

"In Which It Is Conclusively Shown that Winnie the Pooh is Indeed a UU" – Maltome Michaels Urs. Lit.

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to address your congregation on the socio-theologic ideology of that Great and Wonderful bear known 'round the world as Winnie-the-Pooh. I will do my utmost to impart a modicum of knowledge on this subject geared to a "general audience" although please **bear** with me. As I am sure you understand, most of the significant discourse concerning Pooh orbits within academic circles and if you will forgive me for saying so, is somewhat more celestial than can be presented to the casual inquirer.

With that little caveat, let me commence by saying that what I will demonstrate in this short lecture (I had requested 2 ½ hours, but was only given 20 minutes) that when the life of Winnie-the-Pooh is examined, textually, symbolically, dialectically and relationally we are left with no rational conclusion other than that he is a UU.

We shall begin our inquiry using the primary and secondary sources generally accepted as reliable by those who study Pooh. I will draw from three stories found in that delight of English Literature *A World of Winnie-the-Pooh* as we examine notions of Truth, the Absolute and finally Salvation. I will also be relying on the interpretive strength of the standard studies in this field (hold each book up) *The Tao of Pooh*, *The Te of Piglet*, *Pooh and the Philosophers*, *Pooh and the Psychologists*, *The Pooh Perplex*, *Postmodern Pooh* together with countless articles and my own elaborate experience in this subject to corroborate our textual renderings.

We will only have time to skim three of the Pooh stories and briefly touch on some enigmatic references to Unitarian Universalism this morning. And, while we will be discussing theologic concerns, there are other themes, which emerge from the Pooh stories we will not have time to address. For instance, there are significant endeavors to probe gender identity. Our hero's name, we are told, in the introduction is Edward Bear. Yet, despite the fact that the narrator specifically admonishes Christopher not to call the Bear, "Winnie" because he is a boy, the young Mr. Robin obstinately continues with the feminized moniker. While we need not go as far as the feminist critic, Sistera Catheter, who concludes with reasoning bearing the stretch-marks of an overextended analysis in *Just Lack a Woman* that Pooh is hermaphroditically constituted, it is fair to say that Pooh presents us with significant gender ambiguity.

Returning to our primary concerns, we find in Chapter One that Pooh hears a buzzing sound, concludes therefore that bees are about and suggests to Christopher Robin that he ascend, hanging from a blue balloon to the bee's "nest" where Pooh can collect some of his incessantly desired honey. However, Pooh is never able to reach the beehive, is stung and concludes that these are the wrong sorts of bees. Master Robin is then forced to shoot the balloon so Pooh can return to the ground.

Unpacking Pooh is a bit like trying to direct the big bang, but let us start with “Honey”. Traditionally, starting with the Gospel of St. Matthew plowing through Swift and Matthew Arnold, “honey” has been a symbol of spiritual truth and light. Consider “Sweet Honey in the Rock.” Dr. John Williams suggests we treat “Honey” in the Pooh stories as a form of philosophic truth or wisdom. But, this narrow characterization should not distract from the overall import of the Pooh message. If we are inclusive, let us agree that “honey” stands for spiritual truth/ wisdom.

Thus, Pooh hitches a ride on a blue balloon rising from the ground only to discover the wrong sorts of bees, making the wrong sort of honey. The “bee” in Pooh is nothing less than the basic ontological “to be”. (Would that we had time to compare Pooh and Shakespeare!) So, what have we learned?

Pooh searches for truth in the act of being, but finds that the truth he originally sought is inconsistent with his deeper self. For Pooh, it is the wrong kind of truth. Milne elaborates on this image with the blue balloon an obvious reference to the earth and thereby the notion of a “worldview”, “nested” as it were in social constructions. As Pooh floats up, clutching his adopted worldview, he loses touch with the earth or becomes “ungrounded”. In fact, he experiences pain. Christopher Robin obliges Pooh and deflates the worldview allowing Pooh to become himself again.

The lesson, a UU lesson, Pooh learns in this episode is that there are different worldviews, different notions of truth. Our natural inclination to gather truth can lead us into discomfort, if we get carried away into worldviews where we lose touch with our essential Being.

It may be time to repeat the oft quoted passage from the seminal essay, “Paradoxical Persona: The Hierarchy of Heroism in Winnie-the-Pooh by Harvey C. Window, “We have, then, seen how Milne meant Winnie-the-Pooh to be read, and we can now appreciate the subtlety of technique that has beguiled three generations of fools into imagining that that the book is nothing more than a group of children’s stories. Indeed, the more we ponder Pooh’s complexity, the more we must wonder how any child could possibly enjoy these tales. Only a thorough versing in the Hierarchy of Heroism, combined with advanced training in the ironic reading of literary personae and a familiarity with multivalent symbolism, can prepare us adequately to approach this book.” It would be humorous if the problem were not so perennial.

Before proceeding to the next story, we should reflect on the Cosmology of Pooh. A. A. Milne is of course the Creator, but as demonstrated by the narrator’s occasional appearance in the Stories, He is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Note that in Chapter One where Christopher Robin requests a story, the Narrator responds, “I’ll try.” These are not the words of sealed fate, but remind us of Alfred North Whitehead’s *Process Theology* and the idea of an interactive, unsealed and evolving creation consistent with the religious humanism prevalent in UU circles.

Christopher Robin, who's very name belies any doubt, plays the "Christ" in this story. He is the son of the creator and as the object of the narrator's voice, the mediator between creation and the other characters. Christopher/Christ is reported to live both in the house (House of the "Lord") and in the forest with the other characters behind a "green door". Insofar as "green" is metonymically associated with environmentalism this conjures images of the "Christ" as the laws of nature, including human nature or "bear nature" as the case may be.

But where is the Holy Ghost in this trinity of personae? I point to the illustrations of E. H. Sheppard, who while never mentioned as a participant, is ever present as the silent witness to all of the unfolding events.

In the Episode known as, "In Which Piglet Meets a Heffalump" we are confronted with "The Absolute". When Piglet announces that he had seen a Heffalump and Pooh responds, "So did I, wondering what a Heffalump was like." This is an appeal to the rigor of Kantian synthetic reasoning. The problem, as you know, with conceptualizing the absolute, call it "god" if you will, is that IT is not "like" anything. The absolute has no contingent properties. This interpretation is buttressed by the etymology of Heffalump, *auf Deutsch*, to wit: Häffen meaning Seaport or Haven, also the basis for Heaven. Heffalump is thus a little piece of Heaven and in the vernacular also means an earthen vessel, which in typical Milnean textual layering, as we shall see, becomes a pun. Pooh who claims a prior encounter with the absolute remains in awe of the singular nature of that experience and in an effort to deepen his connection with the absolute, Pooh devises a plan to capture the Heffalump in a pit.

Pooh as mystic descends into the pit or well. This is to say that Pooh, following the work of St. John of the Cross and his "Dark Night of the Soul", is looking for the absolute in the depths of suffering. We are likewise linked through this tableau with Paul Tillich's definition of the absolute as the "Ground of Being". Now Pooh gets his head stuck in a honey jar or "earthen vessel". Which is to say there is a relationship of identity between Pooh and Truth, yet for Pooh the experience goes beyond conceptualization, moving into the bodily experience of Compassion as we read that, "at last he lifted up his head, jar and all, and made a loud, roaring noise of Sadness and Despair . . . and it was at that moment that Piglet looked down." Piglet who was frightened by what he saw reminds us of how difficult it is to understand those around us in a relationship with that mysterious source.

A cryptographic clue to Milne's essential message for Unitarian Universalism involves Piglet's home, which is said to be in the very center of the forest under a sign labeled, "Trespasser's W". While the "W" is usually written as side-by-side "V's", the traditional calligraphy, as the name implies, are side-by-side "U's": the two U's of Unitarian Universalism, placed by Milne in the center of his epic tale.

The question we must ask is, "In what way are UU's trespassers?" Here the Narrative pauses to ponder the cultural alienation of the Unitarian Universalists as religious nomads and cultural outsiders. In a topsy-turvy Heinleinian world we are "Strangers in a Familiar Land."

Lastly, let me just mention the heroic expedition to the North Pole. Remember that the North is the indigenous direction of wisdom. And moral philosophers like William Bennett talk of a “Moral Compass” or a moral magnetic north. In the same way that Honey represents Truth and the Heffalump becomes the Absolute, the North Pole in the World of Pooh is nothing less than salvation in the context of Western ethical monotheism. True to the Christological structure of the book, it is Christopher Robin who leads the other characters in this search. When asked by Rabbit, “What does the North Pole look like?” Christopher Robin, echoing the *a priori* idealism and the notion that all knowledge is an act of “remembering” found in the Socratic dialogues states, “I did know once, only I’ve sort of forgotten.” This is to say that discovery in this case requires an intuitive or idealist approach rather than empirical investigation. Science, for Milne is inadequate to explain salvation.

Discovery comes when Pooh, trying to rescue baby Roo from drowning in a stream looks about and finds a pole which he then uses to reach out and save Roo. Pooh does not immediately recognize the pole as the North Pole, until Christopher Robin sees that Pooh has through an act of Compassion transformed an ordinary pole into the Saving Pole of the North. Milne clearly places Salvation in a relational context between characters, rather than mere belief or interior states. Salvation in Pooh is the life-centered activity of caring and compassionate action. We are universally both saved and saving in a dance of generous mutuality.

We have seen that Pooh is on a determined search for Truth and Meaning, assuming personal authority and responsibility for his beliefs. He comes to encounter the absolute with both mind and body in the depths of life, crying out in despair as he experiences the terrifying compassion of divine suffering. And lastly, Pooh “finds” salvation in reaching out to others, as he becomes, like the Bodhisattva he is, an extension of absolute goodness. All of this occurring within a Unitarian landscape where the Christ is not equated with the creator, but acts as a prophetic character in the same narrative as all others.

I know that this is a Welcoming Congregation and while this good work has not normally been seen to include “fictional” people, I hope that you will not discriminate against Mister Edward Bear, a/k/a Winnie-the-Pooh merely because of his negative existential status, but accept him, as I have shown him to be, a true Unitarian Universalist.

Thank you.

Maltome Michaels, Urs. Lit.