity is the lot of all.
(first and twelfth of thirteen stanzas,
in Rossetti 1979: 77, 79)

With echoes here of chapters 2, 9 and 12, as elsewhere in her work, Rossetti betrays her intimate knowledge of Ecclesiastes. This almost obsessive thematizing of vanity is taken up in at least 13 of Rossetti's published poems, and other Ecclesiastes themes in roughly 10 others (see Jiménez 1979: 30–5). Probably the finest of these is 'Vanity of Vanities' (first published 1847):

Ah woe is me for pleasure that is vain,
Ah woe is me for glory that is past:
Pleasure that bringeth sorrow at the last,
Glory that at the last bringeth no gain!
So saith the sinking heart; and so again
It shall say till the mighty angel-blast
Is blown, making the sun and moon aghast,
And showering down the stars like sudden rain.
And ever more men shall go fearfully
Bending beneath their weight of heaviness;
And ancient men shall lie down wearily,
And strong men shall rise up in weariness;
Yes, even the young shall answer shiningly,
Saying one to another: How vain it is!
(Rossetti 1979: 153)

(While this is a subtle exposition, noteworthy too is Rossetti's use of the refrain 'Oh vanity of vanities, desire!' in 'Soeur de la Miséricorde', 1881, in Rossetti 1986: 119–20.)

A notable twist in the literary adaptation of *vanitas* in the late nineteenth century is the manner in which, like other key phrases (e.g. 'nothing new under the sun'), *vanitas* could provide opportunity for witty and light-hearted verse. Frederick Locker-Lampson's 'Vanity Fair' (c.1865), which is commenting at least in part on the reception of Thackeray's titular work, is a good example:

'*Vanitas vanitatum*' has rung in the ears
Of gentle and simple for thousands of years;
The wail is still heard, yet its notes never scare
Or simple or gentle from Vanity Fair.

I hear people busy abusing it – yet
There the young go to learn and the old to forget;
The mirth may be feigning, the sheen may be glare,
But the gingerbread's gilded in Vanity Fair.

...

Philosophy halts, wisest counsels are vain, –
We go – we repent – we return there again;
To-night you will certainly meet with us there –
Exceedingly merry in Vanity Fair.

(1865: 125–6)

(Compare Frederick Ward's 'Laughing Philosophy', 1890: 'Comes to all the ultimatum,/That snuffs out the Royal gas;/*Vanitas O vanitatum,/Omnia sunt vanitas!*/... *Therefore laugh and live*'; ll. 37–40, 48; 1890: 787.)

A frequently referenced appearance of Qoheleth's *vanitas* is found in George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* (in Shaw 1965: 332–405), composed 1901–3 and first performed in 1905. The third act, the 'Don Juan in Hell' dream sequence, is often performed independently as a distinct piece, and provides opportunity for some philosophical discourse on the futility of endeavour in relation to human progress, and of course it is only appropriate that Qoheleth has his say:

THE DEVIL. Don Juan: shall I be frank with you?

DON JUAN. Were you not so before?

THE DEVIL. As far as I went, yes. But I will now go further, and confess to you that men get tired of everything, of heaven no less than of hell; and that all history is nothing but a record of the oscillations of the world between these two extremes. An epoch is but a swing of the pendulum; and each generation thinks the world is progressing because it is always moving. But when you are as old as I am; when you have a thousand times wearied of heaven, like myself and the Commander, and a thousand times wearied of hell, as you are wearied now, you will no longer imagine that every swing from heaven to hell is an emancipation, every swing from hell to heaven an evolution. Where you now see reform, progress, fulfilment of upward tendency, continual ascent by Man on the stepping stones of his dead selves to higher things, you will see nothing but an infinite comedy of illusion. You will discover the profound truth of the saying of my friend Kokoheleth, that there is nothing new under the sun. *Vanitas vanitatum* –

DON JUAN [out of all patience]. By Heaven, this is worse than your cant about love and beauty. Clever dolt that you are, is a man no better than a worm, or a dog than a wolf, because he gets tired of everything? Shall he give up eating because he destroys his appetite in the act of gratifying it? . . . Granted that the great Life Force has hit on the device of the clockmaker's pendulum, and uses the earth for its bob; . . . has the colossal mechanism no purpose?

THE DEVIL. None, my friend. You think, because you have a purpose, Nature must have one. You might as well expect it to have fingers and toes because you have them. (Shaw 1965: 387)

For Shaw Qoheleth illustrates well the 'comedy of illusion' that when properly recognized shatters faith in the reliable moral order of the world. A comment a few years earlier, in his preface to *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901), sheds further light on this idea: 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity! moans the Preacher, when life has at last taught him that Nature will not dance to his moralist-made tunes. Thackeray, scores of centuries later, was still baying the moon in the same terms' (in Shaw 1934: 716). With this and the larger context of this dream sequence, which reflects existentially on the value of human existence stuck against the cyclical futility of 'Nature', Shaw's larger understanding of the theme as it relates to human endeavour becomes clear.

The *vanitas* theme can be seen (re)emerging in some twentieth-century poetry. In his celebrated *The Testament of Beauty* (1929), brought on by the death of his daughter in 1926, Robert Bridges offers a Qoheleth-like stanza that is as bleak as any *vanitas* adaptation:

. . . surely Nature hath no night
dark as thatt black darkness that can be felt: no storm
blind as the fury of Man's self-destructiv passions,
no pestilence so poisonous as his hideous sins.

Thus men in slavery of sorrow imagin ghastly creeds,
monstrous devilry, abstractions of terror, and wil look
to death's benumbing opium as their only cure,
or, seeking proudly to ennoble melancholy
by embracement, wil make a last wisdom of woe:
They lie in Hell like sheep, death gnaweth upon them;
whose prophet sage and preacher is the old Ecclesiast
pseudo-Solomon, who cryeth in the wilderness,
calling all to baptism in the Slough of Despond:
VANITAS VANITATUM, OMNIA VANITAS.

(Book II, 'Selfhood', ll. 518–31, in Bridges 1936: 608)

Like Klein (see p. 98), Bridges is one of the very few writers to draw attention to the rhetorical device of Qoheleth's *nom de plume*, 'pseudo-Solomon'. Despite

(or because of?) its dark themes, *Testament* was an immediate success. When Oxford University Press published it, 'they were unprepared for its success. Printings could scarcely keep up with demand, and by 1946 it had sold over 70,000 copies' (Phillips 2004).

Few poets of the modern period engaged more comprehensively with the *vanitas* of Ecclesiastes than T. S. Eliot. As Edwards notes,

Four Quartets takes on itself, like 'Prufrock', the burden of Ecclesiastes. As Denis Donoghue has indicated, it is often a meditation on *vanitas vanitatum*. The particular horror of endlessness in the Preacher's lament: 'yet is there no end of all his labour' (4:8), is actually expanded in the Preacher-like dirge of 'Dry Salvages' II, which asks, repetitively, 'Where is there an end of it . . . ?' and replies, 'There is no end, but addition'. The phrase drives one back for a while into the desolation of *The Waste Land* (as also forward to Beckett). There are many further instances, and the most telling are those which show Eliot to have been thinking of Ecclesiastes at the beginning of *Four Quartets*, and at the end of all four of its constituent poems. (Edwards 1990a: 80; cf. T. Wright 2005)

So in 'Dry Salvages', II (1941) of the *Four Quartets* (published 1943), Eliot ruminates,

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayerable
Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?

There is no end, but addition: the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours

(In Eliot 1969: 185)

And further on there is something here of Ecclesiastes' sense of the ever-vanishing goal of memory and its consequent meaning (cf. 1:4, 11):

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning

...

That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations – not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:

The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.
(In Eliot 1969: 186–7)

While, then, the idea of *vanitas* subtly underwrites the whole of *Four Quartets*, it is in part II of ‘Little Gidding’ (1942) that vanity at last appears:

Dead water and dead sand
Contending for the upper hand.
The parched eviscerate soil
Gapes at the vanity of toil,
Laughs without mirth.
This is the death of earth.
(In Eliot 1969: 193)

(Further on Eliot and Ecclesiastes, see pp. 68–9.)

I have already discussed the rare appearances of Ecclesiastes on film (see pp. 83–4), but I should make mention here of a splendid cinematic *vanitas* reading. *Rembrandt* (1936) follows the artist’s life from 1642, a time of his considerable wealth and established reputation to his final years in, as the film has it, relative obscurity (c.1668–9). In the closing scenes, Rembrandt (Charles Laughton), who has lost his wife to illness and come to the brink of bankruptcy, wanders the streets of Amsterdam unrecognized and even derided. He falls in with a young bunch of raucous revellers who, charmed by his wit, take him along to a tavern that he might ‘sing for his supper, preach a sermon’. Once there, they cheerfully call out toasts: ‘To beauty! To woman! To youth! To love! To money! What about you, grandpa? You haven’t given us your toast!’ ‘I can’t think of a toast’, he replies. The crowd points out that they heard him ‘mumble something’ into his glass. ‘That wasn’t a toast, and they weren’t my words.’ They ask whose words they are, at which point the camera closes in on Laughton’s pensive face. ‘They were the words of King Solomon. They are the best words I know.’ ‘Well, let’s have them! You can be our King Solomon and teach us wisdom!’ With mesmerizing cadence, Laughton delivers Qoheleth’s words, and it is not a simple citation, but a medley of thematic verses: ‘Vanity of vanities. All is vanity’ (1:2b); ‘I have seen all the works that are done under the sun. And behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit’ (1:14). This he follows with the King James version of 1:18 and 3:22a, each line followed by the laughter of his tavern audience. Someone enters, however, who recognizes the still highly respected artist. Ashamed, the group seek to make amends, one offering him some money for food, which he promptly uses to purchase fresh pigments. The final scene, then, sees Rembrandt in his makeshift studio,



PLATE 10 Charles Laughton as Rembrandt catches his reflection and is prompted to speak Qoheleth's *vanitas* judgment. *Rembrandt* © London Film Productions, Ltd., 1936

now able to complete his self-portrait (visually recalling his poignant self-portraits of the 1660s), which provides opportunity for the most affective rendering of Qoheleth on film. Regarding himself in his cracked mirror he pauses, transfixed, and speaks the film's final lines: 'Vanity of vanities. All is vanity' (plate 10).⁷

This performance of *vanitas* is richly referential. In terms of social stature, wealth and possessions, Rembrandt in the final scenes is a shadow of his former self, and he has taken on the figure of the disillusioned king (who on the streets of Amsterdam is mockingly referred to as 'his royal highness', and whom the tavern crowd anoint their own 'king') who can now comment on the real worth of the world's wares. Unknowingly perhaps, the film comments on the insights of the *vanitas* tradition in the arts, which could be utilized to great effect in Dutch self-portraits of the period, such as David Bailly's (1651, see above, plate 8). Like Qoheleth, this Rembrandt is commenting on a way of

⁷ More recently, *Darrow* (1991), which dramatizes the life of the famous socialist lawyer Clarence Darrow (Kevin Spacey), no doubt articulates the sentiment of scores of Ecclesiastes readers when its titular character describes what the Bible means to him: 'Thank God, in our house the good book gathered dust up on the top shelf between Aesop's *Fables* and Bulfinch's *Mythology*. The only thing in the Bible that made sense to me was Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity and a striving after the wind"'

defining the self (so he adjures the youthful crowd as he departs, 'And remember King Solomon'). It is also empowered by the unique ability of film (or more precisely, the incomparable Charles Laughton) to bring Qoheleth to life through visual empathy with Rembrandt as Solomon/Qoheleth. Indeed, readings in literature and the arts are frequently driven by empathy, empathy with the idea that *vanitas* has come to signify for that performer (which is also clear in the example of the film *Babette's Feast*, below).

D. THE BREADTH OF *VANITAS*

To summarize, *vanitas* reading can be seen in five stages:

- 1 *Contemptus mundi* – popularized by Jerome and a host of Christian commentators (Jewish readers generally not interested in the programmatic reading).
- 2 Anti-*contemptus mundi* – popularized (and politicized) by Martin Luther and other Protestant interpreters, later resumed in Puritan commentaries.
- 3 Renaissance *vanitas* – a new application, mainly in poetry, fine art and music, commenting on the perceived dangers of the new sciences and on mortality (linked to *memento mori*).
- 4 Literary *vanitas* – a knowing application that references *contemptus* as well as Renaissance traditions.
- 5 Contemporary *vanitas* – a rediscovery of Renaissance readings, particularly in the arts.

Such periodization should be regarded as fluid. Readers who targeted *contemptus* (2) also articulated Renaissance scepticism of knowledge with *vanitas* (3). The extent of the unabated influence of *vanitas* (5) is impossible to map accurately. This was brought home to me recently on a visit to the Tate Modern museum in London. It was with some disbelief that I took in the room I had just entered, entitled *Memento Mori*. It began with a late but perfectly classical *vanitas* painting by Edward Collier (a Dutch artist who painted *vanitas* works for the English market, and who anglicized his name from Edwaert Colyer), *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes'* (1696 – it can at the time of writing be viewed at the Tate's website, <http://www.tate.org.uk>), the display caption of which read,

This seventeenth-century work is a typical *vanitas* painting. The skull and hour-glass, which symbolise the inevitability of death, are joined by musical instruments, wine and jewels, representing the fleeting pleasures of life. A book by the English poet George Wither is opened at the title page, where a brief poem emphasises the theme of mortality. The Latin inscription in the top left corner

is a celebrated quotation from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, from which the term *vanitas* was derived: 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.'

The room had a range of modern work that echoed the themes of mortality inspired by *vanitas*. (I had to assure my wife that our presence there was all very innocent and unplanned!)

In the end comprehending the influence of *vanitas* itself requires imagination. For Renaissance thinkers *vanitas* provided a sceptical line of inquiry weighted with the disquieting authority of Scripture, as well as a polemical language to be voiced against the monastic tradition that had permanently fixed *vanitas* in the intellectual life of Europe. *Vanitas* fired the imagination of artists, musicians and poets from the Renaissance to the present day. Part of the enormous appeal of Qoheleth's theme lies in its radical openness. In Ecclesiastes *hebel* has no reference but itself and the troubled observations that Qoheleth attaches to it, and the superlative construct *hebel* of *hebels* is infamously self-defining (as many exegetes have pointed out, the 'all' of 'all is vanity' also lacks a semantic reference, one that must be provided by readers). These yield meaning only in a discourse that provides their terms of reference, only as poets and moralizers fill them with a host of experientially bound ideas. This non-referential quality also hints at a transgressive power, a power to wrest free from the cultural conditions of its performances. Where it appears to succeed (even if it necessarily fails), *vanitas* often encapsulates the entirety of Qoheleth's story (in a manner not unlike the frame narrative's use of *h^abēl h^abālim* to summarize Qoheleth's experience), his sense of failed quest and the yearning of the older Qoheleth to redeem it (see Christianson 1998a: 242–54). I will conclude with one such exceptional example, which *can be seen* to comment on Qoheleth's larger narrative. *Babette's Feast* (dir. Gabriel Axel, 1987) recounts the story of a close-knit and austere Christian sect rattled by the arrival of Babette, a Parisian chef who gradually and metaphorically awakens them. The film climaxes in an extravagant and transformative meal for the community, including old general Lowenhielm. The general, it transpires, made a string of decisions in his youth that led him to military success but away from the woman he loved. Before the meal, at which the general is aware that he will meet his former love, we see intercut scenes of Babette preparing her feast and of the general before a full-length mirror, preparing to attend it. The general's scene begins to take on the qualities of an animated *vanitas* still life. Pausing, he addresses himself: 'Vanity. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.' Behind him we see a chair in which appears his younger self, arms crossed, proud and defiant. The older turns to address the younger: 'I have achieved all you dreamed of and satisfied your ambition, but to little avail. This evening, you and I shall settle matters.'

The Overture Played Out: 1:3–18

After thousands of words we arrive at last at verse 3 (!), and it is worth noting that, with the possible exception of chapter 12, nothing in *Ecclesiastes* has engaged interpreters so frequently and comprehensively as the *vanitas* theme just surveyed. Readers should not be surprised, then, to find significantly less space taken up (on a verse to page ratio, as it were) by Qoheleth's remaining chapters.

Qoheleth's dramatic opening lines have provided opportunities for poets to lend gravitas to the commencement of their work. With a little overlap, this will offer an appropriate departure from the *vanitas* section, and a few examples will illustrate the case well. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, wrote his *A Paraphrase of Part of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (1–5) on the cusp of his final imprisonment while foreseeing his execution by Henry VIII in 1546 (see p. 47). His opening anticipates the frustration he renders throughout the poem:

I, Solomon, David's son, King of Jerusalem,
Chosen by God to teach the Jews, and in his laws lead them,
Confess, under the Sun that every thing is vain;
The world is false; man he is frail, and all his pleasures pain.
Alas! what stable fruit may Adam's children find
In that, they seek by sweat of brows and travail of their mind.
We that live on the earth, draw toward our decay;
Our children fill our place awhile, and then they vade away.
Such changes make the earth, and doth remove for none;
But serves us for a place to play our tragedies upon.
(In Howard 1815: 1.66)

George Sandys in 1632 also began his exquisite paraphrase in vivid terms:

This Sermon the much-knowing Preacher made:
King David's Sonne; who Judah's Scepter swai'd
O restlesse vanitie of Vanities!
All is but vanitie, the Preacher cries.
What profit have we by our Labors won,
Of all beneath the Circuit of the Sun?
(In Sandys 1638: fol. Aa, 1)

Compare the opening stanza from the anonymous author of the paraphrase *Chohheleth* (1765):

O Vain, deluding world! whose largest gifts
 Thine emptiness betray, like painted clouds,
 Or watry bubbles: as the vapour flies,
 Dispers'd by lightest blast, so fleet thy joys,
 And leave no trace behind. This serious truth
 The Royal Preacher loud proclaims, convinc'd
 By sad experience; with a sigh, repeats
 The mournful theme, that nothing here below
 Can solid comfort yield: 'Tis all a scene
 Of vanity, beyond the pow'r of words
 T'express, or thought conceive . . .

(Anonymous 1765: 1–2)

Like some sort of plot announcements, each of these beginnings sees the poet borrowing freely from the ancient authority of Solomon/Royal Preacher in order to insinuate at least the foundation of Solomon's 'sad experience'. (Compare the openings of A. M. Klein's 'Koheleth', c.1944 [p. 71] and of Thackeray's *Vanitas Vanitatum* [p. 127].)

There are of course other features of 1:1–2 apart from Solomon and *vanitas* that have produced commentary of one kind or another. In the introduction to his sermons of 1649 on Eccl. 8:2–4 in support of King Charles II, Edward Hyde, with typical exegetical flourish, suggests that 'the preacher' does not use a name because he sought to highlight the fact that the words were not his own but were inspired by God. The proof lies, says Hyde, in the use of a feminine title: '... [*Ekklesiasta*] either [*psychi*, soul] or [*sophia*, wisdom], not a *he* but a *she Preacher*, that is, not a Preaching man, but a *Preaching soul*, or a *Preaching wisdom*'. This directs the reader's attention away from the persona of Qoheleth/Solomon to the purpose of wisdom, which in this book is to exposit 'the publick testimonial of his [Solomon's!] repentance' (Hyde 1662: 12; my transliterations).

The answer to Qoheleth's rhetorical question of 1:3, 'What profit hath a man of all his labour . . .?', can of course only be 'none', and John Hall in 1646 saw in this observation the illustration of a kind of intellectual *Wanderlust*:

Even as the wandring Traveller doth stray,
 Led from his way
 By a false fire, whose Flame to cheated sight
 Doth lead aright,

...

Another whose conceptions onely dreame
 Monsters of fame,

The vaine applause of other Mad-men buyes
With his owne sighes,
Yet his enlarged name shall never craule
Over this Ball,
But soone consume; thus doth a Trumpets sound
Rush bravely on a little, then's not found;
...
(‘What profiteth a Man of all his labour
which he taketh under the Sun?’, 1646: 97, 99)

As Hall continues, he suggests that taxonomy also falls under this same curse: ‘So a weake Eye in twilight thinkes it sees/New species,/While it sees nought’ (1646: 99). Hall extends Qoheleth’s idea to apply the notion of ‘profit’ not just to physical labour but to other ways in which effort is expended.

The opening verses of *Ecclesiastes*, like its closing elegy, have wrung out from poets not just fine verse but also a tendency, as we have seen in the *vanitas* readings, to relate Qoheleth’s words to the broadest forms of human experience. The poetic force of the passage was captured well by T. K. Cheyne, who drew attention to Thomas Carlyle’s rendering of 1:4 in his fictionalized autobiography, *Sartor Resartus* (1831):

To me, I confess, the prelude or overture (i. 4–8), though not in rhythmic Hebrew, is the gem of the book . . . [Its] poetry is of elemental force, and appeals to the modern reader in some of his moods more than almost anything else in the Old Testament outside the Book of Job. I cannot help alluding to Carlyle’s fine application of its imagery in *Sartor Resartus*, ‘Generations are as the Days of toilsome Mankind: Death and Birth are the vesper and the matin bells, that summon mankind to sleep, and to rise refreshed for new advancement.’ (1887: 246)

For William Knox Qoheleth’s observation on the passing of generations draws comparisons to the natural world beyond the immediate language of the passage. In his 1824 poem ‘Mortality’, Knox draws on verses 4 and 9–11 (as well as Job 3), extending these to the levelling power of death:

The saint that enjoyed the communion of Heaven,
The sinner that dared to remain unforgiven,
The wise and the foolish, the guilty and just,
Have quietly mingled their bones in the dust.

So the multitude goes – like the flower and the weed
That wither away to let others succeed;
So the multitude comes – even those we behold,
To repeat every tale that hath often been told.

For we are the same things that our fathers have been,
 We see the same sights that our fathers have seen
 (ll. 25–34, in Knox 2003)

In his poem ‘One Generation Passeth Away’, Christian mystical poet Jones Very (1818–80), like Knox, related Qoheleth’s themes to broad reflection on human experience:

As is the sand upon the ocean’s shore,
 So without number seems the human race;
 And to that number still are added more,
 As wave on wave each other onward chase.

 As are the drops of rain, that countless fall
 Upon the earth, or on the briny sea,
 So seem man’s generations great and small,
 Those that have been, and those who yet shall be.
 . . .
 More than the ancient Preacher now we know,
 Though wiser he than all the sons of men;
 God through his Son the promise doth bestow,
 That all the sons of earth shall live again.
 (In Atwan and Wieder 1993: 351–2)

George Sandys captures the same sense exquisitely in his 1632 paraphrase:

The Earth is fix’t, we fleeting: as one Age
 Departs, another enters on the Stage.
 The setting Sunne resignes his Throne to Night;
 Then hastens to restore the morning Light.
 The Winde flies to the South, shifts to the North;
 And wheelles about to where it first brake forth.
 All Rivers run into th’insatiate Mainie;
 From thence, to their old Fountaines creepe againe.
 Incessantly all toyle. The searching Minde,
 The Eye, and Eare, no satisfaction finde.
 (In Sandys 1638: 1)

The circuitous activity of ‘generations’, the Sun and the elements in 1:4–7 has elicited a range of responses. The cosmological debates of the Middle Ages in particular included Eccl. 1:4 and 3:11 in their proof-texting arsenal. Both verses suggest that the Earth itself is not subject to the same mutability or transience as the rest of creation. Moses Maimonides, in his *Guide for the*

Perplexed (c.1190), defends ‘Solomon’ from the idea attributed to him that the world has existed ‘from all eternity’:

But as to the existence of the world from eternity, there is no passage [in Ecclesiastes] to indicate that such was his belief, though there is one, it is true, which shews that *he believed that* the world will not perish, but last for ever. Because then they saw that there was a verse proving the stability of the world, they thought erroneously that he believed that the world was not created. Now the verse which speaks of the future eternal duration of the world is this: ‘The earth abides for ever.’ [1:4] Some have interpreted the expression as [*l’ôlām*] signifying only for a ‘definite’ time. But I should like to know what they will make of the passage which we find in David, Ps. x. 4, 5: ‘He has founded the earth on its basis that it should not be removed for ever and ever,’ [*ôlām w’êd*]. But if you should say that the expression [*ôlām w’êd*] does not demonstrate its eternal duration, but only its duration for a definite time, you will necessarily say at the same time, that the Creator will only reign for a definite time . . . (2:29; in Preston 1845: 18–19; italics in Preston, my transliterations)⁸

Here Maimonides executes philological exegesis in order to appeal to the plain (if cosmological!) sense of this verse. In a similar vein, medieval commentators on Ecclesiastes related the circuitous waters of the sea in 1:7 to Aristotle’s similar notion in *Meteorologica* (2.2): ‘Many of these (rivers) form lakes . . . but all of them come round again in a circle to the original source of their flow’ (in Smalley 1949: 330). William of Auvergne, c.1220, reflected the harmonious agreement between Aristotle and Ecclesiastes, in which ‘Aristotle agrees with the Scriptures’ (in Smalley 1949: 331). Karlfried Froehlich unpacks the scenario further:

Hugh of St. Victor treated the verse [1:7] as scientific information, drawing a parallel to the circulation of the body’s blood supply. William of Auvergne quoted Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* . . . He was cited by the Dominican Postill which added a verse from the poet Lucan . . . It was only when William of Moerbeke’s new translation of the *Meteorologica* became available in the 1260s that the matter was clarified. Siger of Brabant pointed out that the real Aristotle did not support, but clearly contradicted the recycling theory of Qoh 1:7. (2000: 531)

This harmonizing approach to philosophy and Scripture would be all but overturned in the early stages of the Renaissance (cf. Cameron 2001: 70).

⁸ Note that Ginsburg (1861: 58, 525–8) takes issue with Preston’s translation and retranslates this passage, but the implications of his newer translation are not entirely clear.

While many pre- and early modern interpreters triangulate Ecclesiastes to classical philosophy and good doctrine, as in the example just discussed, few before the 1800s make comparative use of writers outside Jewish and Christian tradition for non-doctrinal illumination. However, commenting on 1:5, John Trapp makes his own use of a (pop- or high-?) cultural text:

For use hereof, hear the Poet [marg. reads 'Catull', i.e. probably the Roman poet Catullus, c.84–c.54 BCE]:

The Sunne doth set and rise;
But wee contrariwise,
Sleep after one short light,
An everlasting night.

(1650: 11)

Of commentaries of this period especially, Trapp's strategy is highly unusual for finding 'use hereof' in such material. And the implication of the poem in relation to Ecclesiastes is apt: commentators still struggle over the question of whether he is drawing a sharp contrast between the joyful strength and steadiness of the sun and the elements to the misery of the human condition, or whether he is suggesting that creation, too, can only be miserable (see the classic discussion in Whybray 1988; cf. the discussion of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, above, p. 69).

Victorian novelist Charles Kingsley, one of the first of the Anglican clergy to support Charles Darwin's theories, recognized in 1:8, in his historical 'prose idyll' *North Devon* (July 1849), a subtle affection for nature.

Some may call it a pretty conceit. I call it a great world-wide law, which reaches from earth to heaven. Whatever the Preacher may have thought it in a moment of despondency, what is it but a blessing that 'sun, and wind, and rivers, and ocean', as he says, and 'all things, are full of labour – man cannot utter it'. This sea which bears us would rot and poison, did it not sweep in and out here twice a day in swift refreshing current . . . Wonderful ocean-world! (in Kingsley 1880: 269–70)

Kingsley is a good example of readings that seem to emerge so clearly from an ideological momentum, for he writes – as will Robert Louis Stevenson (see p. 252) and as the Renaissance interpreters did not – with an infectious enthusiasm for the discovery of knowledge. There seem to be few moments when the cultural *Zeitgeist* manages to drive such positive assessment of Qoheleth's words.

The 'elemental force' of Qoheleth's opening verses is subtly rendered in Christina Rossetti's 'Subject to Like Passions as We Are' (1892), which like so

much of her poetry is liberally and naturally immersed in Qoheleth's imagery (in this case of 1:7–9):

Experience bows a sweet contented face,
 Still setting her seal that God is true:
 Beneath the sun, she knows, is nothing new;
 All things that go return with measured pace,
 Winds, rivers, man's still recommencing race: –
 While Hope beyond earth's circle strains her view,
 Past sun and moon, and rain and rainbow too,
 Enamoured of unseen eternal grace.

(In Rossetti 1986: 251)

Rossetti here achieves on a small scale what many see as Qoheleth's achievement: an inexplicable concord between the proving 'seal' of experience (which includes the 'truth' of God) and the ominous distance of hope. It is the Qoheleth-like tension (here at least partially resolved) between these two notions (of burdensome experience and the expectation of something better) that animates a number of Rossetti's *vanitas* poems (see above, pp. 133–4).

As any query to a web search engine will show, the phrase 'there is nothing new under the sun' is still alive and well in the parlance of popular culture (though perhaps less so an awareness of its source). Indeed, the adage is a good example of the quotable Qoheleth, which is not to say that it does not take on different shades of meaning in its variable contexts. In Renaissance readings it often functions as short-hand to underscore the dangers of philosophy (i.e. it is subsumed in that programmatic reading – see Bacon, below). Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century verse exhibits a similar trend (Lok 1597: 'We thinke our world with wisdom doth abound . . . /But ouer-weening thoughts this toy [the world] begits'), which can be seen in the paraphrases of 1:9–11 of Brome, Lok, Quarles and Sandys (see pp. 55–7). Often in post-1800 readings Qoheleth's words do not seem to signify some ominous portent so much as to demonstrate the author's own 'impressive' grasp of an ancient witticism.

For Francis Bacon (see Introduction, pp. 50–1) the truism of 1:9 can only complement the wider Renaissance exposition of the dangers of philosophy. So, in the enlarged version of his *Essays* (*The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 1625) Bacon begins his 'Of Vicissitude of Things' (Essay 59): 'Salomon saith, *there is no new thing upon the earth*: So that as *Plato* had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance: so *Solomon* giveth his sentence, *that all novelty is but oblivion*. Whereby you may see, that the river of *Lethe* runneth as well above ground, as below.' He then concludes the essay, 'But it is not good to look too long upon these turning wheels of vicissitude, lest we become

giddy. As for the philology of them, that is but a circle of tales, and therefore not fit for this writing' (in Bacon 1730: 3.380, 382). In other words, there is an implicit judgment in Qoheleth's observation that only further serves to underscore the perilous pursuit of knowledge. The poet John Collop makes a similar point some 30 years later in a popular tract on religious tolerance entitled *Medici Catholicon* (1656, repr. in 1658 and 1667 as *Charity Commended*). In his (second) Preface, 'To the Romanist', Collop addresses the circuitry of learning, understood in a manner not unlike Bacon's 'circle of tales':

Error is of a teeming Constitution, this Hydra's heads multiply by amputation, there is no end of writing of Bookes the wisest of men dead said, and the wisest of men living lament. Study is a wearinesss [*sic*] to the flesh, I wish most mens studies were not onely a wearines [*sic*] to their own but all flesh . . . while there is nothing new under the Sun, not onely bookes but men are transcribed, men are liv'd ore againe: the Pythagorean Metempsychy is verified: the revolution of planets reduce the same constitutions, same errors: hence Learning is in the circle and not in the Progresse: error hath alter'd her modes and garbs with times, someties more gaudy, better painted, trim'd and drest to become more tempting, but still hath carried her old rotten body through all her veils and disguises discoverable to a curious inquirie. (Collop 1667: dedication, n.p.)

Such readings summon the full force of Qoheleth's words to condemn what is new in the realm of the intellect, but they do little to examine the most obvious question: what did Qoheleth mean by 'new'?

Just a few years earlier Patrick Cary grappled more with the inherent incongruity of Qoheleth's observation (as happens so frequently with readings of 12:12) in his *Fallax et Instabilis* (1651), which uses 1:9 as an epigraph:

'Tis a strange thing this world,
Nothing but change I see:
And yett itt is most true
That in't there's nothing new,
Though all seeme new to mee.
...
All things below doe change,
The sea in rest ne'er lyes;
...
The sun does thincke nothing of all this strange;
Since all things here still change.

And this should drive the reader to seek that which does not change:

Lett none then fix his heart
Uppon such trifling toyes;
But seeke some object out,
Whose change hee ne'er may doubt;
(In Cary 1820: 53–4)

This reading exposes the tension between the appearance of real change in the world and the potentially frightening reality that there is no such thing as real change, and this prods at the very heart of Qoheleth's thinking (cf. 1:10, 15; 3:14–15).

A more accomplished reading of the same interpretive friction observed by Cary was published by bookseller John Dunton in an eccentric collection of letters splendidly titled *The Art of Living Incognito* (1700). The letters are whimsically semi-autobiographical, and like much of Dunton's writing blur the real and the fantastic (see Hunter 1979: 29, 31). The setting and characters who exchange letters may bear some relation to reality, but the volume is really about Dunton himself, as he suggests in his first letter, 'Of Living Incognito': 'as others Squander away their Time in Publick Hurries, and in rambling from *one Vanity to another*; I chuse rather to retire to a Solitary Village (Blest with a Neighbouring Grove, a Purling-Stream, two Cuckoos, and one Nightingale) and here under the *Covert of a spreading Tree*, I intend to devote the remaining part of my Time, *To study my self*' (1700: 1). In his fourth letter, Dunton devotes nearly 20 pages to proving in quite spectacular fashion that there really is nothing new under the sun. He first relates this to the topics that he is undertaking in his letters and wishes to inform the 'Madam' he is here addressing what he means by intending to write 'uncommon' letters:

'tis time now, that I tell ye that by *Uncommon*, I did not mean NEW, but only Subjects that were *Curious*, or very rarely handled. – No Madam, it had been a great Presumption in me to have pretended to any thing *New*, when *Solomon* tells us. – *There is nothing NEW under the Sun*. And Dr. *Winter* adds, *Nor in the Moon neither*, (a Picture of this Mutable World) of whose encrease, tho we have every Year *NEW Ones* a full dozen, Yet all is but the *Old One over and over* . . . The Sun returneth every morning to the same place he came from, with like form, and self-same substance – The *Days and Nights* pass by course, and ever continue of like Essence . . . Nothing is the Object of our Senses, but what is ordinary and familiar: We see nothing strange and New. (1700: 42–3)

And thus he proceeds to list scores of examples that demonstrate his case, from news items that are not really 'new' at all, to the discourse of the coffee house – the never-ending string of happenings can never be new. 'News' may report

of an Earl's Cutting his own Throat, and then flinging the Razor out of the Window; – of the penitent Death of some great Lord; – of a Bloody Fight; – of a *Lover hanging himself*; – of a Virgin Ravisht . . . But these '*tho Real Truths*' are no *New Things*, but what we have seen over and over. – Not but I must own, if there were a *New Thing* under the Sun, *the Author of the Flying Post* wou'd find it out: But he's an honest Gentleman, and writes nothing but Truth; and *Truth is always the same*; and if his Papers be always the same, what News can there be in them? (1700: 46)

Dunton's overall goal is one of peculiar application: 'when *Solomon*, who was many Hundred Years before *St. Paul*, pronounces of his own Times, That there was not then, nor shou'd ever be, *any New Thing*? How much more then is it true in our Time, being so many years after him? – Thus have I proved there is *Nothing New*' (1700: 50). Indeed, he goes on to apply the judgment to fashion, literature, politics – until with exasperation he claims, 'Madam shall I stop *here*? For you see the further I search, the less hopes I have of finding any *Thing New*?' (1700: 55).

The letter that follows, 'The Lady's Answer', reveals a compliant respondent who has seen her '*Vulgar Error of expecting new things, which Solomon Affirms the World can never shew, which yet Experience seems to contradict*' (1700: 57). But this is the juncture at which Dunton's extravagant exposition turns mightily insightful, for with this dialogic device he grasps that opposition of desire and reality so key to Ecclesiastes. Dunton now uses the 'Lady's' voice to oppose himself, and in so doing questions, with notable precision, the programmatic reading of resistance to 'new' knowledge:

But I see not how Solomon in saying there was nothing New under the Sun, could possibly extend it so far as to Arts and Sciences . . . and who could say there was nothing new, with respect to Arts and Sciences with less reason then Solomon, who sat himself upon a Throne of so new an Invention . . . They say, and with great reason too, there are some Inventions so beneficial to the World, that 'tis impossible that being once known, they could ever be lost or laid aside, as the Invention of Printing, of the Sea Card, Guns and Mills, which for certain some Ages past the World was Ignorant of, and therefore must be the new Inventions of later Ages . . . it binders not but that many things are thought New, only for having been so long disus'd that they are out of remembrance. (1700: 58)

'The Lady' then turns her critique on Dunton's claims about his own project of self-examination:

Sure Hope has represented to your Fancy some excessive fine Prospect of learning the Art of Living Incognito, which must be New, for I believe you never was before

under such an Enchantment; I'll go no farther, therefore, for an Instance then your Self, to find a proof of something new . . . there needs no more to convince you of your mistaking the sence of Solomon, I shall add no more, but conclude. (1700: 59–60)

Subsequent readings of 1:9 become increasingly light-hearted. So George Almar, in his play *Pedlar's Acre: Or, The Wife of Seven Husbands* (1831), treats the theme with an obviously comic touch:

There is nothing new under the sun,
No no, – ah, no! there's nothing new:
The skies are as bright as in days of yore,
The waters beneath are as blue.
...
And times have not changed, I do truly believe,
Since they turned out of Paradise Adam and Eve.
There is nothing new under the sun, &c.
(Act I, sc. 2; 1831: 24)

Similarly, in other poetry and drama from the nineteenth century onwards Qoheleth's maxim might best be regarded as a witticism to be nuanced. Matthew Gregory Lewis (who became famous at the age of 19 for his gothic novel *The Monk*, 1796), in the epilogue of his play *Adelmorn, the Outlaw* (1801), provides a good example:

Since Solomon's time (he who lived with such glee
In a nest full of wives, like a kind of king-bee)
To the days of King George, undisputed has run
This maxim – 'There's nothing new under the sun!' –
Our Bard (who, no more than myself, as I'm told,
Likes a foolish thing better because the thing's old)
Was resolved that this proverb to-night he'd derange,
And produce something singular, novel, and strange;
So painted a Wife, who with sentiment true
Dreads the death of her husband – I'm sure now, that's new.
But if any dispute it, I beg them to name
What part of this audience can furnish the same.
(1801: 99)

Or take the protagonist of Frederick Reynolds's *Begone Dull Care: A Comedy, in Five Acts* (1808), who uses the adage to exposit his 'charming' resistance to married life: 'for the wisest of all men didn't say there was nothing new under the sun, till he had tried a hundred wives. – So, at any rate, I'll try one wife.

– This way, Madam . . .’ (Act I, sc. 1; 1808: 7). Or again, take the relatively well-known example from journalist and satirist Ambrose Bierce: ‘There is nothing new under the sun, but there are lots of things we don’t know yet’ (this is often attributed to his *The Devil’s Dictionary*, 1911, but I have been unable to locate it in the critical edition, Bierce 2000).

Just as 1:9–10 raises the question of what Qoheleth could have meant by ‘new’, so 1:11 leaves open the reference of memory. The Karaite commentator Yepheth ben ‘Ali (c.990) reflected on such referentiality in his Ecclesiastes commentary: ‘No remembrance may mean that the people themselves have no remembrance, or it may mean there is no remembrance of them, no vestiges, that is, edifices which are passed on from *generation* to *generation*. The latest is remembered, but the former is always forgotten, and so on’ (in ‘Ali 1969: 165).

Qoheleth’s dramatic introduction at 1:12–13 marks him as a seeker of truth, for he will use his immeasurable wisdom to examine *all that is done*. Given the totality of his scope, it is natural to see Qoheleth as casting his investigation to the farthest possible reaches in order to know what makes it all tick, a sense captured well by Jerome in his commentary (388/9):

Ecclesiastes therefore set his mind first of all to the acquisition of wisdom, and pursuing this beyond what is allowed, wanted to know the causes and reasoning why children are easily snatched by the Devil; why the righteous and the wicked are equally punished in shipwrecks; and whether these events happen as a result of fate, or by the decree of God. And if by fate, where is providence? If by decree, where is God’s justice? With such desire to know these things, he said, I understand the great care and torturing anxiety experienced in many things, which was given to man by God, in order that he might desire to know that which he is not allowed to know. But the cause is inborn first, and God then gives vexation. (2000: *ad loc.*; cf. *Midrash Song of Songs* 1.1.7, which describes Qoheleth/Solomon as an ‘explorer of wisdom’)

Perhaps surprisingly Jerome does not seek to take the edge off Qoheleth’s audacious quest, nor to avoid its theological consequence, the acquisition of forbidden knowledge.

Another early critical note (although much later than Jerome) is sounded by Samuel ibn Tibbon (c.1200) regarding the relationship of 1:12 to what precedes (which he regards as a *prooenium*, a prologue): ‘That he mentioned his name and his kingdom and the name of his city is proof that this is the beginning of the book. This is the way of those who compose books. Even when they mention their names in the preface of their books, they mention them again at the beginning of the subject [*‘inyan*] of the book’ (in Robinson 2001: 123 n. 29; cf. Robinson’s comments, *ibid.* 85). He is anticipating such

approaches as Edwin Good's on 1:1–11 by some 900 years (Good [1978] sees 1:12 as the real beginning of Qoheleth's thought and the preceding 1:3–10 a pre-emptive, illustrative poetic discourse). (See the Introduction, pp. 31–2, for Yepheth's ben 'Ali's strikingly modern observation on 1:12 c.990.)

We have seen in the Introduction that 1:17–18 proved popular with Renaissance sceptical thinkers (see pp. 44, 50, for examples). An earlier example is seen in Eudes of Châteauroux (c.1190–1273), a 'particularly gifted preacher', and most significantly one who 'as cardinal . . . masterminded the propaganda campaign for Louis IX's first crusade in France' (Maier 2000: 9). In a sermon on the invitation to 'take up the cross', his comments even at this relatively early period paraphrastically relate Socratic scepticism to Qoheleth: 'man knows only this: that he knows nothing, as the Philosopher says' (sermon 4.4, in Maier 2000: 163).

Two typical examples from the Renaissance period will help round out and conclude this whole chapter. In 1576 the poet and 'literary innovator' George Gascoigne closely adapted Pope Innocent III's *De Contemptu Mundi sive de Miseria Conditionis Humane*, which enjoyed huge popularity nearly 400 years previously (1195; see Introduction, p. 46). The adaptation appears as the first section of his *The Droomme of Doomes Day*, 'The View of Worldly Vanities'.

Let wyse men search narrowly, let them heedely consider the height of the heavens, the breadth of the yearth, and the depth of the Sea . . . and let them alwayes eyther learne or teach, and in so doing, what shall they fynde out of this busie toyle of our life, but traveyle and payne? that knewe he by experience, which sayed: For asmuch as in great wisdom and knowledge there is great disdayne, and he which increaseth knowledge increaseth also payne & travayle [1:18], for although whilest that he sercheth it out, he must sweat many tymes, and watch many nightes with sweat and labor, yet is there scarcely any thing so vyle, or any thing so easy, that man can fully and thorowly understand it, nor that he can clerely comprehend it, unlesse perchaunce that is perfectly knowne, that nothing is perfectly knowne. (In Gascoigne 1910: 2.223; Gascoigne's translation is very much in agreement with Lewis's critical edition of *De Contemptu*, in Innocent III 1978: 108, 110)

Like Francis Bacon and Pierre du Moulin, Gascoigne, voicing Innocent's much earlier concerns, goes on to develop the thesis of the human failure to grasp the 'reason of Gods workes, yea the more he laboreth to seeke it, so much the lesse shall he fynde it, therefore they faile in the searching, how narrowly so ever they search' (2.223). Paraphrasing 7:29, Gascoigne concludes, 'God first made man, and he hath wrapped him selfe in sundry and infinite questions' (2.224). Not long after, Pierre Charron, a close friend and disciple of Montaigne, in his *Of Wisdome Three Books (De la sagesse*, 1601), sets out a lengthy

discourse on ‘the knowledge of our selves and our humane condition, which is the foundation of Wisdome’ (in Charron 1640, unnumbered preface). When discussing the responsibilities of parents to their children in undertaking the proper teaching of science, Charron is reminded of Qoheleth: ‘One of the sufficientest men of knowledge that ever was, spake of Science, as of a thing not onely vaine, but hurtfull, painefull, and tedious. To be briefe, Science may make us more humane and courteous, but not more honest . . . The wise man said, that he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow’ (in Charron 1640: 502; similarly, see Moulin, above, p. 109). For Qoheleth’s readers in this period it seems that the only way to avoid sorrow is to avoid the ‘sciences’ altogether – although, with the possible exception of John Dunton, the irony of such sentiments in books that largely drove forward the study of the humanities was entirely lost. As with the observable change of approach to 1:9–10 (from warning to witticism), as the perceived ‘danger’ of the sciences subsided, so the verse itself faded from public use.