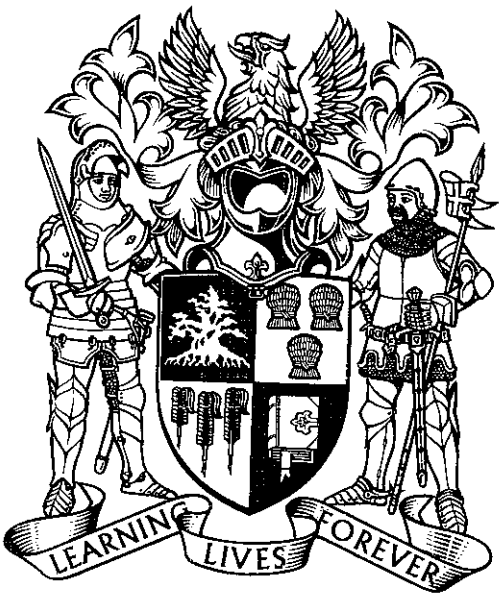
Protecting the Magic: How Poetry Survives in a Scientific World



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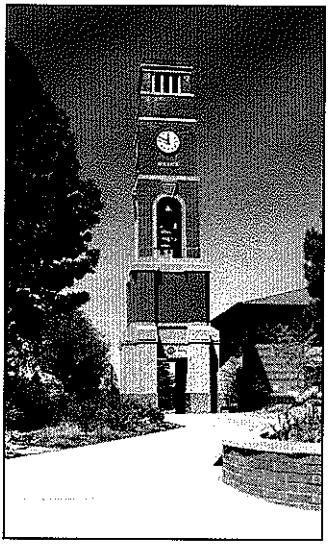
Cedar City, Utah

Delivered as the
DISTINGUISHED FACULTY LECTURE
at SUU, September 4, 2014

ISBN# 978-0935615-46-3

Southern Utah University



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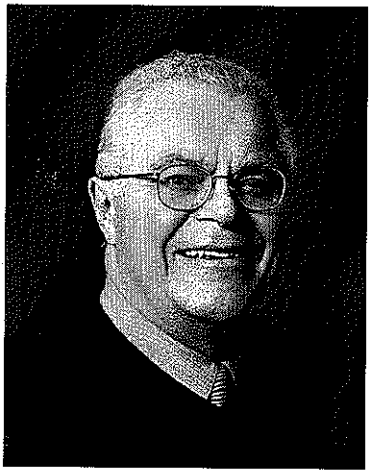
Bryce Christensen



Bryce Christensen, who is associate professor of English at Southern Utah University, received his Ph. D. in English literature from Marquette University. His current research focuses on the relationship between science and poetry, on non-Western literature (especially classical Chinese literature), and on utopian literature. Dr. Christensen has published articles on cultural and literary issues in *Philosophy and Literature, The International Journal of the Arts in Society, JGE: The Journal of General Education, Christianity and Literature, Renascence, Society, Changing English, Modern Age,* and various other scholarly journals. He is the author of the novel *Winning* (Whiskey Creek Press) and of the non-fiction books *Utopia Against the Family: The Problems and Politics of the American Family* (Ignatius) and *Divided We Fall: Family Discord and the Fracturing of America* (Transaction). He is the author of *'The Portals of Sheol' and Other Poems* (White Violet Press). He has published poetry in *The Formalist, Snakeskin, First Things, Lucid Rhythms, Christianity and Literature, Modern Age* and other journals and has had poetry anthologized in *Sonnets: 150 Contemporary Sonnets* (University of Evansville Press), *The Conservative Poets: A Contemporary Anthology* (University of Evansville Press), and *Grace Notes* (Institute for Religion and Public Life). He and his wife Mary are the parents of three sons and the grandparents of five grandchildren.

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Protecting the Magic: How Poetry Survives in a Scientific World

By Bryce Christensen

For centuries the crowning grace of the Anglo-American literary culture, poetry is now in a bad way. "Poetry is Dead," proclaimed *Newsweek* in 2003, asking, "Does Anyone Really Care?" (Wexler 18). Nor is it just general readers who have turned away from poetry. Writing in 1993, the critic Vernon Shetley remarked, "What is disturbing and novel about the situation of poetry today is that it has lost the attention not merely of common readers but of intellectuals, even of many intellectuals whose chief interests are literary" (3).

Ordinary readers might acknowledge that poetry has largely lost its audience but still wonder, Why does it matter? The poet Galway Kinnell gives us a reason to care about the current status of poetry when he identifies poetry as "the canary in the mine-shaft warning us of what's to come" as he laments that "so many things lovely and precious in our world seem to be dying out" (qtd. in Gioseffi). Poetry does not perish alone. When poetry dies, other "lovely and precious" things die with it.

Those who acknowledge that we do have reason to care about the well-being of poetry might join critic Joseph Epstein in asking "Who Killed Poetry?" (13). But we might perhaps more fruitfully ask, *What* killed poetry? What forces or impulses in modern culture have proven toxic for poetry? That question might generate a rather long list of plausible responses. But one possible reason for the demise of poetry emerges in the thinking of the prominent early-20th-century critic I. A. Richards. In his book *Science and Poetry* (1926), Richards argues that poetry ultimately depends upon what he calls "The Magical View" of the Universe, a view premised upon belief in Spirits, Inspiration, and the Efficacy of Ritual. But Richards asserts that the scientific outlook is incompatible

with "the Magical View" and therefore that the growing ascendancy of science in the broader culture means the passing of the Magical View. "It is," Richards conjectures, "a possibility to be seriously considered that Poetry may pass away with it" (47-48).

Some might understandably object that Richards' phrase "Magical View" carries connotations of childish credulity. And perhaps a Weltanschauung that allows for Spirits, Inspiration, and the Efficacy of Ritual—all of which are central to traditional understandings of religion—might seem childish in our increasingly secular age. All the more reason, then, to listen to critic George Steiner when he asserts, "Any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence." Steiner argues that this divine presence is particularly critical in "the experience of aesthetic meaning" of the sort poetry provides (3). Steiner—no minor critic—clearly does recognize something like Richards' Magical View of the Universe as foundational to poetry. Nor is Steiner alone. The iconic poet William Butler Yeats asserts, "No man can create as did Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, who does not believe, with all his blood and nerve, that man's soul is immortal" (qtd. in Steiner 228). Yeats, at least, sees in the world's greatest poetry an implicit belief in immortal Spirits—an essential element of Richards' Magical View.

The reasons that modern science might threaten that Magical View and therefore the poetry it sustains deserve attention. But first, we might acknowledge that in the eighteenth century--when the English-speaking world was becoming increasingly familiar with the fruits of the Scientific Revolution—a number of prominent poets fervently embraced modern science, expressing enthusiasm not fear at the prospect of a culture increasingly shaped by that science. Alexander Pope, perhaps the greatest of 18th-century poets, praised the scientific path-breaker Isaac Newton in ecstatic terms: "Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night: / God said, Let Newton be! And all was light" (lines 1-2). Eighteenth-century poet James Thomson likewise lauded Newton as an "All-piercing sage!' and

as "our philosophic sun!" so marveling at the brilliance of Newton's work that he rhetorically asked, "Did ever poet image aught so fair, / Dreaming in whispering groves by the hoarse brook, / Or prophet, to whose rapture Heaven descends?" (lines 23, 90, 119-121).

But beginning with William Blake at the end of the eighteenth century, we see a new and far less favorable poetic attitude toward Newton and the scientific project. And in this new attitude we may detect fear that science does indeed threaten poetry precisely because it discredits the Magical View of the universe. Though himself a heterodox thinker, Blake expressed his misgivings about Newtonian science as a prayer, so manifesting his own faith in the Magical View defined by a Divine Spirit, Inspiration, and the Efficacy of Ritual. "May God us keep," Blake prayed, "From Single vision & Newton's sleep" (lines 87-88).

Expressing a similar sentiment, the Romantic poet John Keats protested in famous lines in his *Lamia* that the "Single vision" of Natural Philosophy (what we would now call science) was disenchanting the world, driving out all spiritual presences, all magic, all mystery. In these lines Keats especially laments the way the science of Sir Isaac Newton's *Opticks* (1704) had reduced the awe-inspiring rainbow to a merely natural phenomenon fully explained by mathematics:

> ...Do not all charms fly
> At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
> There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
> We know her woof, her texture; she is given
> In the dull catalogue of common things.
> Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air and gnomed mine
> Unweave a rainbow... (II, lines 229-237)

Keats' contemporary William Wordsworth likewise decried the way the typical Natural Philosopher (i.e., scientist) lost all sense of reverence as he applied his disenchanting scientific method:

Philosopher!—fingering slave,
One that would botanize
Upon his mother's grave. (lines 18-20)

Poetic protests against the way science was killing the Magical View of the universe came from the other side of the Atlantic as well. Consider, for instance, these lines from Walt Whitman:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars. (lines 1-8)

In his "Sonnet--To Science," the American poet Edgar Allan Poe left an even more extended lament over the way that science was destroying the Magical View of the universe, so threatening the poet's vision:

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise?

Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?
Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?
(lines 1-14)

Too many poets, too many *great* poets have protested against the way science disenchants the universe to dismiss their protests as groundless. These protests indeed align with Richards' argument that science threatens the very existence of poetry by undercutting the Magical View of the universe. But *why* does science jeopardize the Magical View of the universe? The answer to this question lies in large measure in the way modern science adheres to the logic of the 14th-century scholar William of Ockham, who taught natural philosophers (scientists) to rely on the simplest possible explanations of natural phenomena, paring away all unnecessary conceptual complexity. Scientists have indeed generally accepted Ockham's Razor as a guiding principle in their work; in contrast, poets have generally—with Blake—rejected that Razor, wanting more in their literary art than the "Single vision" of conceptual parsimony.

However, to see how applying Ockham's Razor cuts away both the Magical View of the universe and the poetry that it inspires, we can turn not to another poet bur rather to the great scientist Isaac Newton. Even casual students of science know of Newton's work in defining gravity with the equation $F = Gm_1m_2/d^2$. What very few people in or out of the sciences know is that in his private papers Newton defined gravity in another very different way. Gravity, Newton said in these unpublished papers, is the Music and God is the Piper (cf. McGuire and Rattansi 108).

In this definition of poetry, Newton offers a metaphor, a poetic metaphor clearly informed by the Magical View of the universe. But the very fact that Newton chose not to publish this metaphor suggests that he was—as a good scientist—applying Ockham's Razor. The *simplest* empirically verifiable definition of gravity does *not* need a Divine Piper piping a gravitational melody. Consequently, in his practice of science, Newton was using Ockham's Razor to cut away both poetry and the Magical View of the universe.

But we can find an even more telling confirmation of Richards' conjecture that science imperils poetry by killing the Magical View of the universe by testing it against the contrasting thinking and life trajectories of the two co-discoverers of Natural Selection: Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace (cf. Christensen).

Let it be remembered that the young Darwin was a fervid lover of poetry. "Up the age of thirty, or beyond it," Darwin writes in his *Autobiography*, "poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays" (138). However, by the end of a scientific career marked by almost unprecedented success, Darwin had decidedly turned against poetry: writing in his *Autobiography* at the age of sixty-seven, six years before his death, Darwin confessed, "[N]ow for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me" (138).

To be sure, Darwin himself was troubled by his loss of responsiveness to poetry, which he interpreted as a "curious and lamentable loss of the higher aesthetic tastes." And he recognized that "the loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature" (139). Regardless of the consequences of this loss of responsiveness to poetry, Darwin was quite sure of the reason for this loss. Darwin attributed his loss of responsiveness to poetry to

his complete absorption in his science: "My mind," he writes, "seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts" (139).

In remarkable contrast, Wallace remained a great lover of poetry all of his life. As he examines how Wallace spent his final years, biographer Peter Raby remarks, "Literature, *especially poetry*, still spoke to him powerfully" (272, emphasis added). Wallace incorporated these lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in his 1898 book *The Wonderful Century*:

> The hills are shadows, and they flow
> From form to form, and nothing stands;
> They melt like mist, the solid lands,
> Like clouds they shape themselves and go. (qtd. in Raby 272)

In the same book Wallace also included lines from the minor poet A.H. Hume, and quoted from the much more famous poet Alexander Pope in *The World of Life*, published in 1910, just three years before his death. His reading during his final years included Oscar Wilde's long and emotionally potent *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (Raby 273). Wallace even became heavily involved in a public controversy about the authenticity of "Leonainie," a long poem attributed to Poe, a favorite with Wallace (Wallace).

It would strain credulity to argue that Wallace retained his love for poetry while Darwin lost his because Wallace was less devoted to science. Like Darwin, Wallace devoted much of his life to "grinding general laws out of large collection of facts." Indeed, as a tireless field worker, Wallace collected even more biological data during his expedi tions to the Amazon Basin and the Malay Archipelago than Darwin did on his famous voyage on the *Beagle*, and he used those data not only to independently formulate the law of Natural Selection but also to define the boundary separating Asian fauna from Australian fauna. Yet he remained a responsive and appreciative reader of poetry.

Why this divergence in attitudes toward poetry in the two men who gave the world the principle of Natural Selection? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the disagreement between the two men over just how much of human identity that principle can explain. As cultural historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has remarked, "Wallace not only had the distinction of being the first Darwinist; he was also the first renegade Darwinist" (83). Whereas Darwin believed that the science of evolution could completely account for the human species, Wallace indulged in a "little heresy," as he called it, questioning whether the science of natural selection could account for "the moral and higher intellectual nature of man" (cf. Raby 202-203). Believing that the "spirit [of man]... was qualitatively distinctive," manifesting "mental and moral faculties—Veneration, Firmness, Conscientiousness, Hope, Wonder, Ideality, Wit, Imitation"—not seen in other species, Wallace rejected "the scientific method as the only means of achieving truth" about this exceptional spirit (Himmelfarb 63-64).

For his part, Darwin was very much aware of Wallace's "little heresy" and was quite unhappy about it. In responding to Wallace's willingness to move beyond science to explain the human mind and spirit, Darwin was bluntly direct: "I differ grievously from you [on this matter]," he wrote to Wallace, "And I am very sorry for it" (qtd. in Raby 203). Darwin evidently insisted on a thoroughgoing application of Ockham's Razor, paring from his thought everything but the most conceptually parsimonious science. In contrast, as he pondered the mysterious spiritual and moral depths of the human creature, Wallace allowed his "little heresy" to shield from that Razor enough of the Magical View of the universe to permit poetry to remain a living presence in his life.

As we contemplate this divergence between Darwin and Wallace, we may indeed want to clarify just what concepts and perspectives Wallace retained, even protected, through his "little heresy" and what concepts and perspectives Darwin lost through his repudiation of that heresy. Evidently, Wallace's "little heresy" allowed him to retain a Magical View

of the Universe, so giving imaginative space to both religious concepts and poetic expression. Thus, to underscore his belief that some "Overruling Intelligence," some "Supreme Will and Power," was behind the creation of the human mind, Wallace quoted these lines from Pope's *Essay on Man*:

> All nature is but art unknown to thee;
> All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
> All discord, harmony not understood;
> All partial evil, universal good. (cf. Raby 202-203, 282)

Wallace's openness to the Magical View of the Universe ultimately hinged on his insistence on the uniqueness of man, a uniqueness he believed was manifest in "something which [man] has not derived from his animal progenitors—a spiritual essence or nature . . . [that] can only find an explanation in the unseen universe of the Spirit" (qtd. in Jones 5). In his attraction to the Magical View of the Universe, Wallace not only embraced poetry but also a kind of Natural Theology. Though Wallace wandered very far from Christian orthodoxy, even dabbling in the outré spirituality of the séance, his "conception of the mystery of the Life-World" ultimately rested—as he affirmed just three years before his death—on belief in God. "We are forced," he wrote in *The World of Life*, "to the assumption of an infinite God by the fact that our earth has developed life, and mind, and ourselves" (qtd. in Raby 280-281).

Though he acknowledged in his *Autobiography* that he had earlier held quite strong belief in the God of the Bible, Darwin revealed that, just as he had lost his responsiveness to poetry, he had also lost his religious faith, becoming "an Agnostic," that is, "a man who has no assured and ever present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence" (94). In his complete absorption in science, Darwin apparently completely shut out the Magical View of the Universe, so excluding from his life both poetry and religious faith.

To assess just what Darwin shut out by relying so completely on science that he wholly excluded the Magical View of the Universe, we might take an excursion to a streamside. If we make that excursion in a

Darwinian fashion, guided by nothing but science, we will attend only to what the science of water—hydrology—can tell us about the pH of the water in stream, about what minerals and gases are dissolved in that water, about what flora and fauna live in the stream, and about what dynamic patterns define the flow of the stream. But if we make the same excursion with the Cornish poet Charles Causely, a vision will open to us made possible only through the Magical View of the Universe:

Eden Rock

They are waiting for me somewhere beyond Eden Rock;
My father, twenty-five, in the same suit
Of Genuine Irish Tweed, his terrier Jack
Still two years old and trembling at his feet.

My mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress
Drawn at the waist, ribbon in her straw hat,
Has spread the stiff white cloth over the grass.
Her hair, the colour of wheat, takes on the light.

She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight
From an old H.P. sauce-bottle, a screw
Of paper for a cork; slowly sets out
The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.

The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.
My mother shades her eyes and looks my way
Over the drifted stream. My father spins
A stone along the water. Leisurely,

They beckon to me from the other bank.
I hear them call, 'See where the stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you might think.'

I had not thought that *it* would be like this.
(lines 1-20, emphasis added)

Within the Magical View of the Universe, the poet can do what the scientist never can: he can convert an ordinary stream into a transcendent metaphor, a metaphor that points the reader toward a heavenly metaphysics.

My own poetry hardly deserves comparison to Causley's—except that, like his, some of it does manifest a Magical View of the Universe. In particular, I would note that in a number of my poems, I talk to the dead, a practice that makes sense in the Magical View's universe of immortal spirits but not in a disenchanted universe defined strictly by empirical science. As an example of my Magical-View poetry addressed to the dead, please consider this sonnet:

Grandmother's Wake

6 January 1951

You're dead and I'm not born, but both have come:
You in cold flesh, and I in spirit, last
Of mourners to arrive, the tardy son
Of your yet-virgin daughter. Homeless ghost,
I haunt the parlor where you lie, and eye
Your portrait edged in black, your face a tale
Of how a slow disease taught you to die.
I take my place, unseen, by Aunt Lucille,
Aunt Ruth, and Mother. Shadows cross your lids,
Which quiver in a dream:
                You're young again,
A pretty girl, the kind who can turn heads.
You read aloud a letter from a man
Who wants to marry you...
                I strain to hear
His final phrases with my unformed ear. (lines 1-14)

For an even bolder articulation of the Magical View in poetry, we might turn to a sonnet by the distinguished American poet Jared Carter.

Entitled "Dark Matter," this sonnet does the same thing Causley does in "Eden Rock"; that is, it turns a feature of nature into a transcendent metaphor. But Carter goes further than Causley in his conversion of nature to poetic metaphor. For the feature of nature that Carter focuses on is the mysterious "dark matter" that modern cosmologists have posited as an invisible but massive result of the Big Bang that created the universe, a result detectable only by its gravitational pull. Modern physicists say that without the pull of this unseen dark matter, the equations that describe the universe would not balance. Though the language of this sonnet suggests that Carter is well versed in modern cosmological theory, he moves well beyond that scientific theory and into the Magical View of the universe when he makes dark matter a metaphor for all that we cannot see yet accept on faith:

> Out from the primal star that sprang unique
> Before all others from the void: inflamed
> Inflationary, monstrous in its framed
> And failing particles that into weak
> And strong—electric—gravitational fields
> Dispersed, and so began that headlong fall
> Through time and space—
> And was the brightness all
> That ever was or came to be? One yield?
> Or is there presence back, before, beyond
> That growing pulse, that opens inwardly
> Upon—into—some other realm? The way
> Can only be imagined, like the bond
> Of faith that points us to the mystery:
> *He is not here, but risen, on this day.*
> (lines 1-14, emphasis in the original)

Of course, not all physicists will join Carter in making dark matter a poetic metaphor opening onto the Magical View of the universe.

The University of Maryland physicist Robert L. Park certainly will not make this metaphoric move. "Science is the only way of knowing—," he has declared, "everything else is just superstition" (215). Though his writing is lucid and vigorous, it is utterly barren of poetry. Arguably, in both his complete absorption in science and his hostility to the Magical View that sustains poetry, Park is an heir of Darwin. Like Darwin, he has used Ockham's Razor to cut away everything that animates and inspires poetry.

In marked contrast, the pioneering quantum physicist Freeman Dyson quotes freely from poets (such as Blake and Byron) in his essays and even takes the title for a book of these essays from Shelley. Why this responsiveness to poetry in this 21st-century scientist? Perhaps because, like Wallace, he does not shrink from the label "heretic"—frequently applied to him by his colleagues (cf. Schewe 263). "I am proud to be a heretic," Dyson unashamedly declares (44). In his proudly professed heresy, Dyson-- again like Wallace--believes that scientists who suppose their conceptual tools are adequate for "comprehending the totality of nature" are guilty of "overrat[ing] the capacity of the human mind." "I prefer," says this 21st-century heretic, "to live in a universe of inexhaustible mysteries" (qtd. in Shewe 300).

The heretical Dyson loves poetry in part because he refuses to let science alone define his perspective on the universe. In his remarkable openness to non-scientific sources of truth, Dyson manifests an intellectual capaciousness that leaves ample space for the Magical View of the Universe and for the poetry it animates. No narrowly scientific thinker could say, as does Dyson,

> As human beings, we are groping for knowledge and understanding of the strange universe into which we are born. We have many ways of understanding, of which science is only one. ...Our ways of understanding have been collective, beginning with the stories

> we told one another around the fire when we lived in caves. Our ways today are still collective, including literature, history, art, music, religion, and science. (qtd. in Shewe 250)

As the stunningly successful scientific careers of Wallace and Dyson make clear, it is hardly necessary to reject science to retain enough of the Magical View of the Universe to sustain poetry as an imaginative presence in life. What is necessary, however, is a willingness to recognize what immunologist and Nobel laureate Peter Medawar has called "the limits of science." These are limits, Medawar explains, that will forever prevent science from answering the "ultimate questions," such as "What are we all here for?" and "What is the point of living?" (66). For answers to these questions, Medawar tells readers to look outside of science—to "the domains of myth, metaphysics, imaginative literature or religion" (88). Medawar's own essays, like Dyson's, draw frequently from poetry and other imaginative literature.

Those who move beyond the limits of science may look like heretics to thinkers such as Darwin and Park. But the road into heresy will seem more inviting than threatening to all who want a life rich with the poetry, moral and emotional health, and purpose that the Magical View makes possible for those who embrace it.

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