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Rex Mottram (in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*) would do anything to marry Julia Flyte, the daughter of Lady Marchmain. He would even convert to the family's Catholicism, though he was the freest of free thinkers. So he began instructions under Fr. Mowbray. But his eagerness to accept everything worried the priest. Was he sincere or trying to hasten the wedding? There would be moments when the priest would ask what he meant by prayer and Rex would say, "I don't mean anything. You tell me." Then Fr. Mowbray would briefly explain prayer and Rex would say, "Right! So much for prayer. What's the next thing?"

So Cordelia, the younger sister of Julia, decided to have fun. She began to share with Rex other items of Catholic belief, like Catholics slept with their feet pointed East because it was the direction of heaven, and if you die in the night you can walk there. She also told him about the sacred monkeys in the Vatican – and if you put a one pound note in the poor box with someone's name on it, that person went straight to hell. This shook Rex's resolve. Rex complained to Fr. Mowbray who later told Cordelia, "You've very considerably increased my work." Cordelia, of course, was one of those still medieval souls whose universe was so saturated with God that she couldn't resist toying with an agnostic like Rex.

Which reminds me of a joke. A fellow noticed a sign in a store window which said, "Talking Dog For Sale." He entered and asked the storekeeper, "Where is this talking dog?" The storekeeper pointed to a corner. The fellow approached the dog curiously and said, "Can you really talk?" The dog snapped back, "Of course I can talk! In fact the CIA once used me as a spy." The fellow rushed back to the storekeeper: "How much do you want for that dog?" "We'll settle for ten dollars?" "You'd sell that dog for only ten dollars?" The storekeeper looked a bit perplexed for a moment and then said, "Oh! Come on now! Don't tell me you believe that story about his being a spy. He tells that to everybody." Now I know one should never analyze a joke, but what's funny about that joke is the customer's sudden realization that only he seems surprised about a talking dog. The storekeeper isn't. He takes talking dogs for granted. He may not believe everything they say, but that a dog can talk? Hey, what's your problem?

Once people lived in an Age of Faith. Now we live in an Age where we're taught to doubt anything that hasn't been laboratory tested. Only thus can we escape illusion to live in a factual world. To which Cordelia might reply: "Only then will you enjoy a universe that has become a vacant house, as silent as a tomb. No talking dogs. But what's worse, no talking God, no poets speaking to us down through the ages by way of the sun and moon and stars, no sense of nature trying or somehow ready to converse with us by way of not only science but by teasing our imaginations, intuitions, our sense of having roots like trees that reach deep and touch upon whoever thought up this universe we live in – whatever may be the source of our unique power of language to serve as the voice of all things bright and beautiful .. The prophet Jeremiah would imagine Rex as one who has become like a *barren bush in the desert / that enjoys no change of season, / but stands in a lava waste, / a salt and empty earth.*

Geoff Wodd