

**THE EXPENSE OF SPIRIT IN POSTMODERN TIMES:
BETWEEN NIHILISM AND BELIEF**

OR

Art, Nihilism and Belief in the Postmodern Age

Ihab Hassan

We are nihilistic thoughts that come into God's head.

Franz Kafka

And every Natural Effect has a Spiritual Cause, and not a Natural:
for a Natural Cause only seems...

William Blake

INTRODUCTION

William Blake's wife used to complain that she saw little of Mr. Blake's company because he was always in Paradise. No doubt, he was among Spiritual Causes. But this is not a current complaint - indeed, many nowadays would find the complaint quaint, if not downright silly. Why is that? The question engages the plight, the expense, of spirit in postmodern times. But how give that informing question direction and shape?

The essay proceeds in four stages as its argument threads between two epigraphs, the space between nihilism and belief, narrower than a needle's eye. It first recalls briefly the history of spirit in an earlier age; then it seeks to give spirit pragmatic definition in our own; next, it considers (in two sections) the forms, uses, trials of spirit at present; after which, it confronts the issue of nihilism, that icy absence of belief which sometimes masks faith. I conclude by facing not faith but its exorbitant demands, its death grip, its dying grip, on our lives.

ONE

Spirit pervades every culture, every history. For a quarter or half a million years perhaps, human beings have entertained an astonishing variety of beliefs, astonishing no less in their credible particularity. Such beliefs persist, proliferate. *Time* magazine now runs lead articles on 'Finding God on the

Web' and wonders, 'Can Thor Make a Comeback?'; 'Was Teilhard right? Is the Internet God's will?' As for the Book of Genesis, it awaits only the endorsement of Oprah to become the all-time bestseller.

We need be neither Catholic in faith nor conservative in politics to recognize the point Paul Johnson makes in *The Quest for God* (1996), that 'from one perspective - the perspective of human spirituality - the most extraordinary thing about the twentieth century was the failure of God to die.' Though an agnostic myself who admires the *via negativa* - how many shades of agnosticism are there? - I appreciate the quip answering Nietzsche's exultant cry, 'God is dead,' with: 'No, *Nietzsche* is dead.'

It would be easy to adduce the great myths of the world, or the great theologies of the world- Hindu, Judaic, Buddhist, Christian, Moslem- to prove the sheer semantic energy of the word spirit. Orthodox myths and theologies, however, fail to convey the full scope of that energy, which also expresses itself in heretical, occult, or antinomian traditions, those secret histories and suppressed speculations that Willis Barnstone aptly calls *The Other Bible* (1984). Through all these traditions - Orphic, Hermetic, Platonist, Gnostic, Manichean, Kabalist, Cathar, Bogomilian, etc. - runs a strain of poetic wildness that, far from undermining spirit, attests to a luxuriance of improbable hope. A few examples must suffice here.

As in *Genesis*, spirit seems always associated with primal creation and light. Thus, for instance, in Gnostic writings, the highest deity is called Father of Light. 'I am that Light...,' God says in the pagan tract entitled *Hermes Trismegistus: Poimandres*, 'I am the Mind, the first God, who existed before the watery substance appeared out of the Darkness. And the luminous Word that issued from the Mind is the son of God.' Similarly, God speaks to his prophet thus in *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, a Jewish apocalypse: 'Yet I opened up the light and rode through it as one of the invisible, as the sun rides from east to west... I said to the light, "Go higher, become firm, and be the foundation for the highest."'

The dualism in this apocryphal tradition heightens by its contrasts the identification of light with spirit. It creates a play of shadows, a kind of spiritual chiaroscuro, suggesting a hierarchy in the realm of spirit. Thus, in the Gnostic *Secret Book of John*, pure 'Spirit is a Unity, over which no one rules... It is the immeasurable Light, the holy and pure purity, the indescribable, perfect and imperishable.' This establishes the possibility of an aristocracy of the invisible. In the hermetic *Poimandres*, for instance, the

nous is highest Godhead, from which emanate the *logos* (word), the Demiurge (creator of matter), and *anthropos* (humanity). In other Gnostic works, *psyche* (the soul) is of a lower order than spirit (*pneuma*); and the *Zohar* distinguishes between *nefesh* (the vital soul), *ruah* (a higher spirit), and, higher still, 'the ineffable grade which is that of *neshamah*' (the super-soul). All this permits dynamic transformations, a spiritual ascent culminating in the Absolute.

Interestingly enough, spiritual hierarchy seems wholly compatible with silence, formlessness, the ineffable, that *kenosis* or self-emptying so movingly expressed in various ancient and medieval texts. 'The dew of the Lord ringed me with silence / and a cloud of peace rose over my head,' starts a poem in *The Odes* (not the Song) of Solomon, a hauntingly beautiful piece of Jewish Pseudoepigrapha. The ecstasy of oblivion is but a shade of God's shapeless attributes. Thus, for instance, the Pseudo-Dionysius prays, in his *Mystical Theology*, 'to enter within the super-bright gloom, and through not seeing and not knowing, to see and to know' what is 'above sight and knowledge' - a presage of that mystical masterwork, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Let us catch our breath, recapitulate, and give the ineffable a rest. After all, 'we know better than that' after two millennia of fumbling history. But do we know how to act better on what we know? Perhaps more than canonical texts, the secret tradition reveals some of the raw spiritual aspirations of human kind. Aspirations only? 'Is it not sheer dogmatic folly,' William James asks in *The Will to Believe* (1897), 'to say that our inner interests can have no real connection with the forces that the hidden world may contain?... And if needs of ours outrun the visible universe, why may not that be a sign that an invisible universe is there?'

I leave that supreme question open, as James did, and return to what the secret tradition - I think of it also as wild, fantastic - divulges. It shows, first, a spontaneous association between spirit and the primal energy of the cosmos - light, whose speed is a universal constant of science. Think of it: what curious, photic intuition is that? What trope binds consciousness to the physical universe, binds true knowledge to sight? Second, the secret tradition insists on grades, gradations, and graduations of spirit, an internal action, a sense of perfectibility that the 'perfects' embodied. Spirit evolves, ascends, till it reaches a limit condition, like light - though in Manichean systems, it may lose out to the Dark. Third, the tradition *ultimately* refuses

to articulate spirit in a specific form: the Absolute has no attributes. The very principle of linguistic similitude breaks down. To manifest himself, God may assume the Ten Sefirot, or qualities, that the *Zohar* lists. But the question, 'To whom then will ye liken God?' can only be answered by silence.

Hence the implacable dilemma of the topic: how speak of what none can utter? Thus I must circle, stutter, stumble around discursively, without hope of discovering 'an ecstasy and simplification,' as Plotinus might say, yet still try to assess the expense of spirit in postmodern times.

TWO

The problem I would now pose is this: what can the word *spirit* mean to us in this postmodern moment? What can it mean to academics, particularly, who deprecate it intellectually, socially, politically, associating it with rappings at a seance, incense in darkened rooms, susurrations of New Age beatitude, if not machinations of cryptofascists? Enervated, discredited, nearly exhausted, the language of spirit must also endure its own *necessary* insecurities as it questions itself at every turn to evade the baneful extremes of dogma and disbelief. Still, despite all its insecurities, the language - more stubborn than any stone Dr. Johnson kicked - endures by the sheer force and ferocity of its appeal to mortals.

What, then, do I mean by *spirit*? As word, concept, feeling, *spirit* seems too multiform to suffer definition - the kind of definition, say, that Rudolf Otto gave to the numinous, or that I myself might be tempted to give spirit as a human intimation of immortality. Instead of definition, then, let me offer a spectrum of intended meanings in this essay.

By spirit, I want first to challenge the contemporary, cast-iron 'materialist' paradigm, which shapes discourse in the academic humanities thanks to a line of thinkers extending from Marx to Foucault. The paradigm is reductive and determinist in its asseverations that we are all 'socially produced,' not unlike sausages in a machine, or 'culturally constructed,' not unlike erector sets. No doubt, we are so 'constructed' to an indeterminate extent. But we also construct society back, as materialist reformers and revolutionaries should be first to admit; we are further self-created; and a few genes and much contingency have been known to affect individual destinies.

Next, I mean to underscore the obvious fact, perhaps too obvious for certain intellectuals, that human beings care enormously about immaterial things: love, courage, friendship, dignity, creativity, sacrifice..., which all shade into spiritual concerns. We cannot begin to understand the geopolitics of our moment if we entirely ignore immaterial factors in developing as in developed societies. I would hazard, for instance, that a Somali may sometimes push himself closer to starvation rather than see a U S Marine strut on the streets of his village. Why is that? And why does a Harvard-educated Iranian woman *choose* to wear the chador? What urge to self-sacrifice or self-transcendence enables these Moslem women to subjugate themselves, in full knowledge of their act, to some imperative *they* perceive to be fulfilling?

Moreover, I must accent the role of beliefs, ranging from the trite to the transcendent, in the conduct of everyday life. James called it the 'will to believe' or 'our willing nature,' by which he meant 'all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set.' In truth, we would fail to leave bed each morning were it not for the assumptions of our existence. Where do these come from? How do they develop in individuals so variously? Is there a hierarchy of beliefs, one belief trumping the others in a particular situation as in the case of the chadored woman? And in our hybrid, interactive, interdependent, in-your-face world, how do we mediate conflicting beliefs, warring values?

Further, I need to recall the role of certain dematerialising technologies, from telephone and telegraph through television and satellite, to computer and laser. These technologies, as Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller foresaw, contribute to a vast, invisible process of derealisation, ephemeralisation, etherealisation, of matter turned into energy, of message scattering and semiotic dispersal and cognitive dissemination, which I have called the 'new gnosticism.' Language has gradually become the human environment, more than nature, more than cultural artifact, a noetic space that Baudrillard, deriving from Fuller and McLuhan more than he admits, has theorised as the 'precession of the simulacra.' In cyberspace, mind - an aspect of spirit? - goes to murder and play. And in cyberspace, can mind evolve into Teilhard's 'noosphere'?

Finally, I wish to include in spirit certain fugitive, shadowy, or ineffable states of consciousness, alternatives to what James - a psychologist no less

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than a philosopher - called our 'ordinary, waking consciousness.' Such states seem intrinsic to human experience, and often involve a compelling relation to something vital, something wholly other, including death. They extend from quotidian intuitions to the creative process in art and science, from sentiments of wonder, awe, mortality, surrender, the sublime - vogueish these postmodern days - to mystic illumination. About the last, Karen Armstrong says in *Tongues of Fire* (1985): 'When the religious experience of mankind is examined critically, it almost seems that there is one, universal religion of mysticism, while the more dogmatic forms of religion seem irrelevant to the findings of the mystics and even dangerous.'

Whether we speak of values, beliefs, intuitions, arts, or dreams, or of extraordinary states of diverse kind - especially the gift of seeing the eternal in the temporal, the gift of primal relation - we still wait upon brain, neurological, and psychiatric research to explain them. Should such explanations arrive - and some scientists believe we are reaching the limits of explaining ourselves to ourselves - the term spirit will have done little harm. For as a mental phenomenon, spirit continues to engage the entire human personality, and also to serve key human functions. More, it may express, at least metaphorically, an aspect of cosmic evolution.

THREE

How different is this compound sense of spirit from some thoughtful attempts to reclaim Christianity in our time, to Christianise postmodernism, as it were? One example must suffice, not from the 'death of God' theologians, who have challenged us in their day, nor from Gallicised 'atheologians,' enchanted more by verbal precosities than spiritual quests, but from a more traditional Christian, the American writer Reynolds Price. In *Three Gospels* (1996), Price performs a remarkable literary and fiduciary feat. Graceful, erudite, tolerant, and insistently Christian withal, he offers us there a deeply felt commentary on two gospels - Mark and John - that he has translated from Koine Greek, as well as a new, syncretic gospel of his own. The work, however, can persuade only believers because it finally resolves the most renitent questions of faith in rhetorical proofs, much as the Koran claims to derive its transcendent authority from the absolute and self-evident uniqueness of its Arabic language.

Price has lived with the Gospels since childhood, and for more than two decades has studied and taught the Bible scrupulously. In the countryside near his parents's home, he 'had also undergone solitary apprehensions of a vibrant unity among all visible things,' and felt that his life was '*willed and watched with care by a god who once lived here.*' Such feelings, such intuitions, are of course incontrovertible, and they accrue immensely to the enhancement of life.

The difficulties begin, though, when Price makes assertions of a different kind. This for instance:

The man Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew of first-century Galilee whose life affected very few of his contemporaries, seems to me to have stood in a demonstrably but inexplicably intimate relation to the creator of our world and all that we see and don't see beyond our world in this one universe (one of perhaps many).

One wonders, did the man actually stand in that 'inexplicably intimate relation to the creator,' or did the man and his disciples think he did? And if the former, where is the demonstration? Invariably, for Price, the blazing demonstration turns out to be *writerly*, as when he alleges, quite plausibly, 'the hair-raising newness' of the Gospel according to John; or, again, when he eloquently observes of Mark:

The supreme narrators...can bring us to the very doorsill of the roofless chamber of total trust in the power of words to trigger belief. They transport us to that brink, not primarily by metaphorical brilliance or linguistic and visual freshness and precision but by a mysterious summoning before us of the fact - laden instant in which a visible undeniable human act approaches us with godly power - a power which, at the moment of reading or watching in any case, grips us and forces our full consent.

But is not that 'mysterious summoning' ultimately verbal, rhetorical, effective as proof only on the strength of *prior belief*, prior disposition to say the least?

In the end, though, Reynolds Price understands that his figure of Jesus 'is of course shaped and colored by' his own 'predilections.' And he poignantly understands the affective depths such a figure attains when, recalling the Beloved who leaned on the breast of Christ during the Last Supper, the author stunningly remarks: 'Bizarre as it is in so many parts... [John's] gospel speaks - in the clearest voice we have - that sentence all humankind craves from stories: *The Maker of all things loves and wants me.*' And that is where all 'proof' and 'evidence' in the case will have to rest - unless we can penetrate deeper the mysteries of eroticism and faith.

The mysteries of faith inspire current heterodoxies as well as orthodoxies. 'Credo quia absurdum!' a Church Father had cried, none other than St. Augustine, bane of Gnostics - as if he had heard James: 'the only escape from faith is mental nullity.' But how different, really, is it from the cry of Harold Bloom in his Gnostic sermon, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (1996), though he opts for the 'timeless knowing of one's own deep self' rather than faith?

Many aspects of Bloom's credo will seem attractive, particularly in our vacuous, materialist moment - and one aspect will remain intractable, at least for me. I honor, for example, his avoidance of disguised spiritual resentments; his insistence that revelation, rebirth, and resurrection are always and forever now; his search, a touch melancholy, for a revisionary spirituality, rich in imagination and the 'quality of unprecedentedness.' Above all, I find centrally attractive his appeal to the 'unchurched, to seekers of many kinds, who are too lucid and spiritually mature to play with New Age and Woodstock toys, and yet who know, on many levels, what Emerson meant when he wrote in his notebook that 'It is by yourself without ambassador that God speaks to you,' and added the deepest truth of all Gnosticism: 'It is God in you that responds to God without, or affirms his own words trembling on the lips of another.'

Pending further illuminations, however, I would consider such statements part of the legacy and aspiration of the human race, a few more images in a radiant galaxy of images that, in the words of Bloom himself, 'have their own potency and their own persistence,' since they testify to urgent desires and needs. And I would leave it at that. For beyond, there be not monsters but insuperable queries. Can we really distinguish between 'authentic Gnosis' and true Faith? How is Gnosis, as 'direct acquaintance of God within the self,' distinct from mystical experience or visionary - I nearly said delusory - dreams? What permits Gnostic initiates to discriminate between 'inward knowledge' and 'outward belief'? 'Gnosis is the opposite of ignorance and not of disbelief,' writes Bloom. Semantically, etymologically, quite so. And pragmatically, is the distinction real? Finally, how differentiate between Price, the orthodox Christian, and Bloom, the Gnostic Jew, when the latter says: "'Knowing God" has a special twist that makes it the Gnosis: it is a reciprocal process in which God also knows what is best and oldest in you, a spark in you that always has been God's'? Personally, I know nothing,

absolutely nothing, about what God knows - and there remains the predicament of most spiritual agnostics.

Bloom may counter that I am no initiate of esoteric knowledge, which is certain. But I can counter back, despite much esteem for his spiritual intuitions and poetic knowledge, that he does not follow his avowed pragmatism closely enough in acknowledging religious experiences that make a difference. For James would acknowledge religious experiences, including Price's, that Bloom would find distasteful to admit. Further, I would counter that the road of self-knowledge, whether gnostic, meditative, or psychoanalytic, should finally lead to the palace of self-heedlessness. 'If you seek *yourself* outside yourself, then you will encounter disaster, whether erotic or ideological,' Bloom wisely begins his *Omens of Millennium*. But that is not quite enough. With a touch of Buddhist self-annihilation, I would add: you may also encounter disaster if you seek yourself, not the Self, within yourself.

Reynolds Price and Harold Bloom travel two roads, one more, the other less, travelled by. But once more I must call on William James to help us move some distance along this obscure, spiritual way. We find ourselves believing, he had said, we hardly know how or why. Actually, James adumbrated in a later work, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), the wavering steps that may lead to unwavering convictions, from a mere shadowy conception to a committed belief. He concludes:

Not one step in this process is logical, yet it is the way in which monists and pluralists alike espouse and hold fast to their visions. It is life exceeding logic, it is the practical reason for which the theoretic reason finds arguments after the conclusion is once there. In just this way do some of us hold to the unfinished pluralistic universe; in just this way do others hold to the timeless universe eternally complete.

Even before our time, a time parlous with skeptical and religious frenzies, James knew that no touchstone of reason would help us distinguish between too much and too little faith; nor could reason alone determine for us what faith to choose. That is why in his 'half-wild, half-saved' universe, he was ready to entertain an 'unfinished pluralism,' not mellow but exigent, ready to face its limitations without dogmatism, ready also 'to count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences,' as he says in *Pragmatism* (1907), and 'will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact - if that would seem a likely place to find him.' How could Reynolds Price, or any honest believer for that matter, quarrel with that?

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Yet even James, that most genial and robust of philosophic minds, had his premonition of the darker side of belief: nihilism. We know that in his youth, in a stretch of intense personal doubt and metaphysical despair, he contemplated suicide. And once he saw the abyss mirrored in the face of a poor epileptic in an asylum; the young man sat there, greenish of skin, 'moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human.' 'That shape am I,' James admits in a kind of existential revulsion. 'Nothing that I possess can defend me from that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him.' There it was, the void incarnate - firmest foundation of faith.

FOUR

Some things I have said here may be argued, have been argued, interminably. But on this I would insist: we need to refuse the bullying choice between postmodern concerns and the idiom of spirit. Increasingly, postmodern artists, philosophers, theologians, scientists, psychologists, sociologists, critics, do refuse that choice, knowing that a postmodern spiritual attitude must also reckon with emergent technologies, with geopolitical realities - population, pollution, the growing obsolescence of the nation state, the needs of the 'wretched of the earth' (Frantz Fanon) - with the interests of feminists and minorities and multicultural societies, with an ecological, planetary humanism, with new myths of cosmogenesis and millennial hopes. Sometimes, though, the new thinking, the postmodern gnosis, seems too abstract, recondite; sometimes too obvious, decking out old thought in smart PoMo clothes, or none at all. Let me give two instances, one from art, the other from science, which make a serious claim for spirit in our moment.

A recent exhibition at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, entitled 'Negotiating Rapture,' veers toward the esoteric.* 'Conceived as a series of journeys akin to those of saints or shamans,' the catalogue says, the exhibition brings together the work of highly serious artists, such as Francis Bacon, Joseph Beuys, Lucio Fontana, Anselm Kiefer, Bruce Nauman, Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, and Ad Reinhardt ('the Black Monk'), in order to 'reveal their diverse expressions of a shared longing: the basic and enduring human urge to transcend the ordinary and experience the sublime' - indeed, to 'move beyond common experience to a state

approaching religious [and erotic, I might add] ecstasy...' With elaborate pretension, the essays of the catalogue proceed to help viewers negotiate their raptures.

A common, if dubious, assumption seems to be that art, as a surrogate for religion, 'combats the emptiness and malaise that permeates these anxious, dehumanised times.' But can it really do that, except for a few gnostics or aesthetes? How many feel transports of blackness, or experience purification, before those exacting, subliminal statements of Reinhart's 'last paintings'? Perhaps a few, self-selected viewers suffice. Perhaps the function of the exhibition, after all, is simply to pose primal questions in a museal, now almost sacral, space. Richard Francis, Chief Curator, does ask:

Is a spiritual dimension necessary for a full life? Can art, most particularly abstract art, help us understand spiritual mystery? Does the common claim that the museum has replaced the cathedral... have any real substance? Can artists aspire to feelings associated with religion as methods to express themselves? Is this useful or relevant for people who are not making art, but are its consumers, the museum's patrons?

'Negotiating Rapture,' alas, cannot answer these questions; it can only whisper to each viewer according to his prejudice or her belief. And it does not, for me at least, negotiate rapture there and then. But it does show that postmodern artists engage spirit, beyond irony, kitsch, pastiche. They engage spirit along two axes, David Morgan says in one of the more lucid essays in the catalogue. 'First, by nurturing a sense of the enigmatic, a profound skepticism, a sensibility of suspicion, but one that is nonetheless prepared to hope. This is the *via negativa*, the artistic avenue expressing the kenotic impulse. Second is the *via positiva*, the Faustian way - the theurgy of Beuys's utopian art.. The crisis in the second half of the twentieth century has consisted largely of the loss of faith in this notion of progressive cultural and social evolution.' Hence 'the wilderness of negation' - that is, iconoclastic, self-deconstructing, apophatic art, seeking to divest 'itself of cultural illusions, the *maya* of artistic hype and self-promotion.'

In reaction, however, an exoteric yet still spiritual postmodernism has come into vogue. I value its intentions, if not its wishful thinking, which it sometimes dubs 'tragic optimism.' Charles Jencks comes here to mind: more than anyone else, he brings elegance and zest to his version of postmodernism. In *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* (1995), subtitled 'A Polemic: How Complexity Science is Changing Architecture and Culture,' Jencks limns a new, global paradigm, informed by nonlinear

dynamics. This paradigm accords with Cosmogogenesis, or a new Genesis story, which describes the 'universe as a single, unfolding, creative event that is always reaching new levels of self-organisation.' More than that, the universe can be so madly inventive that it sometimes 'changes its mind and jumps.'

In effect, Jencks wants to take a cue from the jumping universe to save postmodernism from its worst tendencies: 'ersatz, phoniness, camp, kitsch, the lies perpetuated by an electronic society.' Committed to an ecological, pluralist, and 'restructive' postmodernism, he understands, as Lyotard did not, that 'metanarratives have not ended but, rather, have become contested, and are seen now in their plurality.' It is this, rather than nihilism or relativism, in Jencks's view, that prompts 'a movement towards the fullness of different meanings and diverse ways of life, continuously created by an expanding universe' - a universe that seems to place human beings at the forefront of its 'cosmic lust for knowledge.'

True, there is a measure of 'promiscuous fecundity' - Jencks's own phrase about his work - in all this, a measure of breezy speculation too. But I would never dismiss *Jumping Universe* as Brendan Gill, snoot in the air, dismissed it as 'a mash note to the cosmos.' Through all of Jencks's work, social and political concerns and a need to recover selected, traditional values keyed to the postmodern world share his interest in the cosmic and the spiritual. And who, really, knows enough to gainsay Jencks when he concludes, in another synoptic essay called 'The Post-Modern Agenda,' that though evil and catastrophe punctuate evolution, the universe harbors life, not just dead matter, and for human life 'what really matters is mind, and spirit.'

FOUR

We do not know enough to deny a vision of cosmogenic solace, but neither do we know enough to confirm it except as an article of informed and benevolent faith. Sooner or later, all roads of spiritual exploration lead to the crux of nihilism. 'We are nihilistic thoughts that come into God's head,' Kafka wrote in my first epigraph. Indeed, human consciousness itself, our rational faculty particularly, may be the seat of nihilism, which it projects everywhere, even into God's mind. For nothing can withstand the corrosive power of reason - it can reduce the universe to rust - nothing, except the will to believe and the will to power, both flowing into that inexplicable thing we

call Life. And Life, I hazard, is a quotidian mysticism, still ignorant of itself - ignorant even if, as Emerson said, 'In the highest moments, we are a vision.'

Certainly, nihilism has a bad name. In its most vulgar sense, it becomes a term of abuse or dismissal, though most often it denotes less an absence of values than values we disapprove. Cultures, on the whole, do not wish to be disturbed. They build their myths, religions, ideologies, build even their sciences, like mud walls, like straw screens against the blowing sand. 'The desert grows,' Nietzsche cried a century ago, and indeed it grows and grows. But is it not the desert we all continually traverse, since we can never cross it once and for all, neither in our personal nor in our collective lives? Is it easy to distinguish, in churning cultures, breakthrough from reversion, an act of creative destruction from another of mindless mayhem? 'Even though its motivation may be dread, anxiety, or *horror vacui*', Helmut Thielicke remarks in *Nihilism* (1961), 'what comes out of it [nihilism] is nevertheless imposing... He who knows what faith is must also have stood beneath the baleful eye of that demonic power *against* which we fling our faith.' More, is not nihilism a kind of penultimate sincerity? Is it not kin to self-emptying or kenosis, a white night of the soul that saints and mystics of every kind experience and we all but briefly glimpse? 'To come to the knowledge you have not,/ you must go by a way in which you know not.../ To come to be what you are not,/ you must go by a way in which you are not,' chanted St. John of the Cross.

I will return to these queries presently, after noting the struggle of the West with nihilism, frozen shadow of its own spirit. From Job, who may have first felt its agony in his boils and bones, through various medieval mystics, on to Pascal, through various Russian anarchists, so chillingly depicted in the novels of Dostoevsky and Turgenev, down to the ideas of Schopenhauer, Stirner, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and Jaspers, among many others, nihilism has stalked, sometimes haunted, the Western imagination. Max Stirner, we recall, had savaged all human values in *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1845) - translated as *The Ego and His Own* - and his successor, Nietzsche, had famously warned against looking too long into the abyss lest the abyss look back. Yet it was Nietzsche himself who plumbed the depths, announcing 'what must inevitably come: the dawn of nihilism' before going mad. In an early work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), he had reasoned that only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world justified; later, he settled for sheer endurance. As an 'aesthetic

phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us,' he avows in *The Gay Science* (1887).

Nietzsche may have wrestled the angel of nihilism to madness, but his insights into the contingencies of faith remain, with Kierkegaard's, the most penetrating we have. 'Gradually,' he says in *The Gay Science*, 'man has become a fantastic animal,' fantastic because he 'has to believe.' Furthermore, faith is most coveted and needed where will, 'the affect of command,' lacks. Hence fanaticism, the only strength that the weak or insecure can attain, seems a kind of hypnotism, a form of subjection to a stronger will. Nietzsche ends by addressing his bludgeoned readers thus: 'No, you know better than that, friends. The hidden Yes in you is stronger than all the Nos and Maybes that afflict you and your age like a disease; and when you have to embark on the sea, you emigrants, you, too, are compelled to this by - a *faith*.' But the agon of purpose and contingency finds its most dazzling expression in Nietzsche's last work, *The Will to Power* (1901). Condemned to the terror of eternal recurrence - 'existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness' - humanity still affirms its defiant being. In this way, nihilism, as 'the highest degree of powerfulness of the spirit, the over-richest life,' becomes 'a *divine way of thinking*.' With a little help from art, which we possess 'lest we *perish of the truth*,' Nietzsche faces the void in strident triumph.

My point has become obvious: in the dialectic of belief and radical doubt, a hairbreadth of hope separates faith from the absurd. If the proposition still seems philosophically abstract, let me flesh it with two literary examples, first of a modernist, then of a postmodernist writer.

William Butler Yeats tells a lovely little story, called 'Where there is Nothing, there is God,' in his *Mythologies* (1959). On a hard winter night, in a little wooden house under the shadow of the wooden chapel, near Tullagh, as the Brothers bend over their handicrafts after twilight had driven them from the fields, Brother Dove explains to a dull, saintly boy why the ruby is a symbol of the love of God. 'Because,' Brother Dove says, 'it is red, like fire, and fire burns up everything, and where there is nothing, there is God.' The boy tacitly understands. Later, the abbot informs all the Brothers that a holy beggar they have taken in to turn their old quern may be Aengus the Lover of God, who after long seeking 'has found the nothing that is God.' The Brothers assent in silence; so does the boy.

Yeats was explicit on the matter in his autobiographical prose. 'Without the arbitrary there cannot be religion,' Yeats wrote in his *Journal* (January 1909). And in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), he enjoins:

We must not make a false faith by hiding from our thoughts the causes of doubt, for faith is the highest achievement of the human intellect, the only gift man can make to God, and therefore must be offered in sincerity... I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing...

In these two statements, the poet recalls *both* the randomness of existence and inexorableness of beliefs.

I have alluded to Yeats though I could have alluded to other great modernists - in whom the aspiration to the spiritual was a foundation of modernism - because he went farther than his peers in breaching the supernatural without losing the credibility of his work. As Frank O'Connor jauntily put it: 'Once, in a fit of delighted exasperation, I said that [Yeats] was the only man I knew who could deduce a universal truth from two fallacies and an error.' Yeats himself preferred to think of himself as devout, his eyes filling with tears in childhood at the very thought of God; but at the end of his life, in a letter to Ethel Mannin (23 December 1938), he remarked: 'Am I a mystic? - no, I am a practical man. I have seen the raising of Lazarus and the loaves and fishes and have made the usual measurements, plummet line, spirit level, and have taken the temperature by pure mathematic.' Can we believe him? Did he know himself? Is this the language of a practical man? We can only half guess.

Let us pass to a more sober witness. Asked who influenced his playcraft, Samuel Beckett, laconic as ever, replied, 'Yeats, who else?' I put aside the question of Beckett's postmodernity - is he really postmodern, is he not rather late modern? - and heed the geometer of the void himself. We have become familiar with his Pythagorean terrors and truths: astringencies of silence, the body as a ruined machine, the empty permutations within the skull, the mournful frolics of solipsism, the endurance of being on a scrap of stage, and the long, sad, inaudible wail of the spirit - all these rendered with relentless *askesis*, a stunning fidelity to failure in art: '*Fallor ergo sum.*'

Beckett's aesthetic of absence does not merely flutter like butterflies of vertigo or glint quietly like the black diamond of despair; it also produces texts of the utmost rigor. One could choose from his works at random to witness how close he brings us to the edge of the abyss, without tumbling in

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it or leaping across it on the wings of faith. I choose an almost familiar text, almost reassuring: 'Imagination Dead Imagine' from *First Love and Other Stories* (1974). The brief, bleached text ends thus:

Leave them [two white bodies] there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere. No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what they are doing.

Such brave finality: life ends, nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, whatever it may have been, wherever and whenever it was. Really, Sam? Of course, Beckett knows no more about it than any of us; his immaculate words simply take the place of that 'white speck lost.' Only immaculate words, Sam? The question may never be answered but neither will the heart ever cease to ask it. And that, in fact, is the limit of nihilism, the rock, the need, on which it founders.

CONCLUSION

I have preferred here to regard nihilism as a radical condition of spirit, reverting in the West to Job or Ecclesiastes, and to regard spirit as a radical condition of being human. But the aspiration to nullity, the eschatology of the void, is hardly confined to the West. It may be rooted in *amor mortis*, a universal love of organic dissolution that Freud murkily mooted as a 'death instinct.' In any case, a benign nihilism of unattachment inheres in various mysticisms, East or West; inheres in certain religions too, like Buddhism, which affirms in the *Heart Sutra* that 'form is Emptiness and Emptiness is form;' inheres particularly in Zen, which celebrates things as they are, beyond merit, beyond our antinomies, things in their miraculous 'inexistence'. Here is a wry saying from *A Zen Harvest* (1992):

How funny! Bodhidharma's
Nine years of zazen.
What on earth did he seek?
To the satori eye,
Nothing exists from the beginning.

No doubt, there is freedom, exhilaration even, in unattachment, and in a certain perception of the void; no doubt, our second innocence is a kind of plenary indifference. John Cage - an exemplum of postmodern spirituality - knew this when he wrote in *Silence* (1961):

nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music our ears are
" " " "hearing " " " " now
" " " "playing " " " " in excellent condition

Cage is eminently - I nearly said gratuitously - to the point here. He has melded Western vanguardism with Eastern precepts, Dada with Zen. Yet this man, who claims his entire life could serve as an 'illustration' of the *Upanishad's neti, neti* ('not quite that'), and who thought that the 'proper purpose of music' was 'to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences' according to an Indian precept - that man remains an American original. Like his father, a California inventor, Cage recalls the down-home, crackpot anarchism and creativity of the New World. In him, American Puritanism, Transcendentalism, and Pragmatism find secret complicities: a kind of willed and practical idealism, a kind of empiric transcendentalism, that are two steps removed from nihilism. Cage's lectures, entitled 'How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse),' instance this productive paradox. In any case, we dismiss Cage's playfulness at our peril. For it is the place where laughter and creation, self-heedlessness and commitment, chance and order, meet - that is, the place where the human spirit renews itself.

In Cage, I have said, spirit finds exemplary - and paradoxically unique - expression of itself in postmodern times. But the issue is not the singularity, let alone the 'eccentricity,' of Cage. It is, rather, our reluctance to accede to spirit in our moment. What makes the language of spirit so generally inaccessible to us? Surely, it is not only the condition of the fractious humanities in America; nor is it only the rage of fundamentalists, left and right, east, west, north, and south. The difficulty of spirit is more essential. Shockingly put, *the needs of spirit and the needs of morality or justice often clash.*

Kierkegaard stated the case harrowingly in the parable of Abraham and Isaac - a father ready to murder his son for love of God - as did Nietzsche in all his desperate transvaluations beyond good and evil. These thinkers,

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however eccentric in their ways, maintained on this issue a ruthless clarity. Even George Santayana, that urbane and skeptical mind, wondered in *Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (1957), if morality was not a 'worse enemy of spirit than immorality,' if it was 'not more hopelessly deceptive and entangling?' In other words, is not spirit less a form of moral knowledge of the world than of *disillusionment*, the first, huge step to reality? 'Spirit chills the flesh and is itself on fire,' Santayana concluded. That same amoral violence haunted, and still haunts, Western artists. Thus, for instance, Yeats in *Essays and Introductions*:

It was many years before I understood that we must not demand even the welfare of the human race, nor traffic with divinity in our prayers. It moves outside our antinomies, it may be our lot to worship in terror: "Did He who made the lamb make thee?"

Would Robert Lowell or Norman Mailer - would John Ashbery, I wonder - disagree?

Our liberal imagination recoils before such affront to our decencies. But why such enforced, such self-protective innocence on our part? We know the record: all those masters of modernism who combined the highest spiritual intensities with egregious moral or political failures. We also know nobler delusions - or are they visionary truths? - Blake's belief, for instance, that the 'world of Imagination is the world of Eternity,' and the belief of Shelley, Arnold, Yeats, Joyce - all the way to the artists of 'Negotiating Rapture' - that art could substitute for religion. And what massive hypocrisy persuades us now that ideologies can substitute for reality (I mean the whole, unknowable truth) and dispense with spirit?

True, we need to make the world habitable for ourselves and safe for our personal version of democracy. We need, above all, to cheat death awhile and evade its dematerialising - that is, its spiritual - claim. William Dunbar rimed it five hundred years ago:

The stait of man dois change et vary
Now sound, now seik, now blyth, now sary,
Now dansand mirry, now like to dee:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

But we risk shallowness, coarseness, cowardice when we gorge on ideology or sedate ourselves with the bromides of righteousness - that is, when we avert the harsh claims of spirit on our existence. Yes, poverty, injustice, disease may be allayed by material means, though the rich, exalted,

and hale continue to suffer afflictions of their own. Still, I wonder: can the world's evil diminish by material means *alone*? Will the collective miseries of humanity dissolve, or even distinctly reduce, by attending only to the corporeal needs of the individual? And if they reduce, what other evils will remain? (Evolutionary biology gives no reassurances on this point.) Indeed, man and woman have never lived by bread alone. Therein lies the indefeasible limit of politics, the insoluble trespass of power. The scales of justice lock us into their steely rhythm, now up, now down, like a common see-saw; the cycles of revolution spin on. Thus we condemn ourselves to repetition, to a sickening triteness of being, without hint of ultimacy or intimation of self-transcendence in our lives.

Our arts, like ourselves, suffer no less from that triteness of being. Without a sense of ultimacy - what George Steiner calls 'real presences' - our arts become a tissue of jokes, ironies, barren virtuosités. 'Does this mean that all adult *poesis*, that everything we recognize as being of a compelling stature in literature, art, music is of a religious inspiration or reference?' Steiner asks in *Real Presences* (1989). His answer, as a matter of history and pragmatic inventory, is unequivocally affirmative. 'It may well be that the forgetting of the question of God will be the nub of cultures now nascent,' Steiner continues.

It may be that the verticalities of reference to 'higher things,' to the impalpable and mythical which are still incised in our grammars... will drain from speech. Should these mutations of consciousness and expression come into force, the forms of aesthetic making as we have known them will no longer be productive.

Some may think these statements overwrought; I see in them traces of Steiner's genius for truthful exaggeration. Be that as it may, I am willing to leave God out of the matter, since I personally find no words to qualify or invoke that Name. But I am unwilling to leave spirit out, spirit as I have spoken of it, as much an issue of nihilism as of belief. A great writer may deny meaning to spirit - witness Kafka, Beckett - but we think it vulgar and vapid if he do so without trace of despair; and we note how often he returns to deny.

I conclude without solace. The stutter of spirit, the struggle for belief, remain primal in our condition. In this regard, nihilism may appear a saving grace, the breakneck candor of a mind insisting on its own lucidity. Let us honor such lucidity: not even the forging earth sanctions every

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vapid, errant, or wicked belief. But by far in the most cases, such lucidity finally fails. Nor does irony, which Kierkegaard called the 'infinitely delicate play with nothingness,' suffice. Heart and mind continue to cry out to hell, to heaven, for something more. The cry is hopeless, its very hopelessness indistinguishable from hope on the other side of despair. At last comes that moment Yeats described:

Now his wars on God begin;
At stroke of midnight God will win.

But what does it mean for God to win?

* I completed this essay without benefit of telepathic knowledge of a more persuasive exhibition in Australia, called 'Spirit + Place,' which opened in January 1997 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.