Fons: Primordial Origins

from Myth to Archaeology

Thursday, 5 November 2025:

13:00 – 13:30 . . . . . . . . Introductory Remarks

13:30 – 15:10 . . . . . . . . Panel 1 – The Classical Tradition

15:25 – 16:45 . . . . . . . . Panel 2 – The Genesis Tradition

17:00 – 18:00 . . . . . . . . Liliana Janik Plenary Lecture

Friday, 6 November 2025:

09:00 – 10:20 . . . . . . . . Panel 3 – Modernity: Old World

10:40 – 12:00 . . . . . . . . Panel 4 – Modernity: New World

14:00 – 15:20 . . . . . . . . Panel 5 – The Ineffable

15:40 – 16:40 . . . . . . . . Charles Foster Plenary Lecture

16:40 – 17:00 . . . . . . . . Closing Remarks and Dismissal

**Fons Conference 2025 Schedule**

**Wednesday, 5 November 2025**

12:30-13.00 Tea and coffee, *Cripps Court East Room, First Floor*

13.00-13.30 Introductory remarks

13.30-15.10 **(All Cripps Court Meeting Room 3) PANEL 1: The Classical Tradition**

Gustavo Henrique Carvalho Fagundes, *The Ancient Mediterranean Morphoscopy: An Introduction to an Early Scientific-Religious Taxonomy of Human Bodily Evaluation.*

Elizaveta Shcherbakova, *A Body Made of Places: Hippocratic Anthropogony and the Mapping of Difference*

Xiyuan Meng, *Reading* duritia *in Vergil: (Hard) Primitivity and Narrative Contestation in* Aeneid *6-9*

Francesco Mongelli, *From Byzantium to the Origins of Rome: Further Reflections on the Brumalia*

15.10-15.25 Tea and Coffee Break

15.25-16.45 **PANEL 2: The Genesis Tradition**

Thomas Moffit, *Forked Tongues and False Words: Glottogenesis and Sin in the Hamartigenia*

Katherine Kelaidis, *Male and Female He Created: Reactionary Gender Politics and the Rewriting of Genesis in Contemporary Orthodoxy*

David van Schoor, *Skepsel: Sovereignty and Bare Life in the Primaeval Narrative [Genesis 9]*

16.45-17.00 Tea and Coffee Break

17.00-18.00 **Plenary Lecture**

Liliana Janik, *An Unfolding Story: Postcolonial Archaeological Perspectives on the Myths of the Great Hunter and Earth Mother*

**Thursday, 6 November 2025**

8.30-9.00 Tea and Coffee

9.00-10.20 **PANEL 3: Modernity: Old World**

Isabelle Kent, *The Wild Man in the Palace: Zurbarán’s* Hercules Hispanicus *and the Origins of the Spanish People*

Marsha McCoy*, Ktesis in Nineteenth Century France: Vercingetorix, Myth, and Cultural Identity*

10.20-10.40 Tea and Coffee

10.40-12.00 **PANEL 4: Modernity: New World**

Alexander Gould, *Imagining an Indigenous American Past in Paul Le Jeune’s* Relation of 1634

Jordi Alonso, *“Hac Iter ad Verum”: Platonic Atlantis and Primordial Origin in Ubertino* Carrara’s Columbus (1715)

James L. Fitzsimmons, *Primordial Savages: Maya Views of Europeans During the Early Modern Period*

12.00-14.00 LUNCH BREAK

*Please try and make it back to Cripps Court by 13.45 so that we can start our next panel promptly at 14.00.*

14.00-15.20 **PANEL 5: The Ineffable**

Jennifer Venable, *The Language of Desire: Ἀγάπη and Ἔρως in Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary on the Song of Songs*

Emma Wilson, *Ramus, Mysticism, and The Dancing Cosmos*

Graham Borland, *Herbert Spencer’s Modernist Afterlives: Ineffable Roots in the Writings of D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf*

15.20-15.40 Tea and Coffee

15.40-16.40 **Plenary Lecture**

Charles Foster, *What Kind of Creature are You?*

16.40-17.00 Closing Remarks and Dismissal

**Fons Conference 2025 Abstracts**

**PANEL 1: The Classical Tradition**

Gustavo Henrique Carvalho Fagundes, *The Ancient Mediterranean Morphoscopy: An Introduction to an Early Scientific-Religious Taxonomy of Human Bodily Evaluation.*

The earliest textual evidence of physiognomic practice (judging by appearance) is attested in cuneiform records from the third to the first millennium BC. The Akkadian series Šumma Alamdimmû (“if the form”) is the most complete surviving source from this period. This text consists of an attempt to systematize social and natural perceptions concerning the human body and to attribute meanings to them. The Alamdimmû is a typical example of the Mesopotamian so-called ‘omen literature’, whose structure is comprised of conditional clauses divided into a protasis describing a sign and an apodosis presenting an associated prognostic interpretation. This system played a scientific and religious role in Mesopotamian culture and epistemology and was part of the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum as it was written down and broadly copied. Instead of defining the Alamdimmû with the peripatetic concept of “physiognomy”, the most recent editor suggested the word “morphoscopy” (Greek: morphḗ > “form”; skopéō > examine), emphasizing the text’s particular attention to the general impressions of the human “form” (Akkadian: ALAM: lānu).

The focus of this paper will be the Alamdimmû’s content and structure. It will present and discuss samples of the most common kinds of morphoscopic omens: the theomorphic and the zoomorphic. The earlier associates abstract concepts of beauty with the divine, and the latter links the form of the human head to animals. As one of the earliest non-literary textual sources from the very beginning of the technology of writing, its interdisciplinary significance is widely relevant.

Elizaveta Shcherbakova, *A Body Made of Places: Hippocratic Anthropogony and the Mapping of Difference*

Anthropogony seems to have been part of early Greek cosmogony from the beginning, at least since Anaximander. So it is quite surprising that one of the first fully preserved naturalistic accounts of the generation of both cosmos and living beings comes not from a cosmological text, but from a fifth-century BCE medical treatise in the Hippocratic corpus: On Fleshes. Scholarship has mostly concentrated on identifying which Presocratic thinker this account might derive from, with little attention to why such speculation appears in a medical text at all.

Instead of focusing on origins, I ask what this account does within its medical setting. On Fleshes provides a systematic account of the human body and its parts, beginning with the generation of the cosmos and living beings. The cosmos emerges through the distribution of materials into proper places by impersonal forces; living beings arise from putrefied residues of cosmic heat, and species difference is explained by the varying distribution of those residues. I argue that this cosmogony-cum-zoogony helps Fleshes build a first unified model of the human body—not yet conceived as a unity of functional parts, but as map-like, in terms of places rather than organs.

Finally, I show that this topological model has use and consequence beyond medical explanation. I take as an example a curious early Greek anthropomorphic map, which draws on the same way of imagining the body as a set of places and depicts the Mediterranean accordingly, treating Greek and non-Greek regions as its parts. I suggest that this kind of spatial modelling, once extended beyond the medical domain, may serve to draw and naturalise political and ethnic hierarchies.

Xiyuan Meng, *Reading duritia in Vergil: (Hard) Primitivity and Narrative Contestation in* Aeneid *6-9*

The language of hard-soft contrast (duritia vs mollitia) forms a significant way in shaping the primitive or primordial past of human civilisation. The progress of civilisation is commonly viewed as a softening trajectory, but it also pushes us to think hard about what duritia means in such trajectory accounts of civilisational growth. This paper examines Vergil’s representation of primitivity in Aeneid 6-9, with a special focus on its relationship with the Roman ktisis. I will beginning with showing that Vergil simultaneously employs the soft and hard versions of primitivity in the middle third of the Aeneid: Evander’s tour of future Rome in Book 8 envisages primordial Italy as a Saturnian golden age, yet duritia turns out to be the leitmotif of the primordial Italians in Books 7 and 9.

Based upon Thomas’ (2005) reading of these passages, I will approach these four Books from a narratological perspective and argue that Vergil’s employment of the idea of duritia is itself contestatory in shaping the different moral/ethical qualities between the Trojans and the Latins. As such, my further analysis will demonstrate how duritia is presented as a positive quality in moral characterisation and I will consider how Vergil qualifies the primitive Latins with this peculiar concept. By focussing on the recurrence of genus durum and other related expressions in Aeneid 6-9, I will also argue that Vergil’s employment of duritia echoes the Lucretian pattern of universal history and sheds critical light onto Vergil’s depiction of primitive golden age.

Francesco Mongelli, *From Byzantium to the Origins of Rome: Further Reflections on the Brumalia*

The Byzantine Empire’s calendar of festivals included celebrations between November and December for the Brumalia, that involved banquets hosted by the emperor and notable figures of the empire. The Brumalia appear in historiographical tradition, with their own well-structured features, only from the 6th century CE onwards, except for a rapid and problematic mention in Tertullian (de idolatria). This historiographical tradition on the Brumalia (f.e. Malalas, Georgius Cedrenus, the Suda lexicon) traces their institution back to Romulus himself and establishes multiple links between the festival and the prodigious survival of Romulus and Remus: according to this tradition, Romulus instituted the festival to honour the memory of his nurse or to dispel the reputation of being ἀλλοτριόφαγος, “the one who eats other people’s food”, which was dishonourable in ancient Rome, according to what we read in Byzantine sources.

Following a research carried on in the last few years by the author, the aim of this contribution is to analyse the genesis of the historiographical tradition on the Brumalia, in order to verify, through some new reflections, whether the festival should be interpreted exclusively as a rewriting of the Romulus foundation myth that matured in Byzantine historiography or whether in it traces of a much older tradition were reworked, a tradition the original core of which may have formed between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE.

**PANEL 2: The Genesis Tradition**

Thomas Moffit, *Forked Tongues and False Words: Glottogenesis and Sin in the Hamartigenia*

Prudentius, although not a theologian by any definition, sought to resolve the problem of evil in his poetic denunciation of Marcion and dualism, the Hamartigenia. His solution is to tie the origo mali to the free will of Lucifer and his personal desire to stray from the word of God, not to an independent source of evil. Specifically, it is Lucifer’s ability to warp his simplex lingua and the language of God that allows him to transfer his sin onto mankind. Contrary to the assertions of Malamud (1990, 2002, 2011) that the Hamartigenia largely serves as a denunciation of figural language, I seek to demonstrate that the juxtaposition of the literal and figurative meanings of lingua is not so much a symbol of the division of language from truth but the creation of ‘language’ as a vehicle for losing touch with God’s interaction with human senses.

Much like Conybeare (2007), I believe the place of the Hamartigenia within its textual tradition must be highlighted. It is, at its core, a series of careful redirections and quasi-quotations from the Bible made to demonstrate the foolishness of using the words of the Bible to draw your own meaning. The Hamartigenia, therefore, serves not as a denunciation of figural allegory and the loss of direct truth in human language; I intend to instead demonstrate that its core message is about unity. Figural allegory is not Prudentius’ core issue with language so much as the dissonance between symbols and meaning.

Katherine Kelaidis, *Male and Female He Created: Reactionary Gender Politics and the Rewriting of Genesis in Contemporary Orthodoxy*

Recent scholarship on gender and sexuality in Eastern Orthodoxy has often focused on fringe online convert communities, where hyper-masculinist, reactionary visions of faith proliferate. Yet the more significant ideological shift is taking place within mainstream Orthodox theology itself. Senior clerics and theologians, particularly in the Russian Orthodox Church and affiliated networks, have increasingly turned to the Genesis creation narrative to assert rigid, divinely ordained gender roles, echoing not Orthodox tradition but the pattern of modern Evangelical Christians. Figures such as Patriarch Kirill and Bishop Neophytos of Morphou present male authority, female submission, and the biological heterosexual family as ontological realities established at the origin of creation, framing modern challenges to patriarchy and heteronormativity as a rebellion against divine order.

This paper argues that such interpretations represent a stark break from the historical Orthodox exegesis on Genesis and understandings of human origins. Patristic and Byzantine readings of Genesis often displayed a profound queerness: gender was spiritualized, symbolic, and ultimately eschatologically transcended. Church Fathers like Gregory of Nyssa imagined a humanity beyond gender; others read the Genesis account through the lens of mystical union and divine eros. In contrast, contemporary Orthodox discourse reinscribes Genesis with modern categories of essentialized gender difference, collapsing theological anthropology into social conservatism. Drawing on pastoral letters, theological treatises, and synodal statement this paper demonstrates how Genesis has been retooled as a literalist political myth—an origin story for patriarchy masquerading as tradition. What is lost in this shift is not only theological nuance, but the radically open, erotically charged, and mystically fluid vision of humanity long central to Eastern Christian thought

David van Schoor, *Skepsel: Sovereignty and Bare Life in the Primaeval Narrative [Genesis 9]*

This paper explores the origin of humankind as a specifically social form of life. ‘Social life’ in this context is a borrowed and reversed form of the concept of ‘social death’, elaborated by Orlando Patterson in Slavery and Social Death (1982). The argument is made that two, main forms of ontogenesis are detectable in the primaeval narrative: on one hand, the creation of ‘mere’ life (zoē as opposed to bios, ‘bloßes Leben’, ‘la nuda vita’ in Agamben’s meaning, senses borrowed and distorted from Aristotle and Benjamin); and, on the other, of life as bios, as social, political phenomenon, comprehensible only within a dynamic economy of social desires and emotions, like shame and recognition. Genesis 9 has served for centuries as an aetiological myth accounting for the sanctioned subjugation of given categories of humans by others.

This argument introduces an African conception of ‘bare life’: the skepsel. It focuses on Genesis 9, Noah and Ham, but sets out on the premise that that pericope can only be richly read in the setting created by at least all of Genesis 1-11. It grafts evidence from Christianising, South African settler history, in which explicit recourse was made to the opening of Genesis, onto the interpretive history of the Primaeval History in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, from the Septuagint text, through Augustine and Patristic, to Mediaeval Rabbinical, early modern and recent scholarly readings. God’s early subordination of all living creatures to human dominion is analogous to the subordination of Ham’s descendants to other humans

**Plenary Lecture**

Liliana Janik, *An Unfolding Story: Postcolonial Archaeological Perspectives on the Myths of the Great Hunter and Earth Mother*

**PANEL 3: Modernity: Old World**

Isabelle Kent, *The Wild Man in the Palace: Zurbarán’s* Hercules Hispanicus *and the Origins of the Spanish People*

Muscled, weathered and hirsute with a protruding gut, the body of Francisco de Zurbarán’s Hercules, 1634, is more Iberian wild man than classical hero. Both Habsburg ‘ancestor’ and early unifier of the Iberian Peninsula, Hercules is ubiquitous in chronicles, theatre and the visual arts of early modern Spain. This paper argues that, in response to growing proto-ethnic discourse in seventeenth-century Spain and its empire, Hercules took on an additional significance: that of wild progenitor of the ‘Spanish’ people.

The paper focuses on ten monumental paintings of Hercules by Zurbarán that hung in the Hall of Realms (Palace of the Buen Retiro, Madrid). The hall’s scheme, overseen by the Count-Duke of Olivares, is one of the great visualisations of Habsburg power and political vision in the reign of Philip IV, yet the Hercules cycle has been marginalised from such analyses, viewed instead as emblems of virtue. By considering Zurbarán’s Hercules alongside the polyvalent political implications and the relationship to humanist and antiquarian discourse on the origin of the Spanish peoples, I argue that Zurbarán’s vision of the body was a deliberate invention constructed in order to promote a proto-national collective identity. Furthermore, Zurbarán’s cycle hung above the so-called ‘battle paintings’ – scenes of neo-stoic military benevolence and victory performed in the service of Philip IV. In this context the overall scheme becomes a visually manifestation of the ‘civilising process’ from wild man and unruly savage to noble hero and ‘perfect prince’.

Marsha McCoy*, Ktesis in Nineteenth Century France: Vercingetorix, Myth, and Cultural Identity*

In 1837, the first ancient coin inscribed with the name of Vercingetorix was unearthed in France, likely minted by Vercingetorix himself in 52 BCE at the time of his defeat by Caesar at Alesia. This discovery publicized the ancient Gaul to a society seeking national heroes in a century in which national identity after the French Revolution was being reformed and reshaped by symbols, history, and myth. Thus Napoleon III used Vercingetorix’s regal lineage to further his own imperial aspirations by erecting a statue of Vercingetorix near Alesia in 1867. Auguste Bartholdi shortly thereafter created a second statue, of Vercingetorix on horseback crushing a Roman soldier, for placement near Gergovie, where Vercingetorix had defeated Caesar earlier in 52 BCE. After France’s humiliating loss in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, an amplified display of nationalism paired Vercingetorix with Joan of Arc in a sculpture erected in Ham, France.

The more psychological and nuanced efforts of 19th century French painters focused on transforming Vercingetorix’s defeat at Alesia into a virtual victory, reflecting the need for such a transformation in the cascading consequences of France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (Schivelbusch, 2013). Henri-Paul Motte’s Vercingetorix Surrenders of 1892, and Lionel Royer’s painting of 1899, Vercingetorix Throws Down His Arms at the Feet of Julius Caesar, both show the disdainful Gaul looking from his horse at the Roman general slouching decadently in a chair. Similar engravings of Vercingetorix’s meeting with Caesar are found in popular French history books of the period (e.g., Guizot, 1872); there also arose a cottage industry of books about Vercingetorix (e.g., Correard, 1884).

Thus, Vercingetorix came to embody the post-Bourbon 19th c. France, becoming a symbol of France’s national aspirations and rebirth through sculpture, painting, books, and other visual representations, and a personification of the political, cultural, and social changes affecting France during the turbulent decades of the 19th century. (310)

**PANEL 4: Modernity: New World**

Alexander Gould, *Imagining an Indigenous American Past in Paul Le Jeune’s* Relation of 1634

In the winter of 1633–4, Paul Le Jeune, a French Jesuit missionary in the St Lawrence River valley, accompanied an Indigenous Innu family on a seasonal hunting expedition, hoping to learn their language and identify which elements of their lifeways might present obstacles to their conversion to Christianity. In the Relation (missionary field report) which recorded his experiences and observations during the winter, Le Jeune theorised about the origin of the Innu people. At several points in the Relation, Le Jeune seems to indicate his adherence to an exegetical framework that positioned non-Christian indigenous peoples as humans who had been created with care by God at the beginning of the world, but who had since fallen into a state of wildness through a lack of spiritual cultivation. Le Jeune depended on long established Jesuit rhetorical strategies to enunciate this idea.

Interestingly however, in the same text, Le Jeune appears to advance an alternative interpretation of the origin of Indigenous American nomads, invoking Aristotle to position the Innu in a teleological vision of humanity defined less by a return to a lost original perfection as by progress from a zero point of wildness. The proposed paper aims to understand the nuance of Le Jeune’s account of Innu origin by examining the rhetorical strategies he used to depict the Innu as primordial humans and thereby justify the presence of the missionary to guide them out of what he perceived to be a physical and spiritual wilderness.

Jordi Alonso, *“Hac Iter ad Verum”: Platonic Atlantis and Primordial Origin in Ubertino* Carrara’s Columbus (1715)

In the early modern period, myths of primordial origin, whether of humanity, civilisation, or moral order, were reinterpreted to address new worlds, new sciences, and new theological debates. In his Columbus (1715), the Jesuit poet Ubertino Carrara reimagines Plato’s Atlantis as both a vision of humanity’s deep past and a moral allegory for the fate of civilisations. Drawing on Timaeus, Critias, and Proclus’ commentary, Carrara integrates Platonic and Neoplatonic thought within a Jesuit intellectual framework that unites classical philosophy with Christian theology.

In Book VI (lines 425–454), the crew’s sighting of Atlantis prompts uncertainty over whether they see reality or illusion, reflecting Neoplatonic concerns about the limits of sensory perception versus true knowledge. Ergasto’s speech reframes the city as an exemplary polity undone by its own moral failings, a rise-and-fall narrative that engages with early modern theories of cultural origins and decay.

Carrara further signals Plato’s centrality in Book X through an inscription: "Hac iter ad Verum," casting the Platonic corpus as a path to ultimate truth. A comparison with Athanasius Kircher’s Mundus Subterraneus (1665) highlights the spectrum of Jesuit engagement with Platonic traditions, from speculative geography to allegorical poetics.

By situating Atlantis within the longue durée of primordial imaginaries, Columbus illustrates how early modern Jesuit authors reworked ancient origin myths to examine the moral and metaphysical foundations of human society.

James L. Fitzsimmons, *Primordial Savages: Maya Views of Europeans During the Early Modern Period*

Ancient Maya myths surrounding the origins of human beings as well as language stress that creation was an experiment that often failed. Mythological accounts from the first and second millennium CE point to several creation experiments that ended in disaster but never explain why. Close analysis of hieroglyphic texts (as well as other Amerindian literatures) reveals that the gods of the ancient Maya wanted to create flawed beings who were civilized and articulate, but not so perfect as to represent a challenge to divine authority. Their first creations were from soil (much like the Genesis narrative) or from wood, but these were deemed too flawed to survive and were destroyed—or were downgraded into lesser beings who lacked humanity, proper language, or civilization.

Largely unexplored in the academic literature, such creation stories fed xenophobic, supremacist narratives in ancient Maya civilization; they were also a source of existential crisis during the Spanish Conquest. How could beings who lacked humanity, proper language, or civilization—effectively, primordial savages—even exist, let alone topple nations? This paper will explore Classic (250-900 CE) and Postclassic Maya (900-1521 CE) theories on the origins of humanity and language to illuminate how the Maya would have viewed Europeans in the sixteenth century and whether they were constructing their own cultural and ethnic hierarchies, much like the European humanists and antiquaries of the early modern period.

**PANEL 5: The Ineffable**

Jennifer Venable, *The Language of Desire: Ἀγάπη and Ἔρως in Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary on the Song of Songs*

Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary on the Song of Songs explores the theme of theological anthropology through the concepts of ἀγάπη and ἔρως and of union with God. Scholars debate the nature of Gregory’s use of these two terms with implications for the Christian doctrines of creation, sin, and justification. I argue in this paper, first, Gregory’s use of ἀγάπη and ἔρως foreshadows the Protestant Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith, and his understanding of these two concepts culminates in a sacramentology centered around unification with Christ. Secondly, I argue the use of metaphor presents soteriology in a more holistic framework as it is poetic language that most adequately communicates the nature of desire and love.

English poet, Aemilia Lanyer, in her early 17th century work, Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, draws on the metaphor of bride and bridegroom from the Song of Songs to tell the story of Christ’s death and resurrection. My paper connects the language of Lanyer’s poem with both Gregory’s paradigm of ἀγάπη and ἔρως as well as the protestant doctrines of creation, sin, and justification. Attempts to understand the influence of patristic and mystical theological traditions on Protestant Reformation doctrine facilitate a more fully orbed articulation of theological anthropology and the historic Christian faith.

Emma Wilson, *Ramus, Mysticism, and The Dancing Cosmos*

In the first half of the sixteenth century, a man of obscure origins from a tiny Picardian village made his way to the University of Paris and lit a fuse to detonate its adamantine and essentially dormant scholastic curriculum. Peter Ramus dared to disturb the academic universe in its very heartland by challenging its approach to teaching the core subjects of the discursive arts, logic, rhetoric, and grammar. Scholastic teaching posited a static world whose parts were simply to be described and documented; Ramus introduced a method denying that premise, arguing that what people need to understand to be able to think and talk about any and everything is causation, and in his legions of textbooks he taught readers how to perceive and analyse the causes or forces that move things and people and that make life happen.

His method has been decried in its own time and by modern scholarship as offering nothing more than pedagogical expediency, a simplified and ignorant set of shortcuts for dullards exemplified by the branching tree diagrams synonymous and eponymous with Ramus’ name which seem to represent the skeletonization of knowledge rather than its flourishing. This paper presents a different view: it is my contestation that in tapping into first causes Ramus enables us to understand and crucially to engage with a universe in motion, his outline diagrams embodying a cosmology predicated not on fixity but on change. He is preceded in such thoughts by mystical traditions, and this paper offers the first reading of Ramus, mysticism, and how to dance with the cosmos.

Graham Borland, *Herbert Spencer’s Modernist Afterlives: Ineffable Roots in the Writings of D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf*

Today remembered chiefly for his Social Darwinism, Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary metaphysics had a far-reaching impact on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century religious debate. According to Spencer, biological evolution reflected the agonistic order of the visible universe, which emanated from a fundamental underlying unity – ‘the Unknowable’. This unseen force, vaguely intuited in early human religion, was progressively stripped of its superstitious baggage as science approached the limits of the knowable.

Focusing on the novels of D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, this paper explores how ‘the Unknowable’ – a key battleground for nineteenth-century scientific, theological, and esoteric accounts of human development – provided fertile soil for the modernist literary imaginary. Lawrence was preoccupied with the apparent atrophy of humanity’s primal religious instinct towards some ineffable, God-like ‘X’. Drawing on the religious anthropologies of both Spencer and occultist Helena Blavatsky (herself indebted to Spencer), Lawrence’s novels oscillate between exhilarated accounts of ‘primitive’ spiritual renewal and apocalyptic visions of secularisation. Conversely, Woolf was raised under the Spencerian shadow of her father, Leslie Stephen: a leading advocate of a strict, disciplinary form of agnosticism, forbidding speculation about not just God, but the value of life itself. While inheriting Stephen’s disdain for religion, Woolf’s novels consistently interrogate such strictures: sceptically toying with epistemic ‘limits’ while refusing to foreclose questions of humanity’s origins and ends.

Tracing the fingerprints of Spencer in Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* and Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*, this paper argues that these authors appropriated his Darwinian metaphysics, reading ‘the Unknowable’ against the grain of Victorian scientific and religious narratives, while formally negotiating the possibility of realities beyond expression.

**Plenary Lecture**

Charles Foster, *What Kind of Creature are You?*