

2014 Memorial Discourse on A. A. Luce, by David Berman

Mr Provost, Ladies and Gentlemen:

There are, I think, essentially two kinds of Trinity Monday Memorial Discourses. Those given from living memory and those from historical memory. So the Discourses on Swift or Burke are of the latter, purely historical kind, whereas the one given last year, by Zuleika Rodgers, on Jacob Weingreen, was at least partly from her living memory of him. And so is mine today, since its on Arthur Aston Luce, who I knew in the last 11 years of his long life. And there are a number of people present here who also had personal contact with him.

So what kind of man was A. A. Luce? I think we who remember him would agree. He was an OLD man. Indeed, he was generally referred to as Old Luce or Papa Luce. For, born in 1882, he was nearly 95 when he died in 1977. And that points to what is probably the key challenge of my Discourse: to get to the Luce before our living memory of him, of his pre-1914 self, which preceded his experience as a soldier in the first World War, or as he was before 1940, when he was suffered the other great trauma in his life.

Now there are two ways I can quickly get to the earlier Luce, one of which is by drawing on some lines from a poem by Cardinal Newman, which had special significance for him. These are: ‘And with the morn those angel faces smile which we have loved long since, and lost awhile.’ My suggestion, in short, is that Luce lost the angel smiles after the war, but even more likely after 1940 and into the 1950s, but that by the 1960s he had regained them more and more, and this changed him from being the stern, imperious, autocratic figure, feared by both fellow staff and students alike, especially in 1940s, to the kindly and tolerant old gentleman I and probably others here remember so well.

That there were these two very different Luces there is no doubt. The later, kindly Luce I knew directly in virtually all my contact with him. But I also heard from a number of trustworthy sources that, earlier on, he was intolerant, imperious and prone to cutting remarks, some of which have become legendary, which comes out in Webb and McDowell’s History of TCD, also in anecdotes recounted by members of staff and past students who

were here in the 1940s. But the kindly Luce has also been recorded, for example in the tribute paid to him after his death by the then Provost, Leland Lyons. And here again, as in the poem from Newman, there is a way the early Luce (and also the later) can quickly be seen, literally seen, in photos and pictures of him during these two periods, the middle especially a 1943 drawing as well as photos of the Metaphysical Society, and the later period in the 1971 portrait of him by Derek Hill.

There is story about Luce, on Commons one evening when a Scholar (who was studying Theology and was subsequently ordained) for a bet, rattled off the Grace fast enough to break the record. As he stepped down Luce summoned him silently but ominously, with a beckoning finger...

So, similarly, I might have presented too much material too quickly; which I now hope to rectify by telling his life story in a more measured and chronological way, which begins in Gloucester, in England, where he was born, raised and received his early education, before, as a young man of 20, coming to Trinity in 1901. And here I should note that his coming to Trinity for his university education was not unprecedented, for- although not generally known- his father, the Reverend John Luce was also a Trinity graduate. So the Luces at Trinity go back 3 generations: first John, then Arthur, then his son, another John, who many here knew, as professor of classics, college orator and sometime Vice-Provost, who also wrote two valuable memoirs of his father, which my discourse has benefited from. But to return to Dr Luce, who after receiving his BA in 1905, then entered the Divinity School, and was ordained two years later. The next and probably more significant event came in 1912 when he was successful in obtaining Fellowship in classics and philosophy- and, as he remained a Fellow until 1977, setting a College record of sixty-five years.

But probably more far-reaching still was what occurred two years later- so exactly one hundred years ago- the outbreak of the Great War. And in January 1915 Luce enlisted in the 12th Royal Irish Rifles, however not, as might have been expected, as a chaplain, but as a combatant, who saw nearly three years active service in France, first as a lieutenant, then as captain, and was awarded the Military Cross. Putting together the historical accounts we have of him during these war years, we learn that ‘he earned a reputation for outstanding and even foolhardy bravery’; also that ‘The strain of these years in the trenches left a deep mark on his opinions and modes of thought in later life’. It seems that it was the fighting in late 1916 and 1917 that was worst for him and his platoon, which was almost entirely wiped out in intense bombardment and gassing. This left him alive but ‘shell-shocked’,

from which, on his being finally invalidated back to Dublin in 1918, followed a period of over-tension, withdrawal, and a hardening of his ideas.

However, the return to Dublin in 1918 also introduced a very positive element in his life; for on 21 Dec. 1918, he married Lilian Mary Thompson, who had been one of his philosophy students before the war- and a very successful and devoted one, having attained first class honours and a gold medal, and who, in order to be near him during the war, had followed him to France and worked in a munitions factory in Paris. That Lilian shared his patriotic sympathies as well as his philosophical interests is shown in her exchanging her gold medal for the war effort, for which in return she received a bronze one.

We know Luce was still recovering from the war in 1918, when he and Lillian set up house in Rathgar, where, as John Luce nicely puts it, ‘domestic happiness, together with good academic prospects, helped to lift the shadow of the war years.’

Here I think I can be more specific about how Luce himself, the Christian and philosopher, tried to lift the shadow. It was through work on two books, the first published in 1920, and in some ways possibly his most brilliant, but least known work, the second published in 1922. The first book was called *Monophysitism past and present: a study in Christology* -not a very inviting title- the second *Bergson’s Doctrine of Intuition*. It is through these two books, and especially the first, that we can get our best historical understanding of his state of mind during the shadowy years 1918-22. For what has not been appreciated is that the first book is also deeply Bergsonian, for in its central chapter Luce uses Bergson’s understanding of personal consciousness to get to the true idea of Christ, as both god and man, and so distinguish it from the Monophysite heresy, which plays down Christ’s manhood in favour of his divinity.

But equally important is that, in accordance with Bergson’s methodology of direct experience, Luce also draws on his own direct introspective experience, thus throwing light not only on the theological issue, but also on his own mental condition at the time, which comes out particularly in his illustrations, especially his detailed account of a civilian, moving to military life and back again to civilian. So this was not just a work of theology or philosophy but also a work of self-analysis and self-therapy, which enabled him to lift at least some of the shadow of the war years, which, I think, is supported by the fact that Luce went on straightaway after the 1920 book to produce an even more sustained work on Bergson in 1922.

However, while these two Bergsonian books are crucial, I need to mention that Luce's first appearance in print actually goes back to the much sunnier year 1906, with the publication of his address as auditor to the College Theological Society, which drew a notice from the *Church of Ireland Gazette*, a notice I should certainly quote, as it seems to be the one and only piece of historical evidence we have of him before the war years. It runs as follows:

Mr A. A. Luce, BA, delivered a most thoughtful, well-received address [on 'The evangelical aspect of the Catholic truth']. His statements met a good deal of criticism during the evening, but his straightforwardness, fairness and marked ability were a subject of universal congratulation. If we mistake not, Mr Luce has a promising future before him.

And with the publication of the two books of 1920 and 1922, it did look promising again.

However, that all was not actually going well after the 1922 book and in the following years can be seen by glancing at his list of publications. For between the Bergson book in 1922 and 1931 he published nothing, an ominous gap that has no precedent at all in the next 45 years of his life, and is especially striking in a man who was, there can be little doubt, a born or natural writer, who loved the written word.

And the publication of 1931 was modest enough; it was a scholarly article published in *Hermathena* on Berkeley's account of the Cave of Dunmore. But though modest, it was important, as it initiated the work on which Luce's reputation rests, for from 1931 to his death in 1977, he established himself more and more as the authority on Berkeley's life, works and philosophy.

And between 1931 and 1934 alone, Luce produced no less than six articles and one book on Berkeley. So how then is the eight-year gap between 1922 and 1931 to be explained? Well, probably to some extent by the fact in these years he and Lillian were raising their three children- John born in 1920, Frank in 1922, and Alice in 1928. But I don't think that provides the sufficient explanation. For one thing, if an explanation is to be adequate, it also needs to explain a related fact and gap, that after his two Bergson books, Bergson's philosophy drops out entirely from Luce's works in more than 7 books and 58 articles published from 1931 to 1977.

So how can we explain these two gaps? The answer is: A cruel review of Luce's 1922 Bergson book from none other than Bertrand Russell, then generally recognized as probably the outstanding British philosopher, in which Russell held Luce up for ridicule as the 'reverend rifleman' and

‘Christian Warrior’. Here Luce was unlucky, for his 1922 book combined at least three things Russell disliked intensely: first of all Bergson’s intuitionist anti-analytic philosophy, but also Luce’s ardent support for World War 1, and the book’s association with Christian belief. Russell’s review begins: ‘This book is interesting as the work of a gallant divine who, in these tedious days of peace, has been driven to seek other methods of promoting Christian knowledge than those employed by the Royal Irish Rifles.’ As a pacifist Russell had opposed the war, and was for a time incarcerated. Russell had also shown himself to be the great philosophical opponent of Bergson’s philosophy in a much heralded lecture he gave in Cambridge in 1912, which was then printed in various forms and which even after a century remains one of the most damaging critiques of Bergson. Whereas in his book, Luce was trying to show the value of Bergson’s philosophy. Luce had also, unfortunately, paraded his active involvement in the war, in the book’s title-page, where he is described as A. A. Luce, MC, late of the Royal Irish Rifles, and also in the positive references he makes to the war, one of which Russell quotes at some length.

In fact, in connecting Luce’s book with Christian belief Russell was being unfair, for that is not at all how Luce presented Bergson’s philosophy. However his book was published by the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge. In short, Russell’s review is a tour de force of irony and sarcasm. Luce, the master stylist, had come up against a greater and more aggressive one, and was laid low by him. In fact, Luce was caught in Russell’s powerful and artful fire against Bergson, and I think he recognized that Russell had, in some respects, hit the mark, indeed two or three marks. For while Russell’s description of Luce as the ‘reverend rifleman’ and ‘Christian Warrior’ was, as I mentioned, unfair, given the substance of the book, it was not entirely so, given some of the military illustrations, such as the one Russell shrewdly quotes and also Luce’s decision to enlist as a combatant, rather than as a chaplain. And I think that might have stung Luce, for there is some evidence that in the years following the war he became somewhat ambivalent about his decision. One piece of evidence comes from the Trinity Monday Discourse which Luce himself delivered in 1960 on John Henry Bernard, in which he deals with certain criticisms made against Bernard for moving from being Archbishop of Dublin to Provost of the College in 1919.

We all know that novelists draw on themselves for their characters, what is not so well known is that biographers do so as well. Here, at any rate, is what Luce says:

'In emergencies priests and bishops have even taken up arms; and this [time, i.e. 1919] was an emergency. [And] There must have been some sacrifice of principle; for [Bernard] was a strong churchman... [Yet, Luce says] *we* [my italics] all have to make such sacrifices at times. The best must bow to the good in the hurley-burley of life.'

I find it is hard not to see Luce as identifying here with Bernard, who was his mentor and friend, and in trying to set out Bernard's position in a fair-minded way, and also indirectly doing so for himself. I shall need to come back to Luce's Discourse on Bernard, but now I want to continue my account of Luce's Berkeley publications.

Most of them were on scholarly matters, but although he seems wary of committing himself on the truth of Berkeley's philosophy- which I think relates to the Russell episode- there are passages here and there, in his early publications in the 1930s, which show that he was certainly sympathetic. However, here, unusually, we have an autobiographical statement in a paper of 1968, published posthumously in *Hermathena*, in which Luce describes being in 'mid-Atlantic on board the SS Berengaria [in 1933 on route to America, and how] A convinced immaterialist, I had got my sea-legs literally and metaphysically.'

The wind was fresh and I looked out at the hurley burley with pride and satisfaction. It all fitted in. Here am I, an active spirit, and out there it is all passive, air and water being moved by a power not their own

And in the years from 1931 to 1940 he produces no less than 14 articles on Berkeley, and also his book, *Berkeley and Malebranche*, in which he sometimes comes close to nailing his Berkeleyan colours to the mast. Of course, Luce's life and work did not consist solely of his study of Berkeley. He was also teaching in Trinity, where in 1934, no doubt helped by his book on Berkeley and Malebranche book, he became Professor of Moral philosophy, as successor to Henry Macran, the Hegel scholar. From the evidence I've heard from past students, it seems that Luce was a very conscientious teacher, who prepared his lectures with great care and delivered them with style, and, unlike most present-day lecturers, expected them to be taken down word for word.

And Luce was also doing other things in these years, such as raising his family; but also finding time for his two great extra-curricular passions- fishing and chess, each of which he went on to write about- *Thinking and Fishing*, first published in 1959 and republished in 1990 with a memoir of him by John Luce, and his *History of the Dublin Chess Club* of 1965. Luce also had another occupation, which was neither academic or familial or connected with fishing and chess, namely his work as a clergyman at St

Patrick's Cathedral, where he was successively canon, chancellor, then finally Precentor, and so second only to the Dean, a position he held up till the end of his life.

So once again, as in the years 1919-22, things seemed to be moving along reasonably well for him throughout the 1930s. But once again there was a sudden catastrophic blow, like the one he suffered from Russell in 1922, but much more terrible. For it was on 13 May 1940, that his wife and daughter died in a fishing accident. It seems that he was fishing upstream in the Liffey, while Lilian was also fishing with fishing boots further down the river with their daughter, Alice. The daughter waded into the water and got into trouble. Lilian tried to rescue her, but because of her boots she was unable to do so and lost her own life in the attempt. The aftermath is described by Kingsmill Moore in his obituary of Luce in the *Irish Times* in the following words:

I know from one who visited him on that fatal night [of the fishing accident] how he sat, comprehension paralyzed, incapable of action or movement, an empty shell. But Arthur Luce was not a man to give in. He returned to his work, and [in] a series of volumes on Berkeleyan philosophy, achieved an international reputation....

And here I should note that Kingsmill Moore, though only a supreme court justice and not a philosopher, got this precisely right, that the tragedy not only did not defeat Luce, but seemed to act as a catalyst that had the effect of intensifying and elevating his work on Berkeley, bringing it to an even more substantial level than it had been in the 1930s, so that by the late 1950s Luce was recognized not only as an important B scholar, but the outstanding authority on Berkeley.

Apart from a number of books and articles, this was achieved largely by his 1944 diplomatic edition of Berkeley's philosophical notebooks, his 1949 *Life of Berkeley*- which could well be his most accomplished work, certainly the best biography of Berkeley we have and are likely to have for many years to come- also the masterly nine volume edition of Berkeley's complete works, which he edited in collaboration with Professor T. E. Jessop of Hull. So not only did his work on Berkeley enable Luce to get back on his feet after the Russell review and also surmount the great tragedy of 1940, but in surmounting what might have destroyed or immobilized him, he was able to transmute it into something even higher than it had been. So Berkeley saved Luce, who would, understandably, feel indebted to him, but I think this sense of indebtedness might also have kept him back or delayed his final reintegration with his earlier Bergsonianism and the power it had to unite him in a living way with his pre-1914 self.

To be sure, there was, as I've already indicated, more going on in Luce's life in the years after the 1940 tragedy than his work on Berkeley, which also, no doubt, kept him from falling into depression or a barren dark period, like that between 1922 and 1931. More particularly, there was his involvement in College politics and the running of the college, especially in the 1940s and early 50s. But here again- as with his work on Berkeley- while there was much good in it, it also had a down-side. For his involvement came unluckily at a time of considerable change in the College, when there was a battle going on between the old guard, that is the Senior Fellows, and the Young Turks, mostly Junior Fellows, which culminated in the defining election for Provost in 1952 and to Luce's defeat as a candidate, and the final defeat of old guardism itself, with the election of A.J. MacConnell. And it was that election and change of direction which prepared the way for Trinity as it is at present. For up till then the College was ruled largely by the Provost and seven Senior Fellows, of which Luce was one from 1941 till his death, and which also included his philosophy colleague, Francis Godfrey, who, like Luce, had also fought in the Great War. They and most of the other Senior Fellows tried to preserve what they thought was best in the old Trinity they knew, going back before the war. Whereas the Young Turks, one of whom was David Webb, who wrote twice on Luce, felt that Luce and the other defenders of the ancient regime were badly out of touch with the world as it was in the 1950s.

However, it would be wrong to give the impression that Luce was all seriousness at the time. For in fact he loved a joke, especially verbal ones. Thus my colleague, Vincent Denard, who was here as both a student and lecturer in the 1950s, remembers Luce saying about some of the soldiers he fought with that they couldn't tell the difference between a bush and bosch. Nor did he mind, it seems, if the joke was at his own expense. For Vincent also remembered him asking in lectures: Do you know where Luce comes in the Bible? To which he answered: luce the ass, which is in Mark 11.4, when Jesus directed his disciples to find and untie, i.e. loose, an ass to carry him into Jerusalem. And, about the first time he flew in a plane, he said: 'There I was hurtling through Lucretius's limitless void, like an Epicurean atom,...sucking a lozange.' But Luce realized, as he once said to me, that humour was something he had to watch, being sometimes too eager for the joke.

The story of his and the Old Guard's defeat is told in detail in Webb and McDowell's History of the College and also in John Luce's more traditionalist History. I don't have anything significant to add, except only to note, what is pretty evident, namely that the Webb and McDowell portrayal of him is hostile, which they also recognize, and yet despite of that I think it can't be denied that it is also a searching and formidable attempt to get at Luce's essential character, and it does, I think, capture something of him, as does the obituary notice of him in the *London Times*, which though unsigned was written by Webb and RBD French, a lecturer in the English Department, and not surprisingly reaches the same conclusions, which need to be taken seriously since the writers knew Luce at close quarters at TCD from the 1940s to his death. According to them, and I quote,

Luce had a striking and perplexing personality, which even to his closest friends remained an enigma. The Puritan, the man of the world, and the sequestered don; the cold disciplinarian and the courtly and thoughtful host; the reactionary authoritarian and the passionate lover of justice- all these jostled one another in an unpredictable kaleidoscope.

And this account of him as an enigmatic, conflictive personality also, they observe, comes out in his philosophical work:

After a brief flirtation with Bergsonianism [they say] he took up the study of Berkeley, and for the rest of his life he gave the impression that he ate, drank and dreamed and lived Berkeley. [And] he remained a Berkeleian, not a Neo-Berkeleian....That a man regarded by his pupils and colleagues as independent, sometimes to the point of perversity, should give such wholehearted allegiance to another mind, [i.e. Berkeley] however eminent, suggests a paradox.

I think Webb and French are right in this conclusion. But I don't think they resolve the paradox. And where their analysis falls down is that it is taken from Luce's middle and late periods, from the 1940s to 1970s, so not the youngish Luce, which is understandable, since they had no personal experience of him during that period. But less excusable is that they also failed to appreciate the change in his philosophical views towards the end of his life. For if French, Webb and McDowell had read Luce's last essay, of 1968, published posthumously in *Hermathena* in 1977, I think they would have recognized that in the last decade of his life he ceased giving his 'wholehearted allegiance' to Berkeley and did become a Neo-Berkeleian and returned importantly to his earlier Bergsonianism, which enabled his two philosophical heroes to- if I might use a term he apparently coined in his 1920 book- inter-permeate and enrich each other and himself.

Here I should also mention that at the time of the publication of Webb and McDowell's History, in 1982, I heard that John was not at all happy with their portrayal of his father. And yet, I think it is important to observe that in his own (more traditionalist history), he does not directly contest it—although probably he does indirectly in certain very subtle turns of phrase. However I now need to move from College politics back to philosophy, which in the broad sense is and should be my focus here.

My own suggestion is that Luce needed Berkeley, especially after the disastrous blow he received to his Bergsonian work from Russell. Luce also needed Bergson, but I believe his allegiance to Berkeley kept that from him, because of the debt he felt to Berkeley. But that he did overcome this resistance is shown in an interview he gave to Bruce Arnold in 1971 for the *Sunday Press*, which is the closest thing we have to his intellectual and personal autobiography.

I mentioned a moment ago that my focus here should be on Luce as philosopher, and this can be justified by Luce's own judgment, for, as Arnold notes, Luce 'is conscious that any meaning he can give to his long life must be within the context of [philosophy], the subject to which he devoted that life.' And what did he, as a philosopher, see as its meaning? I think it can only be the Bergsonian message he expressed to Arnold in these carefully chosen words, that

We are the only creatures who can watch Time flow, and even that capacity varies. The great majority live in the present. We who think love the past. It is out of the tradition of the past, and present and the future flowing together that we get some sense of a higher being.

This is pure Bergsonianism, which is clear from the term flowing, which Luce uses twice, because that was the key term which Bergson uses to distinguish clock time, or spatialized time, from true flowing time, time that inter-penetrates and inter-permeates (to quote again his own term). And I take the 'tradition of the past' to be an allusion to himself and TCD before the breach of 1914-22, but also to his life before the 1940 tragedy, now flowing together and integrating with his more recent past.

So here is probably the right time for me to return to the challenge I mentioned at the beginning of my discourse, and also to Luce's own 1960 Discourse on Provost Bernard, in which, I suggested, Luce becomes doubly personal in the key passage where he is speaking both about his friend

Bernard and also himself. And so here again I need to quote Luce's words, where he writes that:

I once heard Bernard expound the famous words of another great John Henry [Newman]: 'And with the morn those angel faces smile which we have loved long since, and lost awhile.' The 'angel faces' are not those of our loved ones, Bernard suggested, but the ideals of youth which tarnish and fade towards evening; but which we [NB] may hope to see again radiant and smiling when ['the night is gone'] and morning comes.

My suggestion is that Luce was able to apply these lines to himself in two ways: first as Bernard did- so to his youthful ideals that had become tarnished or faded with the Great War, but also and more likely and directly to the 1940 tragedy, and so his hope that he might see again the angel faces his wife and daughter.

Do I have any evidence for this optimistic view of the later Luce? I think so in his interview with Arnold, where now 89 he says:

I've had a very happy life. It's been an ideal life, in its way. There is always sadness, and when you get to my age, you realize how short life is. I'm an optimist, ... I believe in God.

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So now at the end of my Discourse I want to conclude by trying to give a serious answer to my initial question: what kind of man was Luce?

I think there were three basic elements in his character, the soldier, the Christian and the philosopher. The soldier comes out in his indomitable spirit and dramatically in his enlisting as a combatant. About the Christian, I cannot speak with any authority, although I believe Luce's Christianity was sincere and deep. About his philosophy, I can say with more confidence that it was formed of two elements, one Berkeleian, the other Bergsonian, and that while the first saved him, the other redeemed him in the end. And so if we want a formula to describe the essential Luce, it might be something this: that he was a mixture of the Bergsonian-Berkeleian philosopher and the gallant Christian soldier. And so there is a nice irony in the end, that the cruel blow inflicted on him by Russell, which was so unfair, and which plunged him into the dark years of 1922-30, became in the fullness of time an astute characterization of him. But I shouldn't leave out the lighter side of his personality or his attitude to this College: So, to conclude: he was a gallant Christian soldier and Bergsonian-Berkeleian philosopher, who loved fishing, chess, this College and a good joke.

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