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The Toothpaste of Immortality: Self-construction in the consumer age by Elmer Hankiss. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press and Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006. ISBN-13: 9780801884214, 448 pp., hb $60.00.

How important a role does your toothpaste play in your life? How important is your mirror? Or your hair? The basic argument of this book by Elmer Hankiss is that apparently superficial matters are rooted in deeper and more serious concerns such as survival, social acceptability, hope, and even death.

We live on different levels at the same time, Hankiss argues. The things we call Self is physical, biological and social, as well as spiritual, existential and transcendent. But what is this Self, which at the same time lives with toothache and family history, reason and myth, consistency and irrationality? How does the many-faceted Self cope with terror, in a world which seems to change with every day's news? And more pointedly, how do we build our lives under the pressures of a consumer age? How do we form necessary links between the many levels of our lives?

Hankiss is a professor of Sociology at the College of Europe in Bruges. He has already written interestingly about the use and value of the symbols we have created in order to make the universe our home (*Fear and Symbols*, Central European University Press). We cast out our fear (of living) by means of the arts and sciences, myths and codes of conduct, jokes and laughter, and we search for enlightenment from the irrational through mysticism.

In this new book the author's starting place is sleep. Sleep is a time of rest and refreshment. It can be a bolthole, away from the assaults of life. And it is also a time, and this is the point, during which we fall apart. We are no longer in control of our experience of living. We dream of impossible, often dangerous and chaotic, situations; or we have improbable successes, far beyond our daylight possibilities. We are, literally, deconstructed during sleep.

So the day must begin with re-construction if we are to make it to the workplace or the shops. Hankiss launches into a series of re-constructive processes by means of which the Self feels able to face the world.

For some, the day begins with prayer. In earlier times this would involve shaking off the devils of the night and welcoming a new God-controlled day. For a (declining) number there will be the first cigarette over the first cup of tea/coffee; then the mirror and the razor and that mouth-cleansing

toothpaste which not only freshens the feel of the body but enables us to breathe, smell nice, and smile. Then there may be exercise, then the shower, the hair-do and make-up, the aftershave and, perhaps above all, the clothes, shoes and possibly jewellery. After such a process of re-construction, the author suggests that we feel reasonably ready to face the world.

In the world we have to learn how to present ourselves. We have to wear different masks for different people; to speak different kinds of language, even wear different clothes, so that others will listen to us, understand us, and accept us. More and more, Hankiss argues, we have left behind our community cultures and become individualists. Yet a room full of individualists can be a very lonely place in which to be.

For most people in the West the just and transcendent order of God and his angels, and a universe designed for people, where all shall be well, is no more. There is only one material dimension. We can still think, of course; and there is still hope, love and forgiveness. But it is all earth-made and earth-bound. There was no Eden and no Flood. There are simply millions of people trying to survive.

Some say that the old dependable, God-wrought order began to end with the fifteenth century Renaissance. Others believe that it was Protestantism which introduced the elements of doubt and the expansion of the Self. Others blame the individualistic Romantic explosion of the nineteenth century, which led to a world in which the Self is the centre for everybody. This explosion of individualism brought about discoveries and inventions. But it continued to lead to the loss of any transcendent dimensions, anything beyond our four dimensions of space and time. And as the mills and mines produced more and more material resources, it also led to the growth of consumerism.

This is the heart of the book's argument: if we have lost the reference-point of Transcendence, of God and another dimension, where do we look for those moments which moved the saints deeply in their prayers, which confirmed the average peasant in his God-blessed place in nature? To whom can we turn in times of stress, need or pain? Or in times of gratitude or joy?

Within the philosophy of materialism, where do we go to be "taken out of ourselves"? The book's answers are not encouraging. Because people have confused freedom with self-centredness, we only really relate to most people through our roles in life. Parents exchange stories of how Janet plays the cello or Roy plays football. Holiday-makers exchange stories about holidays they've had. Sick people cap each other's illness stories and

business men talk business.

For an experience of transcendence we seek intensity of living. You only have to see some of the 60,000 faces in a football crowd when a team has either won or lost—the ecstasy and joy, the sadness and disappointment—to see where many people find their intense experiences. We love to watch the crises of others in films, the avoidance or denial of death (our permanent boundary), or the martyrdom of heroes (whose death must surely be rewarded, but we don't know how). Then there is the celebrity culture. Countless magazines and television thrive on it. For the most part these celebrities shine in unattainable and vacuous splendour, creating unease, dissatisfaction and unspecified longings.

These are a few of the ways in which we seek to re-enchant the world which has become disenchanted and mundane. But Hankiss admits that we need more than celebrities and individualism for the loss of the everlasting arms. He points out that although the Athenian state was democratic the Athenians considered self-discipline to be an essential part of good, happy and fulfilled lives. The real mystics of the Christian church and many other faiths embraced their disciplines for the same reason. Their self-disciplines enabled communities to live together in reasonable concord. Without them,in Yeats' words, "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold."

We need a culture in which personal morality and social justice are valued. Without them there is no real true freedom or real individuality. And there can be no life without fear, or love without weakness. Whether such a culture is possible, without the awareness of a personally engendered universe, is one of the ultimate questions. In the meantime we have to make do with a culture which seems to value oil and footballers, more than it values water or saints.

We have come from trivialities like our morning self-presentation to our ultimate destination. We have moved away from superstitions and myths, spells and gods to—well, astrological charts and gossip, shopping malls and celebrities. We have lowered our aims from making it to heaven to making it financially. We talk of a consumer-driven culture, but in fact it is we who drive the consumer engine. What else do we have? What other intensity of living can we experience than the Monte Carlo life, and the vicarious experience of watching it?

My précis of this book is a poor reflection of the rich areas mined by Elmer Hankiss. He has several pages on the differences between modernism and post-modernism. The inexhaustible subject of Self is both vital

and taxing. Over a thousand books are mentioned or quoted from, in a reference list of over 50 pages. The subject is vast: how can we live in the twenty-first century, remembering how differently we have lived during the previous two thousand years? And what is the Self which is doing the living? (There are over 150,000 abstracts containing a hyphenated "Self" term, like "self-deception" or "self-esteem".) Where does the Self go for it, fundamental values, its freedom, its goals, its place in society? How does it deal with threats, mind, concerns, death? The subject matter is almost endless; yet we all have to deal with it, and this book loosely, necessarily, imaginatively, repetitively, chattily, clearly and yet tentatively asks the question—the unasked question: "Can we honestly, wisely and rationally live in a consumer-driven world without the possibility (some would say "the need") for God? It (sensibly) leaves the reply to us.

Some things in the book annoyed me. There are more than 30 words or phrases in foreign languages (largely Latin) where ordinary English words would suffice. Why write *primum movensi* when "prime mover" will do just as well? Hankiss tells me twice that this is "a scholarly book" and there is a tendency to go "over the top" with both references and illustrations.

As well as some of typographical errors there are some mistakes. The seventeenth-century warlord mentioned on page 253 was Wallenstein not Wallerstein. (Immanuel Wallerstein was correctly mentioned on page 167.) The French Tennis arena is Roland Garros not Roland Garoche. But these can be forgiven, for an entertaining, profound, and provocative book.

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