

The Bubble People

By Robert Lewis

From the Greek *monas* is the word 'monad,' which refers to an elementary individual substance.

In mathematician-philosopher Gottfried Leibniz's system of metaphysics, monads comprise the basic substances that make up the universe. Each monad is unique and endowed with self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*). As an entity its properties are a function of its perceptions and appetites.

Sound familiar?



At this current stage of human evolution, those monads are us, or, at the very least, what we are becoming. Based on a preponderance of personal and reported observations, if we are not quite there yet (monadville), that's where we would like to be – self-ensconced in our self-friendly, solipsistic one-size-fits-all bubbles. In an

essay on Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, George Orwell accuses the writer of taking no interest in the external world, of surrendering to a state of mind popularized by the Bible where a whole and fully intact person, Jonah, finds himself "inside the whale."

"The whale's belly is simply a womb big enough for an adult. There you are, in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference . . . A storm that would sink all the battleships in the world would hardly reach you as an echo . . . short of being dead, it is the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility . . . He

{Miller} has performed the essential Jonah act of allowing himself to be swallowed, remaining passive, accepting.”

In the post-modern era we don't require myth or metaphor to find our way to this “species of quietism.” The superannuated whale has been superseded by the Big Byte – an event that rivals the Big Bang – and its endlessly expanding universe of computer generated alternative worlds whose seduction and comforts are such that, once bit (byte), there's no turning back or turning a deaf ear to the siren call.

On our watch, the beaten down path of least resistance has been enabled by sophisticated satellite communication technology, state-of-the art fibre optics and now AI, whose ever-expanding bandwidth can accommodate the whole of humanity. In short, we are becoming a species of monads, preferring to interact electronically (virtually) rather than in the flesh.

According to chat-room testimonials, the iEverything phylum now accords equal respect and affection to both virtual and real friends. Among the young, upward of 50% prefer virtual sex to the messy physical encounter. We now live not in a SciFi but a Wifi world where someone whom you have never met, whose location is unknown, whose entire profile might be entirely fabricated, can cause you to hate or love yourself and to do things you would otherwise never do in real life. Yes, writes James Morrison (1943-1971), “strange days have found us.”

In the Steven Soderbergh film “Kimi,” the protagonist, Angela, played by Zoë Kravitz, is so wedded to the click-friendly path of cyber convenience, the outstanding challenge in her life is to wean herself off a fully digitalized, monadalized life and meet and relate to other human beings in the flesh.

A mere twenty five years ago, getting together with others, non-digitally, would have been a daily and totally natural,

unselfconscious occurrence. Back then, all our relationships (work, social, sexual) presumed meeting person-to-person. Today, that is no longer the case, and marks a point of departure with game-changing consequences, the surface of which we are only beginning to scratch.

For most of human history, man was nomadic, living in tribes, following the seasons and food sources wherever they led. Very early in the game he discovered that belonging to a group with other like-minded persons of varying talents and proficiencies conferred a range of benefits and options not available to the individual. When the forests shrunk and our primal predecessors took to the savannahs, they understood that a band of hunters was decisively more effective than any individual in leveling large game.

Yet despite a disposition that dates back to our animal inheritance, it now seems, thanks to click-culture, that we are effortlessly able to overrule the primordial urge to physically bond with others and form groups, which is nothing less than astonishing. As we settle into the 21st century, more and more of us prefer to live alone and are able to refuse the bio-directive that urges us to bond with others in the flesh. In 1960, 13 percent of adults lived alone: today that figure is 28 percent. Does this mean that Jean-Paul Sartre got it right when he declared in no uncertain terms (from his play *No Exit*), "Hell is other people." Of course in his day, there was no choice in respect to intimate person-to-person exchange and collaboration. Today, thanks to the on-going revolution in communication technology, we no longer have to physically interact with other 'hell-raising' people like ourselves.

Sigmund Freud proposed that all human endeavour can be reduced to the pleasure principle, described as the "tendency for individual behaviour to be directed toward immediate satisfaction of instinctual drives and immediate relief from pain or discomfort." There isn't one of us, masochists

notwithstanding, who wouldn't rather engage in pleasurable activities and pursuits than their opposite, which suggests that much of our behaviour is pre-determined, that our choices aren't really choices, but alibi reason employs to indulge human nature. Joseph Conrad, the author of the magnificent *Nostromo*, writes: ". . . the use of reason is to justify the obscure desires that move our conduct, impulses, passions, prejudices and follies."

As per Freud's pleasure principle, which has turned the path of least resistance into a 24/7 super highway, man is now able to reject his group patrimony in favour of the more pleasurable monadic life-style. We note that 'monadic' and 'monastic' (from the Greek *monachos* – living alone) share the same etymology. What this means existentially is that our erstwhile non-negotiable being-in-the-world-with-others now requires a major clarification. Yes, there must be the other, but at a monadal safe remove, which, facilitated by the byte-culture, prefigures a major reconfiguration in species behaviour.

Conventional bonding, facilitated by feelings that, pace Merleau-Ponty, carry one person towards another, has become, for many, such a stressful rite of passage that face to face interaction cannot take place unless mediated by one of the many digital platforms that are designed to accommodate the entire spectrum of humanity. In this ever-increasing demographic, even the erstwhile isolated weirdo/eccentric is able to find his way to normalcy through highly particularized gridless communities that cater to the sum of the world's personality types. In the digital universe, no one is left behind; even John Lennon's "nowhere man" will find his somewhere.

In light of these and promised future developments, man is now the sight where two DNA-writ, behavioural imperatives are doing battle, and the nomad is losing out to the monad. Modern man, by the billions, is discovering with a couple of mouse

clicks that monadal interaction is preferable to the more complex and exasperating person to person encounter. And while there is no doubting that sustained isolation and depression are causally linked, the preferred cure is screen-to-screen, for the simple reason that the individual finds virtual contact more pleasurable and less stressful than direct face-to-face contact. In our womb-like monadal bubbles we don't have to concern ourselves with sartorial protocols, table etiquette, our good or not so good looks, the sound of our voices, and even our points of view, all of which we can change as easily as our identities. And of course being able to indulge the Seven Deadly Sins in total anonymity is perhaps the virtual world's crowning achievement. Dostoyevsky's celebrated fear, that in a godless world "everything is permitted," foretells of the rise and dominion of secularism, and by extension, monadism. No impunity clause required.

Monadville, for many, is already the habitat of choice, where each monad is fitted with a portal to the world. The smartphone screen allows everyone equal and instant access to everything. Google maps now allow for real time navigation through the streets and countryside of the entire world. Who can beat that ticket-to-ride?

However, until the transition is complete, until monadal life becomes part of our collective ethos, there will be casualties. Among the Gen Zs, the suicide rates are as high as they have ever been; and for males between 15-24 the rate is 4-times that of females. More and more dysphoric men are copping out of their gender, waiting for future developments in germ-line editing to relieve them of the unease associated with performance. That more and more men are only too happy to submit their penises to the modern equivalent of the guillotine speaks to the anxiety produced by the protocols of conventional male-female interaction.

If a century ago Virginia Wolfe proposed that what a woman needs to self-actualize is a "place of her own," in the very

near future what human beings will need is a monad of their own, and for monadal existence to be afforded the respect and status once conferred to real relationships in the real world.

That monadal existence is a consequence of the pleasure principle isn't so much a commentary on man's chronic inability to deal with self-consciousness, but is rather an indictment of human nature.

All of the above notwithstanding, from an evolutionary perspective, so long as the species – 7.8 billion strong – continues to flourish, it shouldn't matter if the numerical triumph is consequent to the advantages gained from living in closely knit communities or monadic existence. If the latter dynamic better equips man to deal with adversity, nature will bless that adaptation and the species will live to see another day, another epoch.

Which isn't to say that there might not come a day when our nostalgia for the way it was, when we used to dance with wolves and holding hands made the heart race, will move us more than what is told of us in the dry pages of the archives, that ever-expanding spirit world inhabited by ghosts and the remains of cultures that didn't make the cut.

And the beat goes on.