# BEYOND BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

## CREATIVE NIHILISM

**The books that seek to 'explain' God are legion: so are those that seek to rebut the explanations. Here, written in non-sectarian, non-specialist language is something new and brave: trail-blazing.**



PHILIP LEON

Professor of Classics, University of Leicester

# BEYOND BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

*BY THE SAME AUTHOR:*

THE ETHICS OF POWER

THE PHILOSOPHY OF COURAGE

PLATO

BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

THE PROFESSORS

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## CREATIVE NIHILISM

by

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PHILIPPUS

ALEXANDRO FILIOLO

HANC LEGEM UT CLARAM VITAI LAMPADA TRADIT

TRADITURO:

*EX NIHILO OMNIA*

What wise men we'd be if only we
were not such fools!

## UNGODLINESS

Ulrich was in the habit of thinking along lines that were not so much god-less as god-free—an entirely scientific attitude that leaves all the heart's God-seeking to the heart, because that is, after all, not what profits the intellect but only what leads it astray. And he did not in the least doubt that this was the only right approach, since the human mind has achieved its most tangible successes only since it has begun to avoid God. But the notion that haunted him was this: "Supposing precisely this ungodliness were the appropriate contemporary way to God! Every era has had its own way there, corresponding to its most potent spiritual resources: might it then not be our destiny, the destiny of an era of ingenious and enterprising experience, to reject all dreams, legends, and sophistries solely because on the heights of discovery about the natural world we shall turn towards him again and shall begin to achieve a relationship based on experience?"

ROBERT MUSIL, *The Man Without Qualities*

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# INTRODUCTION

*For what Readers?*

"I have something to say, something that needs and is pressing to be said. If only I knew to whom to say it and why, it would get itself said inevitably and I would know what it is." So ran the thought that preceded the putting down on paper of what follows here.

To whom to say it is a most critical question in the Tower of Babel which is our contemporary civilisation. To, and in the idiom of, academics or non-academics, a philosophic audience or the general public, believers or unbelievers, low church or high church, lowbrows or highbrows, Mods or Rockers? One must make up one's mind about this just as one must decide whether to speak in English, French, German or Italian instead of simply to address anyone capable of understanding human speech. One must make up one's mind, if only because the publisher must make up his catalogue with its canonically final divisions, Philosophy, History, Religion and so on, and instruct his travellers at which door to knock of many-mansioned Babel House.* One must, certainly, but I found it particularly difficult to do so for what was pressing in me to be said. Then I remembered.

*The Ishmaelites*

"In the midway of our mortal life", as the poet of Hell sings, "Gone from the path direct", I came across people who struck me as veritable exemplars of the mythical

* I am indebted to Mr. Victor Gollancz for some wise direction.

Noble Savage. They would quote stray passages from Plato or Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, interested in them not, like civilised beings, as illustrating this or that feature of Plato's theory of Ideas or of Stoicism, but as the starving man is interested in bread, the man dying of thirst in water, the asthmatic in the air he breathes, all of us in questions of life or death. "What, sir," I expected them to ask soon, as some are reported to have asked of the Buddha, "is your Dhamma by which you train your disciples, that they, having found consolation, recognise it as their ultimate support and fundamental principle of religious life?" And soon they did, though not in so many words. This in England and in the twentieth century! Straying in what Dante calls a "gloomy wood", John Bunyan a "wilderness", and the Buddha a "mountain jungle", they were the seekers of the Way, of the Dhamma.

It is for them, I have decided, I must write.

They are the Ishmaelites, or the displaced persons, of the world of spirit. Through the saturation bombing of creeds, codes and customs which has taken place in our age their number must now be quite considerable, more considerable, indeed, than it was in the Buddha's time. But they wander separately and have no common language in which to speak or be spoken to about their search and its object. Only when they have "found", do some of them come together, and then the nomads settle —in a new Babel annexe—and develop a new language: a new sect is born. How, then, are they to be addressed while they are still wanderers? In the words which will best make myself intelligible to myself, trusting that one who honestly tries to understand himself can make him-

self understood by others also in the non-sectional, non-sectarian, non-specialist language which common humanity still possesses for common purposes. In that way one can at least communicate the desire and reaching out for the truth, and that is perhaps all that can or need be communicated.

*The Search and Religion*

The Way is undoubtedly the concern of religion: the Dhamma asked of the Buddha was considered by the petitioners "the fundamental principle of the religious life". But whatever be the function of religion, the primary and inescapable task of that favourite modern scapegoat, institutional religion, is (or so institutional religion thinks) to provide a canal so as to turn into safe and serviceable waters the life-force, the drive, behind the search, which, seizing upon multitudes, might act as an all-destructive torrent. The safe waters, however, are apt to suffer from being stagnant and to become weed-choked in the course of the centuries, until, as now, we get their very custodians, bishops and theologians, calling for a clean sweep, offering us God without religion, or religion without God, or X without either, and apparently ready to join forces with the leaders of the anti-God campaign, which they no doubt would do if they did not find these leaders' criticism of "religion" and "God" so much less intelligent and less true than their own.

Above all, their cry is for a new language. Certainly speech must constantly change its words, phrases and rhythms if it is to remain living, just as the body must change its cells if it is to do the same, as I realised when I saw a simple truth which he had been preaching all his

life in the noble language of the Bible come alive to a high dignitary of the Church only when presented to him in the debased jargon of Freudian psychology. Therefore, even if it is still living to oneself, one must beware of hoping to wake the dead with what has for the generality become a dead letter in a dead tongue. Faith, it has been said, must not be even an hour old.* Neither must its language.

Or if not quite dead, the ordinary language of religion is wonderfully divisive. In particular it divides the whole of mankind into two camps, acting as an opiate in one camp, that of the believers, and as a red rag to a bull in the opposite camp, that of the unbelievers. It can therefore scarcely serve my purpose or, indeed, any purpose save that of putting some to sleep and others into a rage.

*Through Ambiguity Towards Certainty?*

As between believers and unbelievers, I cannot help feeling that to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds is not only a temptation, but a duty—as the only way of catching up with the truth; and I am impelled to change my coat once and then once again, because at bottom I believe that all coats, uniforms, are misfits, straitjackets. Having fought the believers with Pauline fury, I joined them and defended them with Pauline fire. Now I have not exactly left them or rejoined the unbelievers, but I have become an Ishmaelite (an Ishmaelite is never an unbeliever—he does not know what not to believe in—while the unbeliever is really a confirmed believer, in unbelief). An Ishmaelite of perhaps a special kind: not exactly wandering, but wonder-

* Robert Musil in *The Man Without Qualities.*

ing—wondering where exactly I stand; not lost and straying, but still trying to find—trying to find what precisely it is that I have "found".

One thing I have definitely found; and that is that believers and unbelievers really believe in the same thing so long as they care enough about the search and stick to revelation—the revelation of experience: if they do not, they still believe in the same thing—labels, though different ones. Any special contribution, therefore, I have to offer can best be made by my showing this rather than by my taking sides.

The significance of my position lies precisely in its ambiguity, certainly unsought. I am confident I could face safely an Inquisition made up of a Dionysius, an Erigena, a St. John of the Cross, a Boehme and their kin: indeed I have been acquitted of any possible heresy by men who know my opinions and belong to the orders that would have been represented on any court before which I might in another age have had to appear; on the other hand, I have also been certified as safe *ex partibus infidelium*, by a very thoughtful and quasi-official representative of the unbelievers.

In any case, one's proper concern is not how one's thought may appear labelled and docketed, but that it shall disappear altogether—in the thought it stimulates in others.

*Profession and Confession*

The ideal account of the search and finding of the Way is undoubtedly autobiography, something like Augustine's *Confessions*, since the searching and finding of the Way is also the searching and finding of oneself, so that

to profess is necessarily to confess. And autobiography I would have written if I felt I had mastered the art of confession, the art of exhibiting the offensive "I"—to whom more offensive than to the autobiographer himself?—without either dressing up that skeleton in the cupboard or going to the opposite extreme and trying to present a truth more naked than the proverbially naked Truth and a skeleton more grisly than any skeleton need appear. Also without giving the impression that what I have to show is simply a personal quirk. For we are so used to considering ideas as simply the result of the thinker's conditions, that if we read an account in an autobiography of how its author had come to believe in the Multiplication Table, we should take it for granted that for another to do the same he would have to have the same parents, the same history, the same physique, the same everything—in short, to be the same person as the writer. But if the discovery of the Way is the discovery of oneself, the uncovering of that self, if rightly carried out, should be the uncovering of humanity, not of a personal idiosyncracy. Not having that art, I have decided to bring in the "I" only when the personal equation seems necessary for illuminating or checking this or that statement. Otherwise I have generalised my account by those means by which one generalises, for example, the account of sense perception or of the aesthetic experience.

But supposing that one can reach the sense perception, or the aesthetic experience, which is everybody's, can one similarly reach the Way which is everybody's? I do not wish to claim that I am the only pathfinder and that mine is the only path. Because I have dropped the auto-

biographic roughage—the colour of my hair and eyes and the complexion of my face and character—I do not imagine that what is left is a recipe for the one and only nutriment. My experience is a personal one. I do not think it is or should be everybody's any more than I think that everybody is or should be myself. Mankind has to make for harmony, not unison, a little truth it is difficult to remember or to tolerate when we are convinced we have found *the* Truth. I am offering what I hope will make a note in the universal harmony.

But though personal, my position is not peculiar. It is representative not only of attitudes found in Antiquity and in medieval times but, what is far more important, of the thoughts and feelings of a growing number of contemporaries who cannot subscribe to any strict formulation of belief and yet feel that they are not unbelievers either. Because what they believe in can only be given literary expression, they fear that it is "just poetry" or "just of the heart". What I give here may help them to a not too rigid and therefore an acceptable form. Above all, the strict discipline of life which is part of the search, is indeed the search itself, will rid them of their fear: it will open up to them a field of scientific verification which is far from being "just poetry".

I am not writing just autobiography or giving merely personal details. At the same time I want to claim the autobiographer's licence, the counterpart of the poet's. Just as the poet has a right to insist that his metaphors be not turned into scientific theory, so I should like the opinions which I have tried to set forth here in as fluid a language as possible to be taken as indications of my own fluid states of mind, present or past, though not exclusively

mine, rather than that they and the terminology in which they are expressed should be petrified and monumentally erected into a theology. Otherwise I can see myself being accused of every kind of heresy, even of diabolism, or at any rate of identifying God and the Devil, though, to be sure, that charge can be brought against the Old Testament also. And of course what I do not give I do not therefore deny; because I leave something untouched, that is not to be taken as a proof that I mean to attack or demolish it.

I say this not merely the further to assure my own safety, but to deprecate the calamitous vice of turning the search for the Way into mere talk. So often we start a controversy just because we will look upon the communication of another traveller as prescribing directions for us which yet we do not at the time consider to be right. How much wiser it would be simply to store them up for possible future use! Have we not ourselves found our own words rejected as meaning nothing at one time by another, who later, when we ourselves have already forgotten them, has brought them up again as meaning everything to him?

# CHAPTER I

# OBJECTIONS TO "CHRISTIANITY" AND "HUMANISM"

*The Fundamentals of Christianity*

Why did I become an Ishmaelite?

Because I was forced to be "with it" before "it" became "it". Before the fashion arose for Christians to make objections to Christianity and humanists to make objections to Humanism, I was driven into objections to both, because I had been first a humanist and next a Christian.

I have no objections in principle to the supernatural or to miracles, including that of the Virgin Birth. Indeed I think that those who have do not properly understand what can be meant by "nature" and the "laws of nature". The difficulty I have in believing in any alleged particular miracle is the same as I have in believing in what others tell me or what I tell myself happened quite ordinarily yesterday: it is the difficulty of any historical evidence, including the evidence of our own senses. In the case of miracles the only additional difficulty is that which arises from two special miracles: their miraculous multiplication by those who believe in their possibility, and their miraculous suppression, or hushing up, by those who do not. For me miracles neither accredit nor discredit the Christian belief, but rather make credible science and its "nature"—by making them more intelligible, less alien.

The notion of the Trinity I found useful for correlating some of the most significant experiences before I accepted Christianity.

I had wandered in the wilderness of atheism and, later, agnosticism from the age of about thirteen to just over thirty, reluctantly but dutifully—from allegiance to honesty and truth. Then when I came into Christianity, the Christian belief, which I think I must have held implicitly before also, meant for me belief in the Cross—that is to say, the Omnipatience which is Omnipotence or the Omnipotence which is Omnipatience—as the foundation of the cosmos, and the life of the Crucified, crowned by the Crucifixion, as the fullest possible life and thus the fullest image of, and the surest mediator and safest way to, the source of all life. This belief struck me with a logic more compelling than the logic of logic itself and a self-evidence clearer than that of mathematics, though I should be hard put to it if I had to explain the nature of either: it was to me the key to the riddle of existence. Nor has anything been able to part me permanently from it—not the most elaborate reasoning, my own or that of others, nor the repeated falling or turning away from its implications as too exacting or impossible, and that too although I have not been brought up—indeed, have come late—to it and do not "like" it, since it places me, who am as desirous as the next man to feel myself somebody, lower than the lowest rung of the ladder of ascent I count in my heart of hearts as the only real life.

But I did not inquire pedantically into the Articles of the faith and entered not at all into the ecclesiastic controversies about the succession to Peter's keys, which I

could not identify with the keys to the riddle of existence.

What objections then can I have to Christianity?

*Historically Bound Christianity*

The first and most superficial objection runs on the usual lines—"Socialism", "Conservatism", "Pacifism", etc., would be all right except for "the socialists", "the conservatives", "the pacifists", etc. Christianity would be all right except for the Christians. Not that one can point to any particularly objectionable characteristics (apart from persecutions in the past). But except perhaps for greater kindliness and readiness to help, they do not strike the outsider as particularly unique. Their talk, however, does, and indeed is about uniqueness. Not, of course, the talk of ordinary intercourse: there are no special Christian expressions left in common speech, unless it be "Christ!" used as a swear-word. I am referring to the common run of the expositions of Christian belief. The ordinary Christian argues the indubitability of the historical facts of Christianity and the uniqueness of Christ pretty much as a Burns fan might prove this or that fact about Burns and proclaim his uniqueness. Having done this, he seems to feel he has done all that is required of him by a profession of faith: he has declared his loyalty to his Master and his loyalty consists in declaring it, in saying unto him, Lord, Lord, and giving credit for everything to him, jealous while so doing even of the claims of God; his profession, in fact, makes one feel that to join the Christians is like joining the Burns Club.

The assertion of the uniqueness is made in such a way

that it seems to blind the Christ fan to the significance of all other religions and their inspirers. The assertion of the indubitability, besides being less justified than he thinks, is, surely, largely irrelevant. For the essential truths of Christianity, as indeed any essential truths touching the Way, are timeless and self-evident and do not require to be proved by anything that has happened. That Jesus really lived, said and did this or that and was crucified under Pontius Pilate is as important for their support as is the fact that the sum of the angles of a triangle were equal to two right-angles when the Pharaohs built their pyramids is for the support of Geometry.*

Yet on my sharing these thoughts with a Christian friend, who, incidentally, claimed to be only a lapsed Christian, he told me that I was only a Platonist and not a Christian. He may have been right about me, but, surely, not on this ground. I cannot accept that having absolute faith in what should be either knowledge or nothing—in history, or even archaeology (excavation replacing revelation, or inspiration!)—makes one a Christian, and not having it makes one not a Christian. This, as I shall try to show, is to bring down faith from its proper world to another in which it can only play an improper part. It is also to get one's tenses wrong in a way which causes the greatest scandal amongst unbelievers. That way is indeed the commonest cause of unbelief—through the preposterous demands it makes on

* A different and far more important proposition is the statement that, but for that particular piece of history and its striking some of the immediate participants and others who came later with an inexhaustible and gradually unfolding significance, the self-evident truths of Christianity, the keys to the riddle of existence, would probably not have been known. The history constitutes, not their proof, which is unnecessary, but their revelation.

belief, or faith. For faith, as I also hope to show, has properly to do with things to be, with *futura*, not with things that have been, with *facta*, or facts.

My other objections apply to all religions, though in different degrees.

*Religion Canonises and Canalises*

Every religion Sundayfies, canonises, finalises: it decrees a special day or days, special occasions, special events, special books, special actions, special persons; these it inflates with a kind of gaseous significance and elevates, balloon-like, to the empyrean, while the rest of existence it depresses by contrast as of the earth, earthy. It sets up a new distinction, a distinction between two parts of the determinate world—between the sacred and the secular—and this it substitutes for the distinction which I shall make here between the indeterminate and the determinate. It prevents or perverts the understanding of either part and seeks to establish a pseudo-para-knowledge and pseudo-para-logic anent the sacred and even anent anything it imagines at any time to be connected with the sacred—the divinity of the heavenly bodies in fifth-century Athens, the geocentric hypothesis before Copernicus, the maxillary bone in the eighteenth century, and the fixity of the species in the nineteenth.

The sacred, or the "numinous", the creation of religion, is the most impressive and the most powerful factor in the world of man, more impressive and powerful than even the instincts of self-preservation and reproduction. Hence it is generally regarded as the primary evidence of what is outside and more than that world—of the super-human, or transcendent. Only when we have

seen it being established, with comparative ease—more easily than it is disestablished—do we realise that it is man-made, or manufactured, as thunder and lightning for example on the one hand and "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel, the spirit of knowledge" on the other are not felt to be man-made, or manufactured. It is primarily a social phenomenon. When people rebel against religion, often of course they reject some moral demand made on them. But more often they rebel against the sacred. That is what they feel threatens to enslave either their humanity or their individuality.

Religion also tries to canalise, date and locate the spirit by its own *fiat*. Or it makes the living God an emperor just as the Roman senate made a dead emperor a god: with the help of ceremony, pomp and circumstance it arranges a Royal Progress with a special route and time-table for the spirit. But the spirit bloweth where it listeth, when it listeth, how it listeth and only as long as it listeth, and notoriously behaves much more like a tramp, not to say a lunatic, than like Royalty on parade. In short, religion turns the spirit into a particular something—an important something, it is true, a something with a vengeance, a very Big Noise, but still only a something. It "presents an image" of God, or turns God into an idol.

*Religion without Gethsemane and the Cross*

The worst effect of the operations or machinations of religion is that they rob us of the pure emptiness which is necessary for the coming of the spirit; of the bare stage on which the inspired life must be enacted; of the desert

in which we can grow to maturity. They crowd all these with pseudo-presences guiding, exhorting and consoling us, with unmistakable saints and heroes; with charts of vices and virtues, of good and bad things, clearly drawn in black and white; with Metro-Goldwin-Mayer choirs of angels trumpeting out doubt and trumpeting in comfort at every critical moment. In short, they deprive us of Gethsemane and the Crucifixion: indeed the more naïve Christian does not hesitate to declare that that is what Christ came to save us from, and if he were capable of brutality (which he is not) he would ask: "Or else, what would be the good of him?"

*Religion as the Chairman of the Watch Committee*

Further, all religion, and especially Christianity, constitutes itself, or allows itself to be constituted, the guardian of society's morality. Now, the latter is very like the Highway Code: it is concerned with external action, is relative (i.e. differing with different societies and with different ages) and, since it must apply universally in a given society, it has to rely on the sanction of force—that of the law or of public opinion—and so on fear. On the other hand, the search for the Way is a quest for perfection, for absoluteness, of being rather than of mere doing, and must be absolutely free from fear or any ulterior motive: the best must be sought for its own sake and not for the preservation of society, and it must be sought not only freely, but *faute de mieux*—from a clear realisation that there is nothing better. If the concern of religion is for this quest, it can only very incongruously combine it with its role of Chairman of the Watch Committee.

This is well illustrated by the present commotion

about "morality" (i.e. sexual morality). It may be the case that perfection requires either life-long virginity or pre-marital virginity and monogamous life-long union with complete faithfulness. I think it is the case. I think, too, that the sex act is all that it can be—a miraculous transfiguration of the senses—only under a certain condition and in a certain state of mind: the condition is the determination of two persons to seek for the Way through union with each other on every level; the state of mind, necessary for both partners, is the pure receptivity, or openness to all the potentialities of life, which is assured by the discipline of creative living. No doubt also the perfect society can only exist if all its members seek the perfect life. But all sorts of societies have been "preserved" in a sort of way by all sorts of moralities falling short of perfection in all sorts of ways, in particular by all sorts of arrangements about sex. The religious moralist, the "puritan", however, who can be as unscrupulous a liar in defence of virtue as the libertine in defence of his vice, stoutly maintains that in the case of sex nothing short of the counsel of perfection will save society.* Thus he gets stuck in the Serbonian bog of sex along with the libertine whom he pursues thither with his denunciation: he allows it to be understood that the main concern of religion is with sex; that religion, which should be all the time a seeing and glad choosing, is simply the blind sense of taboo, especially of sex taboo; and that in his opinion married couples kept together in a cat-and-dog life (with perhaps children to be poisoned by their constant bitterness and strife) because of the difficulty or

* "It often happens," writes Kant, "that the purity of motives and sentiments stands in an inverse ratio to the goodness of the cause, and that its supposed assailants are more straightforward than its defenders."

impossibility of divorce constitute, along with a purely prudential but otherwise quite impure "chastity", important social contributions towards the life of perfection. Whatever service he may do to social morality, he utterly discredits religion, as something irremediably false and bogus.

Such a "puritan" should read that great Puritan, John Bunyan, on Mr. Legality in the village of Morality. Then if someone, made uneasy by the certainly alarming morality of our times, should ask him for his counsel, he might reply, "If you would find and travel on the Way, if you would a pilgrim be, you must seek freedom from all that can hold back or shackle you. Not least of all, you must throw off the dominion of the senses, which, though it cannot ruin the soul as direfully as pride for example, can more surely shear it of its wings. But if you seek for cautions and restraints that will make life in the City of Destruction more tolerable, then, dear friend, you have come to the wrong man. For I find that life quite intolerable."

Of course, the critic may be right who maintains that at the present moment the most vocal custodians of religion seek not so much to tighten but to relax the laws of morality, sexual or other. But this also they do from social ambition for religion, in order to keep their place in the City of Destruction, which is fast becoming the City of Pigs, the "progressive" City of Gadarene swine. They do this no less when they either reduce religion to good works and causes (e.g. Pacifism, Nuclear Disarmament, Anti-racialism, etc.) or try to convince the world that true religion is bringing about conversions in high places which will change the course of history—

conversions of Constantines, at the rate of one per week.

*Religious Language*

My last objection is to the language of religion, in particular to its personifying language.

The Source of creative life is, of course, personal, since it is the source of inspiration and the goal of aspiration, without which two personality expires. But religion with its use of the second and third persons singular sets up for the Source a person—i.e. a determinate amongst other determinates, even though a V.I.?

Now, it is, indeed, true that even the most elaborate and sophisticated religious language is primarily an instrument of worship. Like the muezzin's cry, *Allah, il Allah, la Allah, il Allah*, it is a call to worship. Or, like "Holy! Holy! Holy!", it is the exclamatory utterance of worship. Or it focuses the attention on the object of worship, as do icons, genuflections and other gestures. Just so the tea leaves of the fortune-teller and the crystal of the crystal-gazer are used to concentrate the attention on something other than themselves: they are meant to be looked through rather than at, so that a flaw in the crystal does not invalidate the seeing nor does it matter whether the leaves are of Indian or China, of Typhoo or Earl Grey tea. Religious language is understood "esoterically", with an inner hearing of the spirit to which the letter matters little.

That is certainly so in the inspired life. But that life is a kind of Miracle Play with intermissions, longer or shorter, and during these intermissions the language, heard only with the outer ear, can mislead and tempt to a kind of

play-acting. At any rate I caught myself out doing something of the kind.

*The Evils of Religious Personification*

The language of Christianity, coming to me as it did unstaled by ineffective use, moved me powerfully—often to tears, so that taking part in public worship was an embarrassment. But after a time I began to see what I see now. If it does not exactly interfere with inspiration (or with worship, the very thing for which it is meant), it would do so if I listened to it; it would falsify the awareness if the latter did not prevent me from attending to it. The language which most truly represents that awareness (as far as it can be represented) and thus promotes it, is a depersonalised, depolarised language which, like that of mathematics or science, encourages hard and clear thinking rather than emotion.

During the ebb-tide of inspiration the ordinary religious language involved me in an exhausting struggle with notions and promptings which I half-recognised as idle and yet could not quite shake off. I wanted to please, placate and supplicate God, to prostrate myself before him or plead with him, to accuse or defend myself. I had thoughts of commands and interdictions, and was moved to rebellion by the first and fascinated by the "sin" suggested by the second: the "must" of the first, the categorical imperative, was utterly different from the creative "must"—the "Let there be light", "Let there be life"—of thinking, constructing, loving, breathing even; so was the "must not" of the second from the intrinsic repellence of the senseless, the unfitting, the unloving and unliving; both were blind and fear-fraught.

I had thoughts too of merits and demerits, and of rewards and punishments, not as integral to my living, but as put on *ab extra*, like medals or chains; I felt, or tried to make myself feel, "sin"—not *hamartia*, as it is called in the New Testament, a missing of the bus, but an offence against a superior; forgiveness I viewed, or tried to pretend that I viewed, not like sight returning to eyes which have been temporarily blinded, but like a royal pardon coming to a convicted criminal.

In short, I saw—or wanted to see, or felt that I ought to see—God as simply other than myself in the way another person is, and not also as the source and goal of my life or as the principle of my being in the way another person cannot or should not be.

I do not think this is just a personal quirk of mine. On the contrary, I think it is this language which has made possible, even if it has not caused, the childish revolt against "the horrible Eternal in the guise of a viper, the cunning gangster sitting on a throne of human excrement and gold, with idiot pride, his body clad in a shroud made of soiled sheets";* or against the God who "if he does exist ought to be shot for inventing people".† It has also made possible "the literature of the metaphysical revolt covering the last one hundred and fifty years which have seen the ravaged face of man's protest obstinately return under different masks, risings against the human condition and its creator".‡ Neither of these revolts could have been suggested or encouraged

* Lautréamont.

† Joyce Carey, *The Prisoner of Grace*.

‡ Camus, *L'Homme Révolté*, p. 129. To these revolts might be added the spiritual self-tormenting of a man like John Bunyan. Cf. also below, pp. 94 and 106, notes.

by an impersonal and depolarised language, any more than by that of Einstein's Relativity Theory.

Wedded to the "numinous", it has also given birth to modern "Humanism".

*The God of the Philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*

I have sometimes told myself that all this amounts to is simply that by disposition, training and chief preoccupation I incline more towards "the God of the philosophers" than "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". But the God of the philosophers is supposed to be a merely notional, or explanatory, entity, no more accessible to experience than an electron is to touch or sight. The God, however, I have in mind, is pre-eminently the God of experience—of the experience of the great mystics.

Moreover, allowing for the usage of religious language, which I have already mentioned, for the fact that in religion more even than in ordinary talk, we use expressions like "sunrise" without really thinking (now at any rate) that the sun rises, I am convinced that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob believed only in "the God of the philosophers", if what is given here is that God.

Having written the above, I came upon a strong confirmation of it in Newman, who, surely, cannot be accused of not having believed in "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", who indeed uses their language even in his correction of it. This is what he has to say: ". . . sooner, then, that we should know nothing Almighty God has condescended to speak to us so far as human thought and language will admit, by approximations,

in order to give us practical rules for our own conduct and His infinite and eternal operations."*

*Miseducation through Over-Simplification or Over-Elaboration*

"But, surely, children and the man in the street have to be educated, and for their education the simple image and the language of the imagination are indispensable." Such is the cry of the natural managers of humanity. But the natural managers of humanity have more than their fair share of the foibles of human nature. They exaggerate unconscionably the need and importance of their natural speciality, management, and imagine that mankind consists in the main of morons whose sole need is to have everything spelled out to them in words of one syllable, no matter how wrong these words and spelling are. The result is, of course, that in time all but the morons fall or stay away from the reading lesson—that is, if the natural managers are unnatural enough to leave them free to do either, as, in the matter of religion, they cannot nowadays help leaving them.

In our so-called "Age of the common man", in which everything is allegedly for the sake and commendation of Everyman, these managers are becoming a real danger to humanity—witness the Nazi and Communist propagandists (I am thinking of the simple *bona fide* simplifiers to be found in either camp beside the downright falsifiers): it is far more difficult to straighten out their distortions than to dispel the crassest ignorance. In general, early simplifications, the false simplicities, impede rather than help later learning—so much time has to be spent on unlearning what one has been taught—

* Sermon on St. Peter's Day, 1840.

and the problem of education is proving more and more to be the problem of how to teach without simplifying.

Be that as it may, the fact is that more and more men are turning away from the Christianity, or in general from the religion, presented to them in their childhood, just as our age as a whole is turning away from the presentations of them offered to earlier ages. The language question here is crucial. Granted that the language of religion is no obstacle when listened to esoterically; but what of the outsider who can only listen to it exoterically and whom one is trying to bring in? Above all, what of the modern democratically conditioned outsider to whom the language sounds impossibly dictatorial and who is put off by it even before he is asked to *do* anything? Another fact to be taken into account is that owing to our predominantly scientific culture men are coming to think and to talk less and less mythically and imaginatively and more and more literally and abstractly; soon perhaps few will be able to speak even of the sunrise without being troubled by the thought "But the sun does not rise".

The last word on religious language is, surely, that of Jesus: for speaking of "the mysteries of the Kingdom" to those who "seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand", he chooses the parables,* a medium which, like music, can be sometimes *un*-understood—even by the man whose it is—but never *mis*understood. Next to his parables the most abstract and, to the uninitiated, abstruse language is the best.

As for religious education, that teaching is the safest which will require least unlearning; it consists of the

* Matt. 13.13.

communication of the spirit through example with as little formulation of the letter which killeth, or with as flexible a formulation, as possible. The most powerful and most durable impression upon a child, one which lasts him for life, is that made by a person whose devotion is so whole that it is identical with himself and therefore neither need nor can be put into a formula any more than he himself. What counts later are the things that have not been said earlier rather than those which have.

The seeker of the Way must not be over-loaded; he must be "poor in spirit". The trouble with the religious teacher is that he gives too much: he tries to explain mystery with the help of so many concepts—God the Creator, God the Omnipotent and Omniscient, God the Judge and Punisher, God the Redeemer, etc.—only to end up in hopeless confusion, so that when an explanation is really needed, i.e. for a particular problem, all he can do is to say, "God moves in a mysterious way", when he should be seeing and saying that the religious teacher moves in a mysterious way.

Instead of tons of explanatory concepts without so much as an ounce of any special experience which calls for them, what our scientifically minded age needs is experiment, experiment, and more experiment—the experiment of the search for inspiration—with the very minimum of conceptualising, theorising, explaining—with no more than a linguistic aid for holding a multitude of experiments and experiences together.

The objection may be brought against my objections to Christianity that they are directed not against Christianity, but against the absence, caricature or childish image of Christianity. With that I would certainly agree

and that is why I have put the target of my objections between quotes. Only, the Christianity I have been objecting to is that which most people usually meet with and object to. It is the Christianity I myself met with and objected to until I came across those who had something more.

It is that kind of religion that has made of anti-religion more than an affair of the Giants and Titans, of the real rebels against heaven (if there are any); through it anti-religion has been taken up by some of the seekers of the Way themselves, as a real Liberation movement, as a revolution towards life more abundant, and not just as an anti-God campaign.

It is that kind of religion that is losing its hold over the generality and is calling for a replacement.

*Churchianity v. Christianity*

I was fortunate enough to meet with those who had something more. But having come upon them, it was my fate to watch with a mixture of fascination and dismay the whole history of Christianity repeat itself in less than a quarter of a century. A few people come together simply to propagate the reality they have found. They disown any intention to form a church. But soon a church arises, an invisible church. For it is not bricks or even a common creed and worship that make a church. A church is a common atmosphere which tacitly imposes certain thoughts, feelings, words, intonations and gestures, and excommunicates others. It is so powerful, so pervasive, physically almost, that those who have the appropriate antennae can tell simply by the "feel" of an empty church, chapel or meetinghouse what denomination it serves. In it creation's hymn to the Creator is

reduced to a few notes on a few penny whistles, and the Spirit gradually comes to be replaced by the *esprit de corps*, the corporate spirit. The children of God beget a child god which, unwittingly of course, they set up in the place of God. Fond progenitors that they are, they will not let the child grow up.

The seekers at large have separated themselves from humanity at large and become the peculiar people of a peculiar god. In worshipping him they are really worshipping their corporate self. But because they see no corporal God, they innocently imagine they are still worshipping God.

I am not saying that a church is not necessary. Nor that the morality and morale of society do not need looking after. Nor am I repudiating religion. Religion is a kind of education, and as such it is a help. So is secular education, primary, secondary and higher. One should not scorn any help, provided that it does not, as it too often does, help the helped (life more abundant in the first case, and real thought and knowledge in the second) out of existence.

I am putting forward these objections for the same reason that I imagine the other objectors have put forward theirs. They have not done so, presumably, just to be devils and have a fling—to fling stones at their own glass houses—but because they seek the best for what they criticise and therefore must first see the worst in it.

It was the elusive, invisible, intangible, impalpable church—the claustrophobia generated by it—that thrust me back into the wilderness, where I would at least be able to breathe freely in the wide and open spaces.

There I began to review nostalgically the position I

had held since I was a boy. It was wrong, I reflected, to break ties of loyalty. It was also impossible: I had not really done so and that was why I had been unable to become acclimatised to Christians. Humanism/Agnosticism was perhaps right after all: it at least safeguarded the emptiness necessary for the coming of the truth. The wide and open spaces of the mind and of the future of humanity were in its keeping. Future historians would see in it one of the most important contributions to true religion. I must return.

*The Sect of the Humanists*

I did—to what I found is nothing but the permanent and all but official Opposition of what I had just left. If the automatic loyalty declaration of the common or garden Christian is the assertion of the uniqueness of Christ, that of his humanist counterpart is the contradiction or ridiculing of anything and everything asserted in the common or garden language of religion. I discovered the emptiness filled to capacity with that multitudinous contradiction or mockery and the impetus for the search eaten up by the zeal for confutation. Indeed there is no room for any search: except for some details needing to be filled in, everything, the Grand Plan, the plan of no-salvation, is already known—by "Science": this "Science" is something strangely different from, and indeed unrelated to, the research carried on in this or that corner of Physics, Chemistry or Biology; it is a "science" whose object is nothing.

I found a sectarianism, dogmatism, bigotry, self-complacence and close-mindedness such as I imagine is no longer to be met with, or at any rate, was not met

with by me, in the religious world. I had once cherished the idea of the humanists as the ruthless, if agonised, seekers of the truth, as those who would pursue the search whithersoever it led and howmuchsoever it hurt, as utterly objective and impartial: now I saw even educated, well-trained, subtle and philosophic minds abandoning in this case all objectivity and impartiality, all intelligence even, pursuing their quarry like dogs their mechanical hare without a thought about the make of that quarry, content to attack the most superficial and childish religion without troubling to inquire into that religion which contains a far more thoroughgoing critique than their own of the very thing they were attacking.* I came to the conclusion that here were grownup schoolboys, or rather schoolboys who would never grow up, in whom an unstoppable chain-reaction rebellion had been triggered off against their headmaster, or against the religion of the school chapel or its equivalent. The only sympathy one could have for them was that roused by the extravagance, however long-drawn-out, of any liberated slaves; the only lesson to be learnt from them was a warning about the traumatic effect of the religion and the religious language I have been objecting to.

*Does Humanism Exist?*

Can we say that Humanism at any rate would be all right but for the humans, or the humanists? We cannot, for the simple reason that Humanism does not exist. (Hence it also has been placed between quotes.) What does exist is something that is utterly dependent for its

* There are of course honourable exceptions, notably Professor R. W. Hepburn.

life on the existence of what it opposes—an infantile religion—and on a most unscientific belief in a non-existent "Science" which takes the place of Theology and Metaphysics.

"Humanism" ought to denote an outlook which is based on an examination of all the reaches of human life or experience, undeterred and undistorted by any authority, whether of a book or a tradition or of a pre-existent metaphysic or the logic of an alien field of knowledge, a logic declaring absolutely what can be or cannot be, what must be or must not be. But that is precisely what so-called "Humanism" is not. It is governed most strictly by the authority of this fictitious science which lays down strict laws of what can and what cannot be, irrespective of what experience shows us. In particular it declares that what is human must conform with or be interpreted by, and only by, the laws of the behaviour of electrons, atoms, molecules, gases, etc., or, at the highest, of rats and mice. In so far as it considers the specifically human at all, it appears to regard human beings as mass-produced articles, ready-made according to a pattern which never had to be originated. Origination, particularly the continuous self-creation of man, who, in creating himself, faces the source of his creativity, a source he obviously does not create—this is precisely what "Humanism" does not consider. For what evidence is there of this origination in electrons, atoms, molecules, or even in rats and mice, and how shall one dare go beyond this field—the field of sacred "Science"?

*In Search of Unbelief*

Not being able to find proper Humanism, at least not

in England,* I decided to invent it. (More precisely, I decided to work out atheistic Humanism. For Humanism in itself need not be atheistic: I consider that what I am giving here is unprejudiced Humanism, but no one, I imagine, will call it atheism, even if some decide it is not theism or not religion.) I wanted an atheism which was not just a matter of ideas provoked by other ideas and with no real content of their own, like the "No!" of children in their contrarious moods, which is simply an automatic reaction to the "Yes" of others. I wanted to know what atheism, or unbelief, was when really thought and felt through, what real experience it went with, how one came to it through thinking independently about life instead of just reacting against religion. There was a time, I reflected, when people "believed" without asking what they "believed" in; now they "disbelieve" without asking what they "disbelieve" in. For our times an inquiry into the nature of unbelief was more important than one into that of belief. I carried on my inquiry in several courses of lectures.

The conclusion I reached was that unbelief implied a world in which things did not make sense but amounted to nothing, and a state of mind which was absolute boredom. In short, I reached the position of Sartre, the "Existentialism" of "the Absurd". But with a difference. The difference was this: he believes in it, I did not. Why?

"Here," I thought, "is an 'Existentialist', i.e. one who professes to have come to his atheism or anything else

* On the Continent Heidegger and Sartre have given an account of what the human scene looks like when you have decided not to use your eyes (those of hope and faith). Their vision is "lucid" and "authentic" enough. Only, they should not assert or imply that that is what the human scene *is* like.

from an inspection of the conditions of human existence, from experience, and not dialectically, or through juggling with ideas. But I feel certain he must have tampered with his own experience." Just as I had written this, I was presented with a copy of his latest work, *Les Mots*. "Then felt I" indeed like that "watcher of the skies", Galle, when he turned his telescope to that part of them indicated by the calculations of Adams and Leverrier, and Neptune "swam into his ken"! Sartre, this autobiography shows me, thinks that after many years of strenuous struggle he has at last reached pure atheism and possesses inalienably the gospel of No-salvation: he "knows his real tasks" and yet "no longer knows what to do with his life"; but he is "a whole man, made up of all men and who is worth all of them and what any of them is worth".* The struggle by which he has come to this goal consisted of getting rid of some very fundamental experiences just because he thought they came from, or were influenced by, the kind of religious language and invisible church I have been describing here which, like me, he did not and does not favour: like so many others, he has thrown away the baby with the bathwater. If only he had corrected, instead of rejecting outright, those experiences, he might have reached something like the position set forth here. He may yet do so.

I, on the other hand, cannot cast off certain convictions and experiences. I do not think this is because I like them: they cling to me rather than I to them. At any rate I have done my honest best to shake them off and my struggle has been quite as strenuous, I believe, as

* See especially pp. 207–13, which are fascinating. I am sorry I have not the English translation before me.

Sartre's. The convictions are: that the Cross is the foundation of the cosmos and the crucified life the complete life, with its inescapable logic and uneclipsable self-evidence; that though *facts* may not make sense, the statement that *things* do not does not itself make sense; that complete unbelief is impossible or at any rate would mean disintegration, even physical disintegration, for belief must be analogous to or continuous with the "bonds" that hold the atoms together in the molecules: as Blake says, "If the moon and stars should doubt, They'd immediately go out"; and even the Devil believes, as we are told. The experiences are two. The first, for want of a better generally accepted designation, must, I suppose, be dubbed "mystical", though I very much dislike the word, since it is used to denote a luxury reserved either for heaven or for the lunatic asylum: I myself would prefer to call it the sense of origination, or of the unfinished, of the incomplete reality of what is most real to us—of anything but the spookiness suggested by "mystical". The second experience is absolute boredom and a claustrophobia far greater than that produced in me by any invisible church of either religion or atheism and which is caused by the idea of a closed universe and of myself in it as a fixed quantity, as something that can be finally summed up and cannot change. In *Huis Clos* Sartre pictures hell as consisting of prisoners in a room with no exit who by summing up and labelling and docketing each other are kept imprisoned not merely in the room together but each separately in his inescapable role or character, as usually happens between members of the same family; he concludes that "Hell is other people". He has begun to sum himself up in this first part

of his autobiography. As he continues, he may come to the conclusion that hell is oneself, and the anguish of his own hell may force him to break out of the character in which he is imprisoning himself and to relinquish his gospel of "No-salvation".

I admit I dislike boredom, or hell. But I do not think that my dislike would by itself prevent me from accepting his gospel or dogma if I thought that the truth demanded it, as I once did think. But it may be possible to have atheism without a closed universe.*

What follows is an account of the pattern formed by these convictions and experiences of mine. An account, not a justification. But what could "a justification" mean in this case? Nothing, I think, the reader will agree who accepts the method I propose here.†

* Cf. McTaggart's *The Nature of Existence* and *Some Dogmas of Religion.* Also the Buddhism of the Buddha. But of course ordinary atheism means to deny chiefly what these proclaim, rather than just theism. The bourgeois universe is essentially a closed universe. So is the communist one, for Communism, though it talks anti-bourgeois, is of course irredeemably hyper-hyper-bourgeois.

† See below, p. 66.

## CHAPTER II

# HELL AS A BASE

*The Descent into Hell*

The senseless, or the absurd, nothingness, boredom—i.e. hell. This was the terminus of my inquiry. I could not rest in hell. No doubt because my atheism, unlike Sartre's, was not pure: it had not been purified of the grit of those convictions and experiences. But there hell was and there was I in it. Hell could not be denied: facts—the facts of the sciences, especially of astronomy, and the facts of history—did not make sense, even though I might feel that things must do so; the facts amounted to a nothingness which filled me with infinite nausea, boredom and claustrophobia. But this kind of claustrophobia—ultimate, or metaphysical, claustrophobia—could not be dealt with by running away. I must appeal to reason.

I knew, of course, the classical arguments for the existence of God: had I not lectured on Plato and Aristotle for years? And though not a theologian, I was sufficiently versed in theology to be able to use it as I used science—that is to say, under direction and correction. But there was something almost unearthly in the way all that dialectic cut no ice, at least not that particular ice—the ice of hell. This was partly, no doubt, because I had done my duty with more than academic thoroughness, the duty of the Devil's advocate, and allowed my imagination to be fully occupied by the

Devil's side. But largely it was because I was thinking, as I imagine everyone must think, with and for the contemporary mind (which I took also to be that of my audience), a mind devoid of the background which gives meaning and cogency to that dialectic: the latter could say no more, was no less of a dead language, to that mind than Latin or Greek.

Hell could not be argued away. Nor could the "mystical experience", conceived of as a special experience like the appreciation of music, prevail against it. "The knowledge of the Lord", I was convinced, must fill the whole earth "as the waters cover the sea", and not be confined to one department of the individual's consciousness or to a particular group mind (a particular church). It must be at least coextensive with the sands of the desert of unbelief, or boredom, which could cover everything; it must be able to cover those sands.

Hell must be accepted by the searcher for the Way; the Way must pass through it if it was not to be a dead end to it, since to bypass it was impossible. I must make hell my new starting point, indeed my base.

Having resolved to do so, I saw hitherto undreamed of advantages in hell as a base.

*The Primacy of Boredom*

"Man is a rational animal." "Man is a tool-making and tool-using animal." "Man is a political animal." "Man is a laughing animal." All these are true and fundamental definitions of man. But no less true and more basic, I think, is this: "Man is a bored animal." Boredom shall be the basis of my account of the human predicament.

The advantage of choosing that as a basis is the following. Suppose that I chose for this the poetic experience (which, in fact, I shall have to cite incidentally later) and gave as my example the experience of a Milton because what is most developed provides the clearest illustration, with every feature of the experience writ large. Then, if I claimed that what is true of a Milton is true of everyone on the ground that every country bumpkin is a Milton, though it may be "a mute, inglorious" one, it might be urged against me that poetry lies precisely in the difference between a Milton and every country bumpkin, between muteness and eloquence. On the other hand, if for the same reason I display boredom in its most extreme and all-enveloping form, no one will accuse me of dealing with an experience that is the privilege of a few choice spirits. I shall rouse some harmonic or harmonics in everyone.

*Our Promising Nihilism*

Similarly, nothingness is the most advantageous basis for an account of the contemporary predicament. For its nihilism is the most comprehensive charge brought against the Younger Generation by those who, having reached the age when not only policemen and postmen but even Prime Ministers begin to look young, start making observations on the Younger Generation, i.e. counting its defects. But just as every quality has its defect, so to every defect there is a quality. The quality in this case is the invulnerable hope I have long been looking for: if I take my stand on the *nihil* of nihilism, on nothing, I need not fear that I may have the ground cut from under my feet, nor can the foundations be

undermined of a house which is not even built on sand.

It is always tempting to ring the changes upon any paradox one has come to realise. Yet it is not fondness for paradox that makes me dwell on nihilism. I dwell on it because, as the permanent Devil's advocate I have become, it dwells in me. I am preoccupied with it because it occupies me. "It is merely made by art", that advocate, or his master, the Diabolos or Critic himself, whispers at the rising of anything constructive whatsoever, "in order that we may not perish of Truth"*—the truth, namely, that All = Nought.

To which that part of me which is not the Devil's advocate replies: "The man who has the chief claim to be called the father of the modern mind founded the whole of his philosophic system on his doubt whether anything existed on the one hand and on the indubitable fact that he, the doubter, existed, on the other hand. May one not go further, and found the whole of one's life on the fact that nothing exists and on one's hope and faith in nothing? May one not lay the Dhamma, the Way, on this nothing, on this fact and this hope and faith? Is not this what all those who have taken life most seriously have in effect done, whatever they have said?" "It is," says the Critic, mockingly. "May not the laugh," I continue, "be turned against him by agreeing with him and showing that there is far more in what he says than what he thinks? The present generation, we are told, believes in nothing. Is not that what we should all believe in rather than in God? Or is believing in God the same thing as believing in nothing?"

* Nietzsche. See Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind*, pp. 117 and 139.

These are extreme questions put in an extreme form. But these are the questions that occur to me and this their form, in the extremity, the agony, of thinking which I have to go through whenever I think of these things at all. That, it seems to me, is the extremity everyone has to go through who gives these things any thought at all in our present predicament, when the comfortable traditional "proofs" of all sorts of verities no longer say anything to us.

Boredom and nihilism are two sides of one and the same thing. Boredom is the affective side, what we feel; nihilism is the cognitive side, what we think, believe, see. The second causes the first but the first can also cause the second: when you see nothing but nothingness you are bored, but also when you are bored you see nothing but nothingness. Nothingness, at least provisionally speaking, is the absence of all values.

*Passive Boredom-Nihilism*

There is a passive and an active state of boredom-nihilism. The passive state consists in a complete loss of faith in any values, in a lack of the zest for living or for constructive living, in the inability to take anything, even the search for happiness, seriously or to seek for anything consistently except distraction—distraction from the sense of nothingness. For that state the whole of life adds up to nothing, to "damn all", or the all-damned, or consists of "one damned thing after another". One feels a poor fish struggling in life as in a net which is a lot of holes not even tied together like the holes of the net in the well-known definition, by a piece of string—that is to say by any unifying principle, passion or interest. Nothing

has any reality, meaning, value, quality. The state is a vanishing into nothingness, or nullity, of all the objects of living, but also of the living subject himself in so far as he is made up of particular habits, preoccupations, appetitions and ambitions. Its cause is also nothing, nothing determinate, or particular,* though there may be a particular occasion bringing it to the surface—for example, the disappointment of failure or the disillusionment of success.

The many damned things are not "objects" to the owner of this state, any more than the flies pestering him are the objectives of the weary wayfarer trudging towards he knows not what goal. But there is one object which obsesses his attention unrelentingly, a kind of blank wall against which he is running his head constantly. It can only be described as a wall which hides that which is not-the-flies, which is other-than-the-flies, but which (so he believes) is not there or anywhere. The blank wall is the nothingness materialised, so to speak.

This is the passive, or contemplative, state.

*Active Boredom*

The owner of the active state sometimes seeks refuge from the nothingness of the wall and the flies by plunging into a kind of all-swallowing vortex which is the simulacrum of all reality or of the sole or the supreme reality. Such a vortex is drink, drugs or some fanaticism—any of the "manias" studied by psychiatry.

Or he may react against the nothingness by trying to

* For this, especially the last point, compare Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* and *Was ist Metaphysic?* Also A. de Waehlens *La Philosophie de Martin Heidegger.*

assure himself that *he* at least is something or somebody: he seeks always to master, possess and use; he treats everything and everyone as means, means to feel his own power; he advances from means to means in an infinite "progress" towards no end (for nothing and nobody is valued as an end in itself or himself).

The most extreme response to the nothingness is also the commonest and most familiar. We all know the fascination, both for children and grown-ups, of smashing things up. Its nature seems to be a curiously theoretic, or philosophic, one—that of disinterested action in the service of "the truth": we wish, it seems, to prove—first to ourselves, and next to others—that things really are what it feels they are, viz. nothing, since they can be reduced to nothing. It is that fascination which works alike in the urchin smashing his toys; in the Mod or Rocker creating havoc at a seaside resort; in a Hitler incinerating millions of human beings as one incinerates garden rubbish; in certain kinds of suicide; and in the typically modern satirist who sneers at everything positive just because it is positive. It is a kind of negative mysticism: Kali worship, or thuggery.

The bored-nihilistic life may be summed up as the self-seeking and self-centred life.

Admittedly, I am giving an extreme description of an extreme condition and many will perhaps dismiss it as "morbid". My wife, to whom I have just read it to test for harmonics, remarks that she is not modern enough and has, after all, been brought up as a Christian and therefore cannot or dare not quite acknowledge the experience as hers, though she sees it just round the corner as something which, given admittance, would

send her round the bend. Yet, surely, what I have given sums up the spirit of by far the greater part of what contemporarily is reckoned as "genuine" or "true" art and literature.

I have in mind particularly the introvert literature which is the exploration of what, for want of a better term, must be called the "interior life" of the modern soul: it explores with Proustian subtlety and patience circle after circle of intimacy and intricacy, only to find nothing, more nothing and still more nothing; then, drawn on by an irresistible fascination, it starts all over again. Or it indicates what this soul is aspiring after, waiting for—Godot, or Nothing, in a world where "They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Nor is this true of "high-brow" art only. Writing of some fairly ordinary short stories, a reviewer sums up all the characters as "bored beyond tears", "fossilised by *accidie* and representing a carnival hell". Similarly a distinguished film critic complains of the compulsion of the supposedly most honest artists of today "to display their sense of loneliness, frustration and anger".

*The Concealment of Emptiness*

Of course, we protect ourselves against the full impact of the emptiness upon our consciousness, for this impact, we obscurely fear, would result in the extinction of consciousness, in the bringing about of a kind of nether Nirvana.

We protect ourselves by every kind of distraction and diversion; by plunging into vortex after vortex; by every sort of self-assertion. In short, all the active side of boredom,

including, paradoxically, even Kali worship, and writing and talking about nothingness, is a protection against the passive, contemplative side, against the full seeing and the feeling of emptiness: it is a kind of whistling in the dark, or shouting in solitary confinement, to keep our spirits up.

According to Heidegger,* "All the little harmless, well-explored and safe principalities which make up the world of our work and the world surrounding us", all that makes up the "one"—of "one says", "one thinks", "one does"—that is, public opinion, convention, tradition, form a kind of escape mechanism (the phrase is mine) against the nihilistic consciousness.

According to Sartre,† "All the fixed stable divisions of reality, all the constructs of our concepts and words, all the worlds of art, science, ethics, society, personality", are the devices of *les salauds*—the protection racketeers, we may perhaps translate—who offer to defend mankind against this consciousness.

In short, according to both, the whole of life, or the whole of articulate or structured life, is a cover for the emptiness. According to both also, the nihilistic consciousness should be welcomed: it is the only "lucid" vision, the only "authentic" revelation.

*The Pure Case*

The above description of the nihilistic state is bound to appear improbable simply because it is of a "pure case" and there is no "pure case" in nature, which is the reason why all science with its "pure" gases, "pure" this

* See above, note on p. 49.

† *L'Etre et le Néant*, and R. Jolivet, *Les Doctrines Existentialistes*.

and that, is also bound to appear improbable outside the laboratory. The description calls for correction or supplementation, which we can provide by remembering that the state as given in it is to be looked for in the whole of humanity: in any one individual it is to be found fragmentarily only, combined with fragments of quite different things, including its opposite, viz. an opposite nihilism, which I shall also describe later.

Man's house as I picture it is one of many storeys and this kind of nihilism—"nether nihilism" we may call it—is a subterranean river which flows underneath its foundations and which may rise up and cover it, or into which it may sink, any moment.

*Intellectual, Moral and Spiritual Saturation Bombing*

Nihilism is simply human and therefore to be met with everywhere and in all ages. But as forming the intellectual, moral and spiritual climate of a whole age, in the way in which, for example, faith formed the climate of the Middle Ages, the "ages of faith", which yet contained plenty of sceptics and unbelievers in spite of the burnings, it is peculiarly modern.

The chief blame for it is generally assigned to science. This would be grossly unfair and misleading if by "science" were meant the researches of physicists, chemists, biologists, astrophysicists, etc. It means, however, what, for want of a better name, may be called the science of the meaning of life which some have tried to construct out of the physical sciences, explaining away every revelation, or experience, and leaving only sense experience or what the physical sciences can make of it. It is that science, or rather pseudo-science, which has

produced what is called the "alien" or "hostile" universe: the universe in which modern man finds himself "A stranger and afraid In a world I never made";* or a mere speck whose history is "a dance of dust stirred up by the vacuum cleaner";† or "A mote lost in the infinite vistas of time and space, the helpless sport of random forces, the product of indifferent elements, the prey of hostile energies, crippled by savage encounters with Moby Dick—all moving in some cosmic 'Brownian movement' ";‡ or a vain struggler expecting that a time will come when "imperishable monuments and immortal deeds, death itself, and love stronger than death, will be as if they have not been. Nor will anything that is, be better or worse for all that the labour, genius, devotion and suffering of man have striven through countless ages to effect".§ In short, this pseudo-science has left modern man with what, as anything man can value or be attached to, is precisely nothing.

But more to blame, though scarcely ever blamed, are the sciences of man, or the humanities, which, in England at least, are not called science and are contrasted with it, but which being older, have been at the demolition work longer than it, though its methods may recently have sharpened theirs—I mean history, anthropology, sociology, the comparative study of religions, morals, institutions, etc. These have shown all creeds, codes and customs as "relative": that is to say, man-made, changeable and changing. Intentionally or not, they have cast and broken the tables of the testimony with the writing

* Housman.
† Arthur Koestler, in *The Observer*, October 12, 1952.
‡ Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life*, p. 63.
§ Lord Balfour.

of God graven upon them. They have let us into the secret of the escape mechanism or protection racket, as Heidegger or Sartre might say; for rightly or wrongly, as soon as we understand how a thing has come to be, we cease to believe in its absoluteness. They created a scandal at their inception, through the Sophists of fifth-century Greece, and they are raising no less a scandal at this very moment, in connection with "morality", i.e. sex morality.* It is they that are filling the emptiness with the lamentation of those who do not want to lose their ideals or idols and the jubilation of those who want none of these against the nothingness but only distraction, the merry souls who are just out for a "good time".

Along with science or pseudo-science the humanities have been responsible for what I have called the intellectual, moral and spiritual saturation bombing.

*Physical Destruction*

The actual physical bombing and other destruction on an unprecedented scale have, of course, worked to the same end. The traumatic effect on the imagination produced by even hearing or reading about thousands of human beings wiped out in a few hours or millions sent to the gas chambers—by realising, through a spectacular demonstration, that this can be done to "immortal souls" without any heavens immediately crashing down on the perpetrators of the deeds—the trauma caused by this has been incalculable. Its echoes continue reverberating in a literature—the extrovert counterpart of the introvert literature mentioned before—which feeds on brutality,

* "If you would not have a law end soon, conceal its beginning" (Pascal).

cruelty, savagery, sadism, masochism, the more meaningless uncreative aspects of sex, insanity—in short, nothingness.* So stimulated by the past, this imagination has nothing to look forward to than more nothingness, greater destructiveness—from atomic war.

*The Bored Lord of the Universe*

The positive inspiration of science and technology combined, their elevation of man to the position of Cosmocrator, the World Conqueror and Emperor, leads no less to nihilism. An alien and hostile universe is bad enough, but a manageable one, one that can be explained in a few algebraic formulae and made to perform or taken to pieces like a clockwork toy, is even worse!

Lastly, the mere comfort brought about by the "miracles of science" and organisation produces vast boredom, and the raising of the "standards of living" may make living intolerable by lowering the will to live and thus lead to widespread suicide. This at any rate is what the evidence would seem to add up to provided by a country like Sweden.

*Reason for Hope*

Contemporary nihilism, so triggered off, seems to be limitless. Why, then, instead of joining the prophets of

* In the *Observer Weekend Review*, Jan. 3, 1965, Philip Toynbee comments on the "purely destructive element, a surrender to chaos and to hatred, in a great deal of modern literature, modern thought and modern social attitudes", illustrated by the extraordinary phenomenon of "a community which has produced, without a sense either of shame or of the ridiculous, a dramatic festival called 'The Theatre of Cruelty'." More attractive is Ionesco's theatre of the Absurd, which cleverly disintegrates all sense into nonsense, so that we are forced to ask what is the sense of sense or whether there is any sense at all.

lamentation and denunciation, do I feel inclined to cry hopefully hallelujah?

Because hope and nihilism are allies.

Because I hope that a clean sweep on a world scale may mean a new world.

Because, though there is no limit to nihilism and to its hold, there can be a different beholding of nihilism and I hope for a change in the beholding.

Because I hope that when the world has been reduced to waiting for Godot there will follow the Coming.

Because I have seen and see salvation coming from the sense of nothingness even when inflicted by circumstances.

Because I have seen, see and hope to show, or at least to indicate, salvation following even more surely upon the sense of nothingness when accepted or chosen.

That salvation is the continuously renewed creation of our universe out of nothing.

## CHAPTER III

# METHOD AND MADNESS

"*Dare to be Sane*"

But how can one, how dare one, announce tidings of any salvation, not to mention such a paradoxical salvation, I can hear and see the common or garden so-called "humanist" ask, raising his hands in horror. For he considers himself bound indissolubly and in perpetuity to the gospel of No-salvation, compelled to be a "free thinker" (man, according to Sartre, is a creature doomed to freedom)—by "Science", by a closed and firm body of knowledge or philosophy which lays down what is "rational" and what is not.

There is no such "Science", knowledge or philosophy. This is the first part of the good news, "news" still to the generality, though it is by now ancient history amongst contemporary philosophers. For even more than its soul, it is the intellect of the contemporary world that needs to be saved—from insanity or imbecility. For "Those whom a god wishes to destroy he first drives *mad*".

What is served up here is not a dish specially prepared for philosophers. Such a preparation would involve stretching an intuition into a chain of syllogisms or expanding it into a kind of analytical geometry, constricting a metaphor into an algebraic formula, and a simile into an equation, and supplying for a road sign an Ordnance Survey map. What the seeker of the Way needs are neither chains nor charts, but the kind of

glimpses that intuitions are and the kind of signs that metaphors and similes provide: what he has to find is, after all, more like himself than like a mathematically demonstrable truth, and my purpose is not so much to fix his goal on the map of the intelligible, as to mark the boundaries of familiar intelligibility beyond which his goal lies and to familiarise him with the ever-startling and boundless strangeness of his search.

*Descriptive Philosophy*

But I propose to counter madness—the contemporary world's, my own, the Devil's—with the method of a certain philosophy. This is the philosophy I have practised in all that I have ever written, and have called "descriptive". I will begin by illustrating it with two examples.

The visitor at a certain Mental Home, after watching for some time a patient engrossed in fishing from an empty bath asks indulgently, "Caught anything yet?", and in return for his would-be sympathetic understanding is rebuked with, "Idiot! Can't you see there is no water?" The joke lies, of course, in the surprising method of the madness. But what is the cause of the surprise? Explanation, ready-made or too hasty: it assumes the inability in the patient to distinguish between fact and fiction. On the other hand, unprejudiced observation not aiming at anything more than description can suggest eventually the conclusion that the madman is not suffering from anything of the sort but is simply interested in the mere gesture, or motions, of fishing—in fishing as a fine art like dancing, with no end to achieve outside itself (i.e. a catch); it may assimilate his state to

the play-acting of children (who are also supposed, wrongly, not to be able to distinguish between fact and fiction*), or, for that matter, to the fishing of the majority of fishermen. In other words, the peculiarity of the patient may be seen to consist in something that is not intellectual at all but affective, namely interest; this insight may ultimately lead to quite different treatment.

The second example comes from a phenomenon specially remarked by Gabriel Marcel. Sometimes we are confronted by the presence, the quality, as undeniable as it is unsolicited, of someone who is not there or who is dead. "Imagination" is the term used to explain, and at the same time to preclude or annihilate, an experience which is yet of such vital interest to the whole of mankind. On the other hand, "physical experience", "extra-sensory perception", "survival", "telepathy", "astral bodies", try to explain the obscure by the more obscure and bury the experience under mountains of unacceptable and unassimilable theory. Suppose, however, that we give up trying to explain and are content to observe and describe. Then we shall distinguish carefully the experience from imagining, remembering, hallucination, and mark its similarities to and differences from the perception of a physical object on the one hand and the imageless apprehension of a meaning on the other. We may conclude, if we conclude anything, that we have here something *sui generis*; that our classifications, "real", "imaginary", "perception", "hallucination", and so on are insufficient for it. And if we make a habit of this patient and submissive waiting upon the revelation of experience instead

* Try offering them, when they are hungry, the pieces of cardboard which satisfy them as meats and sweetmeats in their games.

of rushing in explanatorily where angels fear to tread, we shall find ourselves in an intriguing and exciting universe in which near and far, here and there, the same and the different, the one and the many, the quick and the dead, are antitheses useful, and indeed necessary, for a limited number of purposes, but not absolute, eschatological, like the separation into the sheep and the goats at the end of all things.

That is what descriptive philosophy tries to do. It botanises: it observes and describes. It refuses to validate, or at any rate it defers validation. It bids us neither "believe, that we may understand" nor "doubt that we may understand", but merely look that we may see.

*Looking v. Explaining*

A good illustration of the very opposite of this policy is the procedure of men like Nietzsche and Rilke. Their perceptiveness and powers of expression qualify them as experts of the highest order for receiving and communicating the kind of experiences which are of the utmost significance for the seeker of the Way. But having delivered them, and delivered them inimitably, they dismiss the revelations granted to them, as "illusions". This they do because of the pronouncements of "science", which they can handle as skilfully only as a child or savage can a complicated telescope or microscope.

This is explaining away. Worse even is the kind of murderous adoption which consists of explaining something by reducing it to something else. The procedure is like the practice of the doctor who, whenever he came across a disease he could not treat, infected his patient

with one he could. A follower of this philosophy of reduction will never say, for instance, that he cannot understand and has no use for music or climbing Mount Everest. On the contrary, he pronounces as an authority on both and declares the first to be an *ersatz* for the male's call for a mate (that this piece of bird lore happens to be wrong is a mere detail—what matters is that it is "scientific") and the second for his mounting of her.

*Evolution of Intelligibility, and the Larger Empiricism*

Both these forms of explanation have long been epidemics of the age, infecting alike the subtlest and most learned and the stupidest minds. They are its scourges, like nihilism. But at the same time they are acting like blessings, through bringing about—by reaction—the descriptive philosophy I have just described. They hold the greatest promise of our times for the future, perhaps a unique promise.

Explaining, making intelligible, is a kind of fitting of things into the categories, or pigeonholes, of the intelligence. But though everything else has been supposed to change, these categories have been treated as incapable of increase, modification, improvement, development, growth. This even in the heyday of the belief in universal Evolution and Progress. If an experience or insight could not be squeezed into any of these pigeonholes, then, however vital and significant it was felt to be, one either turned a blind eye on it or called life "absurd" or "irrational", absurdly or irrationally.

But now this situation is beginning to change. Every year almost is bringing forth a new physics and astrophysics, new not merely in their facts but in the cate-

gories for handling these facts;* and for the foundation of all science we are getting, besides mathematics of infinity, an infinity of mathematics. This change descriptive philosophy welcomes and treasures. For the change authorises it to respect true empiricism as contrasted with that empiricism which is supposed to come from science and which is an enthronement of one kind of experience only as a despot without even any subjects to rule over because these have been spirited away or slain—by explanation.

*Mystery*

Through this respect descriptive philosophy preserves and fosters the sense of mystery and the proper attitude of humility towards mystery. If we mean to learn, we must come to mystery as little children prepared to have our intelligence moulded by it instead of claiming to know that mystery has been moulded to fit our intelligence, childish though that intelligence is as yet. Now we know that we do not know, but we hope that one day we shall grow into knowledge and understanding. What we have now is milk for babes, but some day, when our intelligence is of full age, we shall have the knowledge that is strong meat.

That sense of mystery is being banished, if not by science, by the "scientific" empiricists, who are creating a desert and calling it an empire—"the empire of science".

* The physicist Werner Heisenberg writes that "the transition in science from fields of experience already investigated to fresh ones never consists merely in applying laws already known to these new fields. On the contrary, a really new field of experience always leads to the crystallisation of a new system of scientific concepts and laws".

"The kind of things I do not know, neither do I imagine I know," Socrates used to say, and that is why, he explained, the Delphic oracle declared him to be the wisest of men. If to know that he knows marks the distance between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the animal kingdom, then to know that he does not know measures the no smaller distance between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo socraticus*, or the Socratic man: to know that he does not know and also to know the role played by this not-knowing. Mystery and knowledge are correlatives, like obverse and reverse: either without the other is nonsense.* In what follows I shall try and observe scrupulously this delicate relationship. It is the failure to observe it by theology that turns so many "truly religious souls" away from religion. For the latter has to deal with two things. The first is the inner life, the moral part, as it may inadequately be denoted, of which there can be a science of self-evident propositions, propositions with a logic more compelling than that of a logic itself and self-evidence more uneclipsable than that of mathematics, such as I have said the belief in the Cross had for me. But the second, the origin and governance of the physical universe, and the historical process, is a riddle of the Sphinx. To treat these two things, that which need not, and that which cannot (not yet at least), be explained, as one, is to distort and falsify either. The best thing is to set forth as precisely as possible what we do understand and to expose clearly what precisely we cannot understand and why.†

* See below, pp. 101–3.
† See below, pp. 101–26; 136–7; 155.

"*Judge Not*"

What explanation is in the theoretical sphere, praise and blame are in the practical. Either of these two replaces its proper object by something else: the first by an idol, the second by an ogre. Looking that we may see brings about unconscious and spontaneous conformation with the excellence which moves us instead of the worshipful but forced and artificial imitation of the idol. It calms moral indignation and silences condemnation, so that we can obey the precept "Judge not". It is remarkable how our attitude to a man who for some reason or another has "driven us mad" changes when we begin to look upon him as a character in or for one of Chekhov's tales: by simply contemplating him lovingly we begin to want to treat him lovingly. True, Chekhov is one whose writing seems to be the overflow of charity and compassion. But perhaps it is only loving looking that leads to true seeing. It helps us realise the truth of the saying, "To understand all, is to forgive all": understanding is the sympathetic insight which comes from patient observation, and forgiving is seeing the fruitful way of dealing with the fault, crime or sin of our neighbour. Such seeing, where it takes the place of the distorting tortures of guilt and remorse, is also the only thing that can open us to forgiveness for ourselves.

Not to be busy for ever judging what things and persons are good and what bad, but to be prepared to learn what "good" and "bad" are, how these two pigeonholes can be improved or replaced, is to learn to grow up.

Cynicism (by which I mean here only deficiency of admiration) and slack tolerance, or deficiency of condemnation, are amongst the vices censored by the critics

of the age. Behind both is the promise of a really understanding future generation.

*Revelation*

Such is the method I propose to follow here. Revelation, the revelation of experience, will be my sole authority; extending a given experience by the imagination as one extends a given series or curve by what in mathematics is called "extrapolation" will constitute my sole theorising or theologising. I have not chosen a rare or rarefied experience, but the commonest and most basic. The experience is Everyman's; indeed Everyman not merely *has*, but *is*, the experience. If that experience appear to some "mystical", perhaps that is because Everyman is a "mystic" even more than he is a poet, mathematician or philosopher.

Paradox is the language proper to revelation. For any genuine view, whether bird's eyeview or worm's, is bound to be paradoxical—that is, contrary to *doxa*, the conventional opinion and expectation which come from our blinkered, tired, or merely token viewing. For that reason I shall not try to bulldoze out of the way or plaster over paradoxes where it is impossible to describe an experience without them. Paradox also expresses best the interplay between mystery and knowledge: hence it is the idiom common to all mysticism.

*Nothing*

I shall ask of the reader only one bit of "philosophising". That is, to think of Nothing (or Nothingness) seriously. I have already used the idea in the previous chapter, where and how everyone would have used it: speaking in a moral context, I defined "nothing" as the absence of

values. But from now on I want to denote by it a presence, and an active presence. The idea is the central one of this book. As ideas are best understood from their origin and the work they are made or meant to do, I shall give it first autobiographically.

One day, at the end of a rather strenuous course of reflection—I had been considering various theories about God and his relation to the world—I asked myself, "If you think beyond this point, what do you get to?" and the answer was: "Nothing." It was a momentary flash of realisation or contemplation—that is to say, made up of emotion as well as thought, such as one has in what is called "the moment of truth". It seemed to open the heavens, but did so only like a flash of lightning and then was cut off. Immediately, I connected it, but without getting much illumination, with the orthodox dogma of creation out of nothing and the current theory of the continuous creation of the universe out of hydrogen atoms which arise from nothing or just arise. Next I had a thought which I did find illuminating, particularly for the inquiry I was trying to work out. If God was Nothing, then that explained how of two people, one an unbeliever and the other a believer, looking at and indeed seeing the same object, the first might say he saw nothing, the second that he saw the All. It also answered the question that had been puzzling me for some time, What type of mind could not believe in God even if it accepted the whole of religion as far as dogma and morality were concerned? The answer, I saw, was, "The mind which could only conceive of a universe made up of definite and ready-made things only, with no room for nothing or for origination"—and that, I now realised, must be what a

"closed universe" was.* Nevertheless, God might be present to such a mind, as indeed to all minds, instead of being confined to a particular type of mind. Only then—this is what often happens with ideas: when they have become truly ours we recognise that they are ours only by adoption, or not exclusively ours—did I connect with "Negative Theology".

According to this theology, all we can say of God is that He is and what He is not. He is nothing because he is above everything. But by the same token he is also everything, or the nothing in everything. This Nothing-All is described paradoxically by combinations of all sorts of opposites: as the rich Nothingness, the Nothingness from which any thing may be born, the inexhaustible Source of creativity, the Abyss on which everything can be founded, the Desert from which comes all fruit, the Darkness from which comes all light. This reality is inconceivable, unknowable, ineffable, unnameable; and yet it is also present in all thought, knowledge and true utterance: "ray of darkness" and "cloud of unknowing" are the favourite names for the knowledge of it, which requires us to relinquish both all sense knowledge and all intellectual operations.

Put like this, this may sound either an absolutely empty notion or the very extraordinary expression of a very extraordinary experience. I hope to show that it stands for something that belongs to everyone no less than seeing, hearing, feeling hungry, thirsty, cold, glad or sad, and having the most concrete notions.

The opposite of nothing is something. A thing is a something: so is a person, a thought, a feeling, the body,

* See above, pp. 42–3, and below, pp. 101–3 and 138.

the mind, a quality, a universal, a world. A something is what it is and not something else: it is determinate. Being determinate, it is knowable: for to know it is to define it as one something amongst other somethings, to mark the boundaries which separate it from these, to circumscribe it, to determine it; the logic of knowledge is, "A is A and not B, not C, not D, etc." What is not something is no-thing, nothing; it can, however, exist and be in some way active. It is indeterminate and therefore indeterminable, indefinable, uncircumscribable, unknowable—mystery. But it is revealed, or manifested, in all sorts of ways and has to be referred to by our knowledge at all sorts of points: as such it is an open mystery.

In particular, reference to it is inevitable, it seems to me, in the consideration of two things: that of origination (i.e. the emergence of the new) and that of fundamental issues.

We may consider it possible that life arose from the not-living in the same way as every new species arose from what was not that species, by the addition of mutation to mutation. But each mutation is new and presents the same problem as life. And when we come to mind and to the different forms of mind—for example, the mathematical, moral or aesthetic—we seem to *see* the impossibility of mind as such and each form of it coming from what is not mind or that form of mind: the attempt to demonstrate such a derivation simply reduces the derived to what it is supposed to be derived from—to the non-mental, non-mathematical, non-moral, non-aesthetic.* We conclude that mind and each of its forms

* Or else we say that everything (e.g. a stone) is really living, really mental, etc., i.e. that everything is really everything else—at least "potentially" or "in the germ".

must have originated from nothing, or the indeterminate —that is to say, from what, if it is not determined as mind, or the mathematical, moral, or aesthetic mind, is not determined as not-mind, not-mathematical, not-moral, not-aesthetic, either.

Or, to come to fundamental issues, why, for example, do we think it important, to be honest at least with ourselves and not to "feed on the roses of illusion"? The natural, primitive and unaffected answer would be, I think: "For *no particular* reason." For some things that we do or refrain from doing the reason or motive cause is outside ourselves and larger than ourselves, but still determinate and determinable, e.g. the continuation of the race or the preservation of society. But for others, we spontaneously recognise, it is indeterminate and indeterminable. To the question "What is the good man good at or for, as the good doctor is good at or for healing, the good pilot at or for steering?" the answer—suggested by Socrates—should be: "At or for nothing, or *nothing in particular*."

We may also think of such sayings as that when God brings us to nothing, He brings us to Himself or that where nothing is, there is God. We may even, if we look deep enough, see profundity—certainly unsuspected and unintended by the mockers, who are prompted by the very spirit of shallowness—in the gibe that a man comes to God only when he has lost, or is about to lose, everything, including his wits.

A certain factor in the intellectual climate of the age inhibits or distorts the reference to the indeterminate, or nothing, just as it makes us turn away quickly and shamefacedly from many things in ourselves because, although

we feel them in our bones to have a vital significance, we cannot tie that significance down to anything definable. The indefinable is anathema, although it is by no means the same as the imprecise, the vague and woolly, or the rosily misty, but on the contrary is itself brought out by the extremity of precision and stimulates more and more and finer and finer precision.*

I might have used "the infinite" instead of "the indeterminate". But that more familiar term, especially when spelled with a capital, is charged with an inflationary emotion which I want to avoid; at the same time its meaning is inadequate to my purpose: it denotes properly an unlimited amount of something determinate, e.g. numbers, space, time, worlds, etc. The indeterminate is capital for the seeker of the Way; but his search must be for quality, not for quantity—not just for "a lot" or for "more and more".

Instead of "nothing" I might also have used the more acceptable and respectable "possibility". But the latter denotes something non-existent, or unreal, or dependent on its reality upon the past and present, while my "nothing" makes these two dependent in a sense on the future, though a curious one, or calls for a rethinking of the tenses. If this rethinking seems like standing on one's head, many have had their eyes opened by that unfamiliar posture to features in a landscape to which they had been kept blind by the more familiar one.

Some or perhaps all of the things set forth here the reader will have met with correlated by more familiar and, he may consider, more credible concepts. But such things must constantly be seen in a new light to be seen

* Cf. above, pp. 30–1, and below, 120–3.

at all, for old lights, old concepts, are somehow quickly discredited, and thus obscured by those (including the seer himself in certain moods) who have no eyes to see with or no desire to use them. In what follows I hope the reader will find a new light.

I shall not attempt to justify the idea of "nothing" —that is to say, of "nothing" which exists and is active—by or against other ideas instead of letting it justify itself as simply an instrument *ad hoc*, or for a particular piece of work. Such an attempt would take me beyond the scope of descriptive philosophy. The reader may look upon what I am asking of him as a suspension of disbelief—disbelief in the non-existence of the indeterminate. He may entertain the idea of the indeterminate simply as a "working hypothesis". More humbly still, he may consider it as a device for keeping and holding together what is experienced and seen and for defending it against explanation. For devices are needed to "save the phenomena" from the explanatory systems which have supposedly been invented "to save the phenomena" but which—as so many governments behave towards many of the governed for whose benefit alone they have a right to exist—suppress many of the phenomena in order to save themselves.

*Why Not Say Nothing?*

If one has something to say and has discovered to whom to say it, no special reason is required for saying it: it says itself. That is the nature of communication. But there may be reasons for *not* saying it, at least for saying nothing about "nothing". To the writing of books there is no end. There are thousands and thousands of books,

and every one of them, either because it is so bad or because it is so good, seems a sufficient reason for not writing another. When one considers how much one would like to accomplish and needs to be accomplished, and how little is accomplished even with oneself by anything one says, one feels like a voice crying in the wilderness only to be echoed by self-mockery, before even opening one's lips.

But communication is part of living. To ask what is its use or justification is to ask what is the use or justification of living. That question we generally try to repress as unhealthy, and my generation of philosophers busied themselves making the present generation cleverer and vainer even than themselves at demonstrating that the question is "improper", therefore (or because?) it cannot be answered. But if it is unhealthy and improper, then the whole of life is unhealthy and improper, since that question springs from its very heart. It is the pebble life urges us now and again to drop in order to sound the bottom of the abyss of our loneliness, and its service—an irreplaceable one—is to make us aware of the immensity of that abyss. But it certainly cannot be answered by any ordinary "philosophising". The answer is given to us in those states when we have our eyes opened to the invisible and our ears to the inaudible, facing that which peoples the wilderness and fills the abyss—the "Nothingness from which any thing can be born"* and which is the opposite of, and yet the same as, the "damn all" or all-damned of the nihilism I have referred to.

Q.E.D., *quod est demonstrandum*, which *is* to be "demonstrated".

* J. Boehme.

# CHAPTER IV

# THE CREATIVE NOUGHT

## I. THE POETIC ACTIVITY

*The Meaning of "Creative"*

The opposite of the bored is the creative life. Where people used to speak of the good life, or the ideal life, or the moral life, or the spiritual life, we speak of the creative life. "Creative" is one of the few ennobling or aspiring words which have not yet become "dirty words"—one of the few we can still utter uninhibitedly instead of having to mutter them apologetically. This is perhaps because we do not quite know what it means, or because it speaks to us in an inviting rather than a demanding or hectoring tone or holds out promises rather than provokes pretences—there cannot be the same hypocrisy or cant about being creative as about being good, moral or spiritual. The real reason, I think, is that it denotes the special need and unconscious striving of our age, the quality of its defect, the promise of its nihilism. Ours will be known as the pre-eminently creative age or at least as the harbinger of such an age. It is certainly striking how in music, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, in every art indeed, also in every institution, convention, norm and practice—in everything—we are eager to start from scratch, from nothing, after reducing everything to nothing by our questioning and criticism. And all this simultaneously. Sometimes it seems that we are anxious

to invent existence itself. If those vague terms, "existentialism" and "existentialist anxiety", may be given a rather special meaning, it may be said that we are living in the age of existentialism and are motivated by existentialist anxiety.

As the magic word of the present destined to open up the future, "creative" is, naturally, not defined and perhaps should not be. For definition dissipates magic, and, as this particular magic is benign, it is worth preserving. However, definition in this case only brings us to mystery, which is always the home of magic. A work is called "creative" with special reference to two features, its origination and its unity. It is not the result of the past or the parts but comes from nothing; that is to say, its parts and matter may have existed before, but its unifying life is new. That is what distinguishes it from what has merely been put together or manufactured.

*Inspiration and its Stages*

As used currently, the term "creative" comes from the arts. I will therefore examine briefly what it stands for in one of the arts, poetic inspiration, in order that we may see whether creativeness in the arts can throw light on the conditions of the creative life and whether or to what extent this life is the Way we are looking for. For this purpose I shall set up a "pure case", repeating the warning I have given how "pure cases" are to be taken. My poet will be a poet only, one whose roles say of husband, father, breadwinner, citizen, etc., are neglected in the consideration (for that matter they often are by himself in practice also), just as are his digestive, respiratory and sleeping processes. No moment of his actual life

consists just of the activities described here. Similarly, no moment of the mathematician's life consists of mathematical thinking only; yet an account of this thinking must exclude any other kind of thinking or activity as irrelevant. The importance of this observation is the following. When I speak of "nothing", I shall mean "nothing in the world of poetry", i.e. no poems; "amnesia" will mean "forgetfulness of poems", and "empty" will mean "empty of poetry".

Of course, the neat schema of the different stages, clearly separated from and succeeding each other in that order, bears the same relation to the irregular and chaotic reality as does any schema, say that of the ages of man or even of the seasons. The sketch is intended particularly to bring out the connection between creation and nothingness.

The more remote antecedent of the poet's creative, or inspired, activity may be a general boredom, or feeling of emptiness, such as I have described, leading often, if he is not careful, to drugs or drink. In particular it is a poetic nihilism, or iconoclasm: all that is called poetry is not poetry for him; all other poets have missed the bus; something he knows not what, something that *is not* (i.e. is not this not-poetry) is wanted: poetry is yet to be born. On a large scale this iconoclasm can be witnessed in every revolution of taste: each generation of poets is set on annihilating, by ridicule, if not all previous generations, at least the immediately preceding one.

The nearer antecedent is, ideally, a total amnesia, partly half-consciously induced, partly just befalling him: an amnesia certainly of all existing poems, including his own, but even almost of language itself, so that each

word when needed will spring from him, a second Adam, new minted, a brand-new creation to fit a brand-new creature; his mind (or that part of it which alone is relevant, his poetic mind), is a clean slate, wiped clean even of slate, a blank, a pure receptivity. The practical importance of this amnesia is immense: without some degree of it the danger of echoing, if only of oneself, or particularly oneself, cannot be escaped; it is fatally easy to become a Niobe, or someone petrified into one pose.

The blank is activated by two powers: courage inspired by hope, and confidence inspired by faith. The hope and faith, both illimitable, are that the something-one-knows-not-what, the something wanted, the something that is-not the not-poetry, will be coming forth, and that its doing so is of importance one knows not why: the importance is indefinable, uncircumscribable.

The penultimate stage consists of attending to the ultimate object. It is a confident but patient and completely submissive waiting. It can be described best negatively: as a non-attending to, an excluding of, everything but the ultimate object,* the keeping of the blank mind blank. Of the ultimate object itself all that can be said is that it is nothing—nothing but the undefined object to this attending, hoping and waiting. If one has ever said what more it is, at this moment one must forget it; if one happens to be a theorist about poetry as well as a poet, the poet must bury the theorist before setting to work.

* Though attending, or half-attending, to something else may help the waiting, as the reading of a book may help us to wait for a bus, provided of course it does not make us miss it.

*The Muse*

The final stage is that of inspiration itself, of the dawning of the right word. At this stage the ultimate object is still indefinable, inderterminate, still nothing—nothing but the promise of unlimited inspiration. It does not, of course, appear as the poem or poetry, any more than the beloved appears as the kiss to which we are moved by the sight or touch of the beloved, or as kissing in general.

And the poet feels it is other than himself for two reasons. In the first place it stretches beyond what he is familiar with as himself. In the second place it stretches that familiar self. This it does by its challenge, imperativeness and authoritativeness: he cannot order or manage it but, on the contrary, is ordered and managed by it.* (And what, after all, do I mean by saying that a particular tree or person is other than myself? It is to be noted that there are degrees in this sense of otherness and that these correspond with degrees of unfamiliarity, and of challenge to and power over oneself, characterising the other.)

Traditionally the poet has personified the source of his inspiration as "the Muse". But he feels it also as most intimately himself; hence he calls it "my Muse".

*The Elusive Quarry*

Strictly speaking, poetry is always in the making only, it is the poetic activity itself. Hence the attributes of the poem—e.g. newness, or originality, and indeterminacy,

* Nietzsche and Rilke, who nevertheless deny this otherness, speak of themselves as being springs touched by an invisible hand, of being commanded to write, of being "merely an incarnation, merely a mouthpiece, merely a medium of superior powers", of "enormous obedience" and of "grace".

or freedom—can only be seen fully during the process of creation with the eye of the creator. They may be invisible to the literary historian looking at the poem, which he may consider he can prove to have been "determined" by all the poetry that has gone before and by the conditions in which the poet lived. Just so anyone looking at a statue and having no inkling of the sculptor's creative activity might decide the statue had been determined by the nature of the stone or bronze.

For the poem is not the poetry, nor is the poetry in the poem. With the finishing of the poem the poet is back in the nihilism from which he started, and his poem has become an item in the mass of not-poetry. The real poem is always the next, and the next, and the next—always in the future. "When composition begins," writes Shelley,* "inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet." So Francis Thompson speaks of himself as adoring "The impitiable Daemon, Beauty, Perpetually Hers, but she never his."†

The immediate poem can, however, serve as a stimulus to further poetry. This it does particularly through two features in it.

The first is its overtone or *plus*, which prevents us from saying that a poem is just "about" this or that something, e.g. "about" a simple primrose by the river's brim and nothing more. As in the other arts, the *plus* tends to be unlimited, uncircumscribable. In Tintoretto's painting for example, according to Ruskin, it gives a stone, a leaf,

* In *A Defence of Poetry.*

† *To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster.*

a shadow, "meaning and oracular voice". Thus it takes us out of the world of somethings into that of nothing. Every art, it has been said, aspires to the condition of music:* music *is* the *plus* and the *plus is* the music, so that of a particular composition we can say either that it "means" everything or that it "means" nothing.

The other feature is its unifying power, its "esemplastic" or "coadunative" quality as Coleridge calls it, the power of moulding or adding many things into one. It is that which, to refer to painting, "coadunates" in the smile of Mona Lisa "the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias . . ."* It is to the parts analysed by the critic or historian what life is to the parts of the body displayed on the dissecting table. Putting that unifying power into a multiplicity is precisely what is meant by the poet's "creating", and it is that power which communicates or rouses creative activity in us: it sets the "imagination" going.

This, then, is what the poetic activity appears to descriptive philosophy—a movement from the world of nothing to the world of Nothing. Are not the two worlds the same, the difference lying simply in the condition of the poet, who tosses as in a restless dream in the first world and is fully awake and alive in the second? The motive powers responsible for the movement are two: courage/hope and confidence/faith. The movement begins with the nothing becoming more nothing: the amnesia of existing poems deepens; the poet, *qua* poet absorbed in creating, becomes more and more bare recipient, open to the Nothing, the indefinite Emitter, or

* Walter Pater.

Giver. The movement "ends" with the Nothing appearing, or manifesting itself, in a new poem, which those two powers "make" or evoke. But the new poem is never "all there". Hence it is constantly a pointer to, a remembrancer of, the Nothing. It is constantly urging us further on towards the Nothing: the movement never ceases.

These are the marks to be looked for in any would-be parallel to the poetic, or in general the artistic, activity.

## II. CREATIVE LIVING

*The Marks of Livingness, or Objectivity*

If life is to be that parallel—that is to say, if we are to talk of "creative living" meaningfully—we must be on the lookout first of all for inevitable differences. Poetry, whatever it is, is only one part or function of life, and the poet is only man engaged in one activity or with one faculty only—the imagination, whatever that is; life, on the other hand, is the whole man. For the poet it is the imagination that has to be empty—of poems. What is it for the whole man? Life? And empty of what? Of the objects of living? Amnesia for the poet is forgetfulness of poems. What is it for the whole man? Is it forgetfulness of self, since his life is his self?

What is "life"? All our appetitions and ambitions, the objects which satisfy them and their satisfactions: hunger, food and eating; desires for all sorts of experiences and activities and the means to them; strivings for power, position, distinction, honour, and the means to or symbols for them.

The objects of what is called the creative life range,

by common consent, from a trivial hobby like stamp-collecting, through games like cricket or chess, and passions, like those for mountain climbing, exploration or scientific investigation, to vocations or missions, like converting the heathen, healing lepers or liberating a people, and devotion to a person.

Its essence is to be seen, if only in a rudimentary form, even at the lowest end of the scale. The creatively living subject is interested in the object as an end in itself, for its own sake, and not as a means to something else; he is interested for no particular, i.e. determinate, reason—his interest is disinterested, gratuitous. He does not use or manipulate the object, but "gives himself", "devotes himself", is "taken out of himself" "absorbed" by it, is directed, formed or conformed by it. His is the opposite of the "self-centred" and "self-seeking" life; it may be called in contrast the "objective" life, because it is directed away from himself and towards the object.

*Focus and Vortex*

The object is, and is felt by others to be, a focus of "life" in general, of quality, of significance, of magic, of mana, of the indeterminate or uncircumscribable: this it concentrates in itself and with it irradiates, illuminates and invigorates everything, inspiring even those who are not its devotees, and inspiring them with a devotion which is not necessarily for itself. In this it differs strongly from what superficially resembles it—that which I have called a vortex, e.g. some obsession, fascination or fanaticism. The vortex contracts or constricts life to a point; the only thing it "creates" is a waste round itself; it repels non-devotees, whom its devotees exclude (as do the

"Exclusive Bretheren") when they do not force them into conformity.

*The* Plus

The living subject's talk about his object always strikes the non-devotee as a kind of *mystique*: to the non-philatelist, for example, stamp-collecting simple stamp-collecting is and nothing more, just as a primrose by the river's brim "a simple primrose is and nothing more" to the unpoetic soul; he talks about it "sensibly"—i.e. as just stamp-collecting, as a determinate, limited something amongst and over against other, limited somethings. To the stamp-collector, on the other hand, stamp-collecting always is something more, something with an aura or halo of an indefinite, indefinable, uncircumscribable, *plus*: it is not really something (i.e. a determinate amongst other determinates) but is incomparable; it is "It". Hence his talk about it is full of "enthusiasm", which in the eighteenth century was synonymous with "madness"; the talk is, strictly speaking (i.e. in the sense of "sensible" given above), nonsensical: "All work done just for the love of it," someone has said,* "strikes most people as mysterious, or not quite one-and-one-make-two".

*The Art of Life and Nihilism*

What does the *plus* point to, the *plus* of every focus which makes the poetry of every enthusiast's *mystique* and sets him apart amongst the staid and sober as at least ever so slightly "odd" almost the moment he opens his lips on the object of his enthusiasm, though on everything

* E. H. W. Meyerstein in *Tom Tallion*, p. 25.

else he may be himself as staid and sober as they make them?

The man who chooses the colour of his tie so as to match the rest of his clothes exactly or some slang phrase so as to express exactly what he thinks or feels is an artist or poet, though he "may not know it". But if we ourselves want to know what art or poetry is, we shall examine not him but the man who has chosen art or poetry or has been chosen by them. Similarly, if we want to understand the poetry that surrounds like a halo every life focus, we must look into, not the man who is devoted to stamp-collecting, cricket, chess, mountain-climbing, or even some great mission, but the man who is devoted—to what? Shall we say the man whose hobby is just life, who is devoted to life or to life as an art, who has chosen the art of life as his vocation or has been chosen by it? Who is that artist of life?

The more devotion to a particular object is devotion—that is to say, the more the devotee is taken out of himself or stretched by the object (e.g. he is stretched more by a great mission than by stamp-collecting)—the greater is the *plus* (i.e. he is stretched not only further beyond himself but also beyond the particular object, towards regions which stretch further beyond it). If we extrapolate (i.e. stretch in imagination) the devotion and so the *plus* indefinitely, or to the *n*th power, then we reach unlimited devotion to the unlimited, or indeterminate, and the particular object becomes a mere symbol, starting point or anchor. The artist of life is the man who carries through that extrapolation not just in theory or imagination, but in practice. Further, he seeks purity in his life as the chemist does in his laboratory; he tries to turn

himself into a "pure case"—i.e. the bearer of such devotion unadulterated by anything else. He is the artist of life because he is devoted to that which holds all the potentialities of life—the "Nothingness from which any thing may be born". He finds ever new ways of being as the poet does of seeing.

He is the supreme nihilist. For he *chooses* the way of nihilism, whereas the poet more or less stumbles upon it.

The way is the so-called "Negative Way" or "Purgative Way", or the way of detachment. In some form it has been part of every philosophy of life, religious or non-religious, including—paradoxically, some might think—hedonism.

It is, to start with, the "naughting"* (negation) of or the detachment from the "self", that "self" which causes "selfishness" and "self-centredness"; the "self" which by its various appetitions and ambitions divides and contracts life into a number of larger or smaller private backyards, of "mines" (my life) and "thines" (thy life).

The naughting can be summed up as the parting with, or liberation from, fear. For if we look deeply into life and the nature of fear we see that this "self" is nothing but a coward and that every form of selfishness and self-centredness is cowardice: the "self" is afraid of the boundless range of life's possibilities and tries to constrict it into a few vortices the desperate defence of which constitutes that "self's" existence. Indeed the "self" itself is such a vortex, and such a vortex is every person to the extent that he retains anything of selfishness and self-centredness. That is why that kind of "self" must be

* The favourite term in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Does Sartre's *néantisation* derive from the same source?

naughted, abolished. Its abolition is the abolition of cowardice.

All fear, divisiveness and narrowness are alien to any creative activity. The thinker must be free to choose just truth, unhampered and undeflected by this kind of "self", or personal equation: the creatively living agent must be free in like manner to choose life as such, unhampered and undeflected by the appetitions and ambitions which make up "his" life.

Next, the Negative Way is a naughting of, a detachment from, all articulate, structured, or ready-made life —everything indeed except the passion to find the Way, the Truth. It is an attempt at a stripping such as we conceive death will be. Plato called it "the rehearsal of death". It aims at the kind of nihilistic state demanded, we have seen, by Heidegger and Sartre (who, in fact, have borrowed, I think, from the classics of the Negative Way) for "authentic" and "lucid" vision.

It itself, as well as its name, has been sadly misunderstood, sometimes even by its practitioners: it has been interpreted as a depreciation of life, especially the life of the senses. But the poet's spontaneous iconoclasm and amnesia should make plain both its inevitability and purpose. The old sanctuary, as Nietzsche says, must be pulled down in order to raise a new one. Determinate life, the life crystallised in settled appetitions and ambitions, habits, codes, customs and institutions, can be an obstacle to the new just because it is something and not nothing (i.e. not indeterminate): the seeker must have his will free, undetermined by anything determinate, just as the poet must have his imagination free, undetermined by anything ready-made, by existing poems: he must be-

ware of every focus even—as a possible vortex. It is this general naughting that in life corresponds to the poet's amnesia.

The realisation of the need to beware of every focus as a possible vortex dispels most effectively the misunderstanding of the Negative Way. The general naughting is like the naughting of the "self": it is the abolition of cowardice. And it is this in spite of all appearances to the contrary. The more a man has freed himself from ordinary selfishness and self-centredness, the more he is apt to cling to something outside himself and larger than himself—some creed, custom, cause—which is to him an inviolable sanctuary. To call his devotion and loyalty cowardice may seem nothing short of perversity. But it is cowardice to take alarm when we hear that not one stone shall be left upon another and not to have faith that a new temple will be raised up instead: it is to limit the range of life's possibilities.

And of course it is only an attitude of the spirit that is asked for, a readiness to pull down sanctuaries rather than any actual pulling down. Similarly, the poet's iconoclasm does not really go to the length of making an auto-da-fé of Shakespeare's works, or Dante's, or Homer's or those of countless others, however necessary it is for his mind to be free from all of them when he himself is creating. The counterpart, and result, of the Negative Way, i.e. of an apparent depreciation of life, is, of course, an immensely heightened appreciation of life. Just as the counterpart of the poet's iconoclasm is his living on poetry and poems, so every detail of life is invested for the creatively living subject with an unlimited, indefinable, importance. He meets with no

pestering flies on his Way as does the victim of the life of boredom, but only with birds of Paradise.

Complete naughting would result in the completely "mortified" life, and the completely "mortified" life would be the completely living, or creative, life, the life (or "soul") saved which one has been willing to lose.

*Desperate Hope*

What in living corresponds to the penultimate stage in writing is the moment of decision. This moment is crucial for the problem I shall be raising in the next chapter—that of the Great Divide. It is of course crucial (in the etymological meaning of the word) for the whole of living as well as for part of my chapter.

In all ages men have had, through contemplation, glimpses of a superior world in which all the evils, troubles, sorrows, afflictions and perplexities of our world, including even such horrors and havoc as those of the last two wars, are either non-existent or felt somehow to be already overcome so that even in our world they begin to seem either unreal or trivial as, rightly or wrongly, we consider children's troubles trivial. In the words of the pagan poet,* this superior world is "the abode of the gods which neither winds shake, nor clouds wet with rain touch, nor whitely falling frost-congealèd snow". The awareness of it has visited some even in conditions as remote from the reality called up by this metaphorical description as those in Hitler's concentration camps. Generally the superior world is dismissed as illusory, as a wish-fulfilling dream. But sometimes it is the second that is dismissed, as a nightmare: when this happens an

* Lucretius after Pindar.

attempt is made to escape from the nightmare into the superior world, by the Negative Way—such an attempt is Buddhism, or so we in the West imagine. Sometimes, again, both worlds are accepted and then we are puzzled by their apparent mutual irrelevance. The key to the puzzle is the moment of decision.

The moment of decision shows most clearly when it is most dramatic. This it is when it calls for the exercise of hope and faith *in extremis*. Then we see that hope and faith are the connecting link, the power-conducting wires, between the superior world and the world we have to live in, just as they are between the Muse and poems.

The dramatic moment brings to a definite point the agent's general naughting. This it does through the demands made by a particular problem or situation: he has done his uttermost in thinking and willing, he has been stretched to the utmost limit of his capacities and virtues; he has come to the end of his tether. It is the "moment of truth", the moment when he realises to the full that he and the whole of his world are nothing.

That realisation is, partly at any rate, what is meant by "conviction of sin" (only partly, for it is no sin not to be able to save yourself from drowning because you cannot swim). But the term "sin", with its suggestion of uncomprehending taboo, so alien to the creative urge, and its intimidating idea of damnation, does not help towards the understanding self-examination which is necessary: it creates more heat, or rather more smoke (the smoke of fire and brimstone?), than light. For that kind of understanding self-examination, the recommendation of the Delphic Oracle, "Know thyself", is more useful, as is also the whole of the intellectual

terminology of Greek ethics: even in the New Testament, because it is written in Greek, "mistake" represents our "sin", and "change of mind" or "change of thinking" or "re-thinking" stands for our emotionally charged "repentance".

But even given every possible assistance, that realisation is very difficult to come to. Such is the fear each man has of exposing himself even, or perhaps especially, to himself; of taking off his mask, or *persona*, even though *in camera*, where he himself is the judge, jury and the only member of the public admitted; of not being loved, even, or perhaps especially, by himself. Only when he has repeatedly found out by experience that the realisation is creative or necessary to creativity—because to be filled he must first be emptied and know himself for emptiness—only then does he begin to turn over his failings and "mistakes" as a miser does his gold, because he realises that they are his capital which will bring him in much interest;* then also he welcomes every difficulty and challenge as an opportunity.

But until then he has good reason for shrinking from that realisation, for it means parting with the last shred of self-esteem and the last hope of self-preservation, even though that be the drowning man's straw, and generally this realisation brings one to utter despair and the nether nihilism. But instead of despair the poet of life chooses hope and faith: he may, indeed, despair of anything coming to pass which he desires or thinks desirable—like every real poet, he is a realist—but he hopes that something desirable, he knows not what, will come from he

* In Plato, Eros, or the creative urge, is the son of *Penia*, or Poverty: wisdom comes to those who feel they are poor in wisdom.

knows not where—from nowhere, from beyond the limits of what he knows as his and his world's being, from the illimitable store of what is desirable.

Then he settles down to wait with full faith and no fret or fuss. For the poet of words the waiting may take a few minutes, hours, days, sometimes years. For the poet of life it may mean a lifetime, and then of course, he waits while doing something else. The waiting can be the most difficult part of the transaction. But it need not be like that depicted in *Waiting for Godot*. If it is really free from fret and filled with faith, the waiting is an uninterrupted exercise in fine discrimination, in the "discernment of spirits": "Not yet", "Now"; "Not this", "That". Then it makes the something else, everything else, fruitful.

And of course the something else may consist of awaiting inspiration for something else. The greatest artists of life are those who seek inspiration for everything and for whom inspiration has become like respiration—a matter of every moment.

(If there is such a thing as a plan for humanity or the whole of creation, who does the waiting and for how long?)

*The Source of Creativity and the Creative Act*

In the fulness of time the poet of life receives new life and vision. These he has with a purity corresponding to the degree to which he has become pure receptivity, the degree to which "the fleshy table of the heart" has been wiped clean of "flesh" as the slate of the writing poet's mind has been wiped clean even of slate, so that he really has no preference that the solution to his

problem shall be, or preconception that it must be, one thing rather than another.

From this new life and vision springs the solution, the authentic deed. And with the solution comes an awareness of what stretches beyond the deed, just as with the poem comes the awareness of the Muse stretching beyond the poem. That Beyond has been variously described: as the "rich Nothingness", the "Nothingness from which any thing may be born", the inexhaustible source of creativity, the Abyss on which everything can be founded, the Desert from which comes all fruit, the Darkness from which comes all light.

The Nothingness is not, of course, this deed, any more than the Muse is the written poem or poetry, or than the beloved is the kiss or kissing. Nor does the Nothingness prompt or ordain the deed, or hold any tables of the law from which an injunction for it or for anything else can be deduced. Even when the deed still seems attached to the source of creativity by a kind of umbilical cord, and still more later, the deed feels ours, or at the very least also ours. It may come in consequence of inspiration, but there is no bodily inspiration of an action any more than there is verbal inspiration of a poem. The poet who should claim verbal inspiration would lay claim to the status of an automatic writing medium, and how many poets would like to do that? Conversely, whatever else such a medium claims, he does not reckon himself a poet, unless he knows nothing about poetry.

The physical universe is apparently an absurd riddle of the Sphinx; we cannot *see* who has created it: but that part of the universe which consists of our doings, of our codes, of our creeds and customs, the articulate or struc-

tured world of our civilisation, is *our* world—we *see* that we are its creators, though in so far as it is the outcome of the search for inspiration, we may also call it the manifestation, or appearance, of the source of inspiration, or of creativity.

Hope and faith are both the eyes with which we perceive the source, the reality, and the hands with which we shape the appearance of the reality. This much is the deliverance of experience, of the crucial experiment connecting the two worlds—the superior world and our world, the world we live in: our world is *our* world.*

This finding should contribute to the moral disarmament of the Giants and Titans, the rebels against heaven. For what animates their hostility and inspires their morale in the fight is the idea that allegiance to heaven means unconditional allegiance to some unchanging general rule, or unthinking obedience to some particular injunction, which religion represents as come down in a "thick cloud", or mystery, straight from heaven: religion, they complain, seeks always to establish a dictatorship, or tyranny, of heaven. It is true that it generally does this, but it need not do this just because it wants to declare the existence and glory of heaven and to bid us seek its kingdom first. Indeed it has no right to do this.†

Or rather—for I must not refute any theories, since I promised not to advance any but to give only descrip-

* But cf. below, pp. 149–50 and 156, on the historical process.

† Those who deplore the possible passing away of this kind of absoluteness as though it meant the end of the world seem to forget that it covered once such things as the sacrificing of children to Moloch and head-hunting. "To so much evil could religion persuade men," declares the Roman poet.

tions—I cannot describe any bodily or verbal inspiration, because I have not experienced any. There are certainly things in my life I would describe as having felt "inspired", meaning that they issued from the search for inspiration and that they fell into the context of life as the "inevitable" words do into the context of a poem. But I would not regard an attempt to criticise or correct them as an attempt to criticise or correct heaven, or the source of inspiration.

I have had no inspiration which was not accompanied by the thought "What a wise man I'd be if only I were not such a fool!" I see no reason for thinking there is a limit to the wisdom with which I might be inspired. But is there any limit to my or anybody else's folly? That is the question—a most profound question. It is perhaps the profoundest metaphysical and theological question there can be. For on it hang such questions as the following. Can there be any kind of infallibility? Is the power of good over evil unlimited? Can there be invincible negation or resistance to good? Is there an eternal hell, hell being just the affective side of this negation or resistance?*

In the doing the creative agent finds full freedom of his will, newness, origination, integration (being unified, made one, made whole), rightness, or righteousness. But

* Theology defines hell as the creature's wilful separation from the Creator. It is one of the worst scandals of the personifying language of popular religion that it represents (or used to represent?) eternal hell as a punishment inflicted *ab extra* by the Creator. It is the "fires" of this kind of penal hell that more than anything else make the humanist burn with a perpetual and undying indignation. But the matter assumes of course quite a different aspect when the possibility of hell is envisaged as perhaps necessitated by freedom. How would the "free thinker", who generally is so easily inflamed by any restriction upon any freedom, like it if he were not free not only to "go to hell" but to go on "going to hell"?

looking at the deed done, at their life lived, the greatest artists of life, the saints, have always felt, "there is no health in us": looking at their living, they can only see the Nothingness, the source of living and health, which alone "is" life, "is" health, in the sense in which it can be said to "be" anything.

But the deed has the *plus* which is a pointer to the creative Nothing. It has also unified the doer more with himself and with his world. It has, too, moved further the horizon, the limits, of his ordinary, workaday underhanding, willing, trying. It has lengthened his tether. And it inspires others.

*The Tragic Life and Tragedy*

Inspiration may lead to a vast variety of lives, as to a vast variety of poems. Which is the fullest, the richest, the most significant? Which is the focus from which the *plus* points at every point and in every direction—the focus from which flows most inspiration? (The richness may, of course, lie in intensity—the intensity of hope and faith—rather than in extensiveness of content, and in simplicity rather than in complexity; its fulness may be an emptiness—of "self" and all that is to be naughted.)

It is that which is most "esemplastic", "coadunative", integrative: that which unifies the depths with the heights, the negative with the positive, the experience of the anti-creative with that of the highest creativity—the experience of the nether nothingness with that of the creative Nothingness. It is the tragic life, the life of the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief who accepts all that life brings him, undaunted in the faith that all can be transmuted creatively.

And just as the tragic life is the fullest life, so tragedy is the highest literature, and the highest tragedy is that which fills us with a sense of all-embracing, indefinable significance, of something signifying everything though we know not what, of defeat which is triumph or rather which points to heights and depths inaccessible to triumph —a significance brooding over what without it is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".

*The Problem of Suffering*

By extrapolation we can reach the notion of the all-creative, the all-positive, which accepts, assumes, suffers, all that is anti-creative, negative, and transmutes it to creativeness, to positivity.* That is the notion of omni-patience-omnipotence or omnipotence-omnipatience. In so far as we can say of the Nothingness that it "is" anything (e.g. that it "is" poetry or health), we might say that it "is" this omnipotence.

We should thus get an answer to the riddle of suffering which has bedevilled all religious explanations of life. The source of creativity must be also the source of freedom, since freedom is as inseparable from creativity as reverse is from obverse; and freedom must include the freedom to negate creativity, to be anti-creative, to be destructive, to cause suffering. On the other hand, the experience of accepting suffering and through hope and faith creatively transmuting the destructive, or negative, both in ourselves and in others, is the experience of a heightened creativity: it shows us creativity not really being limited by its negation but being constantly raised

* See above, p. 20. But contrast p. 94, note.

to a higher power. It is this experience which leads to the notion of omnipatience = omnipotence.

But such thinking, though based on experience, goes beyond it and proceeds to explanation, which I have promised to renounce. What we can say from experience, by way of mere description is this. The object of unlimited and pure devotion, the source and goal of unlimited inspiration, is this Nothingness: in the tragic life our progress comes "closest" to it.

The experience can best be assessed by two questions. Which of us does not feel that the suffering which he has accepted in the right spirit has deepened, heightened and broadened him more than anything else in his life? Who could say he would rather that it had not been? The second of these questions is a curious one, admittedly—and advisedly.

$1 \equiv 0 \equiv All$

Is this Nothingness one with the source of the poet's creativity, the Muse? This question might be answered by mere dialectic. How could there be several nothings? If there were, each one would have to be distinguished from the others by some differentia, or determination, and so each one would be a something, or determinate. But my business is to describe rather than to argue. By way of mere description we can say that the confrontation with the Nothingness is, or involves, an experience of undifferentiated power, power which can be canalised into any channel kept open or prepared for it—that of the imagination (the poet's, painter's, sculptor's, musician's), or that of the "heart", the will, living. The differentiation is effected by us.

It certainly seems strange to maintain that the source of the saint's inspiration is the same as that of the poet's, especially when the poet's poetry is not particularly "saintly". But the experience of inspiration is the experience of power as such. Part of the experience is the insight that once the power is in us it is just ours, to be used for good or ill or for a mixture of the two, according as the "self" has not been wholly expelled or has in part returned. Power is neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral. This is what is so frightening about it, as about life. It is fully good only when we have become vessels like Christ and use it in Christ's way. That, in terms of experience, is, presumably, what is meant by saying that Christ is both the Mediator and the Way.

More generally, is the Nothingness one for all? Two persons who claim to see the same tree may differ more in their accounts of that tree than the great seers of all ages and peoples have differed in the accounts of their experience of the Nothingness.

The search for the Way may be equated with the search for oneness, or at-oneness, or wholeness: in a work of art or any constructive work; between all works of art and between all beautiful things (the unity of Art and the unity of Beauty); in any act and between all acts and ideals (the unity of Righteousness); between Beauty and Righteousness; in any single person; between different persons (the unity of communion and the unity of community, e.g. of society or humanity as a whole); of knowledge and of its object (the unity of Truth).

This equation brings out most sharply the paradoxical nature of the search and makes the questions it raises most acute—sometimes intolerably acute, amounting to

a wonder whether anything exists or can exist, in particular whether we ourselves exist or can exist. Is the object of the search "there"—i.e. "somewhere"—as the sun and moon are "there", or mountains and rivers? Or is it really nowhere? If it is nowhere, is not the search mad, or "irrational", and is not humanity mad, or "irrational"? On the other hand, are not these questions themselves mad and this conception of rationality itself irrational? Why should any of these unities just be "there" or "all there" any more than a poem is which we are about to write? Why should they not all be, like that poem, "nowhere", or "in" the Nothingness simply; or it's appearances or imperfect images when we are in contact with it? In the sense in which the Nothingness "is" this or that, "is" not the Nothingness "the One", as it is often called, or the only real unity? Is not the search identical with the creativity, and what sense is there in expecting that the object to be created should be "there"? And if it were "all there", would not that mean the cessation of the creative activity, or its being succeeded by another and another and so on? And would not that mean the disappearance of the oneness of the creative activity, perhaps the only oneness we have in our world?

*The Oneness of the Person*

The idea of rationality suggested by the second set of questions might be accepted or at least seen to be inevitable but for two forms of unity, that of the individual person and that of knowledge and of its object.

The individual, surely, must in some sense be one? But in what sense? Here are two accounts of that oneness.

"For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, and pronounce the notion of the SELF as a whole or unity to be an illusion."*

And "If I try to grasp this 'I' of which I proclaim my certainty, if I try to define it and to sum it up, it is just water flowing between my fingers. I can give a picture of all the aspects it can take on, also of all those that have been assigned to it, such and such an education, origin, passion, silences, greatness or meanness. But aspects cannot be added up. This very heart which is mine will always remain indefinable for me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to assign to this certainty the gap will always be unbridgeable."†

Is it not a common experience to feel oneself Legion, or a multiple personality, and that one needs to be made, rather than that one is, whole? Indeed the paradoxical search for wholeness is at its most paradoxical when it is for the wholeness of the seeker himself. The seeker can never find himself wholly "there": he has to make up his mind that he is a peculiar creature who is never "all there". He realises that wholeness in any substantial sense is in this case at least (if not in all the others also) holiness, and that holiness, like poetry, is always to seek, or always in the seeking only.

*The Oneness of Knowledge*

The unity of knowledge and of its object means that

* Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. I, Pt. IV, 6.
† Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p. 34.

in theory at least it must be possible to have total knowledge, or one body of knowledge ("Science"), and that all that is must be one (a "Universe"), so that it can be the object of this knowledge. But knowledge is of determinates, or somethings. Therefore the "Universe" must consist of somethings, of determinates, of definables and explicables only and can have no room for the indeterminate, for nothing, for mystery. Such a "Universe", and only such, is said to make sense and to be "rational". That is the "rationality" I have been quarrelling with all the time. It is it that makes "rationalism", viz. atheism; it is belief in it that constitutes real Unbelief. But it itself is made rationality by a mere *Diktat.* It is not only not supported, but is contradicted, by the smallest fragment of the most elementary experience. Even the sight of a red patch, or a pang of toothache goes beyond all possible knowledge, all determination, beyond all possible statements about it, beyond all definition and analysis; it is invested with a *plus* no less than any work of art, and this *plus* is the pointer to, or the link with, mystery. In the last resort there it stands confronting us, inexhaustibly, irreducibly itself. For Sartre it is stupidly, "irrationally", itself; it fills him with nausea and inspires him with a whole novel called *Nausea.* But the mere idea of it, and still more the idea of the whole of experience, as totally knowable, or definable, is, surely, for most of us enough to send us mad with claustrophobia or kill us through asphyxiation.

This, however, may be a matter of taste, and about tastes there is no disputing. But what is our experience of the pursuit of knowledge, of research? It is the experience of a movement to and fro between the known and

the unknown, or mystery. Mystery urges us to clarification—i.e. to its own dissipation—and so brings about an extension of the field of knowledge, but this extension in its turn brings about more mystery. The idea of total knowledge implies the abolition of one term of the movement and so of the movement itself. It is also the idea of knowledge as something ready-made (that which is deposited in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*?) and not as an activity, as that movement itself. Total knowledge would mean the abolition of knowledge and of the human condition, at least as we know these.

Our age believes in knowledge and practically worships knowledge and only knowledge. But it is also the atomic age, not only because of its knowledge of the atom but also because of its atomisation of knowledge. Every division of knowledge is being sub-divided and then sub-divided again *ad infinitum*. It is a common complaint that not only does not the chemist, for example, understand the historian, but chemist no longer understands chemist, physicist physicist, mathematician mathematician. We only know the wood from a distance, when we do not yet know the trees. As we come nearer the heart of our subject, we know first only the trees, then the branches, then the twigs, then the leaves and their nervures, and finally chlorophyll. The atom itself is disappearing into protons, neutrons, electrons, positrons, deutrons, alpha particles, neutrinos, mesons, sub-electrons, negative protons, etc., etc., and Atomic Physics is destined to split up into Protology, Neutrology, Electrology, etc. Soon the only whole, or one, *for knowledge* will be the fictitious "statistical unit".

Both the knowledge of experience and the experience

of knowledge render the "rationality" of Rationalism and the belief of Unbelief utterly chimerical.

The unity of knowledge, and with it the "rational Universe" it implies, are, like the other unities and like poetry, nowhere, or only in the seeking or making, or "in" the Nothingness, the Mystery. Only "in" the Mystery is there the full sense, meaning, or explicability, the intellect requires. That is what Socrates, that prophet of the religion of definition, meant when he declared that only God has *sophia*—i.e. knowledge, which, for him, was definition.

The supreme demand of the intellect, like the supreme demand of the "heart", can only be satisfied by the Nothingness.

To deny this is to try to overlook or overleap the rift, or divide, which is constitutive of the human condition or human experience. I have already referred to it and shall refer to it again in some detail in the next chapter.

*Transcendence*

The Nothingness is realised as the not-self, the other-than-the-self, as the transcendent, firstly because of the imperativeness and authoritativeness I have already mentioned. The source of inspiration can no more be ordered or managed than the wind and the tides. Less, in fact, since these we can "harness' and they are still wind and tides, while the source of inspiration, if we try to "harness" it, simply is not there any more—there is only the Blank Wall. Nor is the imperativeness that of self-exhortation or auto-suggestion, or the compulsiveness of some "self-projection" : the difference is seen both

by introspection and by the scrutiny of the things it authorises.

The Nothingness is realised as the not-self secondly because it stretches not only beyond the agent's familiar self, but also beyond the new self, the new life, he receives in the inspiration. At the same time this not-myself is not experienced as other than myself in the way another self or any something (any determinate) is. It is felt as closer to oneself than one's self (i.e. determinate self), so that the finding of it is also the finding of oneself.

But with "Transcendent", and still more with what those who use it consider its synonym, "God", we utter a shibboleth to which a whole army of people, that of the humanists, automatically reacts with the demand to be "included out": "We are, of course, humanists and therefore cannot accept any Transcendent. Man must rely on himself only." Amongst them are the two I have mentioned before, Nietzsche and Rilke, who, after describing transcendence most convincingly, and obviously from experience, depreciate it as illusion. To such I must repeat that I have done merely what I said in the Introduction I would do by means of the method of descriptive philosophy. I have been merely describing experience. Though elevated to the stratosphere by the adjective "mystical", the experience is really quite a common, down-to-earth one: it is simply devotion, and devotion is given even to a hobby. The terms of the description, spontaneous and inevitable, are also quite common parts of the most ordinary parlance: "devoted to it", "gives himself to it", "is taken out of himself by it", "it is the making of him" (i.e. it creates him). The self-naughting which to some may seem just a monstrous

invention of the medieval mind and the horrible denial of life, is as spontaneous and inevitable in its origins as are these terms. It is so, certainly, with the devotee of any hobby, and largely also, we have seen, with the poet or artist, though in this case it is only the imaginative self that is concerned.

The Transcendent is simply the object of pure, absolute devotion and the final goal of naughting.

Perhaps, if one had a complete philosophy of the self and the not-self one might be able to show that this Transcendent is not transcendent. But I do not think that the majority of that army has such a philosophy. They simply take it for granted that the difference between the self and not-self is given as obviously as is that between solid and liquid in common experience (not, be it remarked, in Physics or Chemistry). True, they have recourse to "the Unconscious", which gives a kind of air of scientific explanation but which, except perhaps when used technically for a limited purpose, is about as explanatory as is "the Muse"; it is a *deus ex machina* invoked to save them from God; it is a blanket term to be deplored because without it those who are now enjoying its cover would be more interesting, each talking at least his own nonsense.

$0 \equiv 0$

Is the creative Nothingness the same as the nothingness which is the Blank Wall? Here too the dialectic answer would suffice: there cannot be more than one nothing. But here too I want to keep to experience. When black spectacles show us a black house and immediately after red spectacles show us a red house in the same place and

there has been no change except that of the spectacles, we say that the two houses are the same. Similarly, experience shows that the two nothings are the same but viewed through different spectacles: put on those of denial and despair and you have the Blank Wall; put on those of faith and hope and you have the "Nothingness out of which any thing may be born". Nor can you see without any spectacles, since the spectacles are the eyes themselves.*

The change of spectacles or eyes may be conceived as taking place in some such way as the following, though generally, of course, less dramatically and more diffusely, often imperceptibly and over a long period of time. The nether nothingness is incomplete because the subject's naughting (not chosen, but forced upon him by circumstances, in the way it is being forced upon us by the conditions of our time) is incomplete. He may cling to some unexamined preconceptions, metaphysical or theological, or/and to some ambition, appetite or appetition, fear or dislike. (Sartre, for example as is made abundantly clear by the autobiographic fragment I have already

* Having written this, I had a realisation of the meaning of the language of the Bible about God "hiding his face"—i.e. behind the Blank Wall—language which I could not understand as long as, following its suggestions, I thought of God as *doing* something, e.g. taking umbrage and punishing. It is not really necessary to talk about spectacles. That which is appears, or manifests itself, to us according to how we respond to it. If we respond with eyes it shows itself as coloured, if with ears it is manifested as sound; similarly, if we respond with hope and faith, we apprehend creativeness. Or changing the metaphor, we might say that faith is the breathing, the respiration, of the inspired life. Paul throws the greatest light on the role of faith in relation to the invisible. But owing to the queer distortion of the personifying language of religion, he gives the impression that faith is a means of pleasing God and gaining his favour (Heb. 11.6). It is as if one were to say that animals, by breathing, please God, who in consequence grants them life.

cited, is holding on to the aversion formed in him by his religious upbringing, the ambition set up by his having been treated as an infant prodigy, and the "habit"—as he calls it—of talking about nothingness and so deafening himself to anything it might say to him.) Hence the nothingness appears as nevertheless a confused something, as the Blank Wall.* As the despair increases, the wall begins to withdraw and the subject becomes terrified of the prospect of real nothingness, without even the wall. He must be saved absolutely, and from his very panic and need for salvation spring hope and faith and with these he perceives the creative Nothingness.†

*The Critic Answered*

With the last equation, or rather identity, I think I have found an exorcism against the nether nihilism obsessing me, an answer to the constant whispers of the destructive Critic who is practically modern man and whose advocate I am. The impression that he spreads, the dogma that he tries to make us accept, is that the more negative life is, the less it has of discipline, direction and effort, the "truer" it‡ is. Why? Because everything that is constructive is "merely made by Art". True to what? To the vision, no doubt, the only authentic one, according to Heidegger and Sartre, of nothingness. Well, it is true that the only authentic vision is of nothingness. That

* Cf. Plato's description of matter in the *Timaeus*.

† This must, of course, be regarded as an essay in myth-making to describe experience rather than as theology. Theology would have to consider the question of prevenient grace.

‡ "It" "[Britain] is the one country where intellectually to destroy and to reject has taken the place of the longing to build and create." Patrick O'Donovan in *The Observer*, January 31, 1965.

vision, however, is ambivalent: as the vision of the nothingness which is just the Blank Wall, it leads to negation and destructiveness; but as the vision of the Nothingness which is the source of creativity, it leads to constructiveness—to "the worlds of art, science, ethics, society, personality". These are, indeed, not "the truth" itself. But they are attempts, not as Nietzsche and Sartre after him declare, to conceal, but to reveal the truth; or at least as much to reveal as to conceal, to express as to suppress it. In either case what the vision leads to, the reaction, is ours. Why should affirmation and construction be considered less "true" and more artificial than negation and destruction, why should making be less true and more artificial than unmaking? Why should that poet be considered as being the only true poet, as producing the only true poetry, who merely scratches his head and stares at a blank page all the time?

Life is, surely, what we make of it.

## CHAPTER V

# AMPHIBIAN, OR AMBIGUOUS, MAN

*The Critic Answered?*

Life is what we make of it, yes. But can this proposition really silence the Critic?

The *Dhamma* of the Buddha, the ancient-Hindu *Rta*, the Chinese Tao, the early Greek *Diké* and the Stoic "Nature" were enunciated and accepted as the way of life indivisible. But to modern man the creative life I have been describing, that of which the source of creativity is the *terminus a quo* and *ad quem*, is (if he admits it at all) man's only; the rest of the universe, so-called "nature", is alien and hostile to him, while he, instead of a reflection, is only an "accidental infection"* of it. The nothingness that "Science" shows us is, as we have seen, only that of the Blank Wall: like the Gorgon's head, "Science" turns everything that meets its gaze to stone. The more negative our life is, according to it, the "truer" reflection it is of that nothingness, more "realistic", if not more real; it is more "objective", while what I have given is "subjective", "artificial", a defiance of the nature of things† instead of a conformation with it. To be negative is, after all, to follow one universal law, the

* Lewis Mumford, *loc. cit.*

† According to Bertrand Russell, in *A Free Man's Worship*, man's task is, "proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power".

law of entropy, or death; it is to be in the cosmic fashion. That is, of course, the whole point of the Critic, and my way of putting things, he might urge, is simply a highly artificial, if not disingenuous, way of getting round rather than over his objection.

*The Problem of the Physical Universe*

Until fairly recently it was still possible to hold on to the view of the undivided life. It was possible to be moved by "above us the majesty of the starry firmament, within us the majesty of the moral law", and while so moved, to identify the two majesties and thus be brought face to face with the creative Nothingness. But when, a few years ago, I asked a well-known astro-physicist what he thought of the majesty of the starry firmament, he said it filled him with respect for the algebra needed for tackling it. But if one is unable to share in the respect because unable to share in the algebra, what nowadays can one see in that majesty except a vast number of superfluous juggler's balls tossed about without even the guarantee of a juggler and a juggler's skill to keep them from colliding if given sufficient time? Indeed, according to some explanations, many of them have collided, or at any rate exploded.

However, we may still try to recover the vision of the undivided life in some such way as this. When someone is dear to us, we might reason, the whole person is dear to us and not either the "soul" or the "body" by itself—each of these is then felt as an absurd abstraction—or the two together. So, in those moments of vision when we experience quality (e.g. splendour, sublimity), or significance, the latter is not experienced as divided between "our

life" and "physical nature", or as belonging to the two abstractions together; it "belongs to" "the whole", or rather it *is* "the whole".

Yet I cannot find this convincing. Not that I think it untrue. But the contemporary imagination has been so conditioned that it will not allow us to respond to that truth with anything but "So what?" To the surgeon who operates on the patient's body and to the patient whose body is being operated on the statement that the body is just an abstraction rings hollow, and so does the statement that physical nature is just an abstraction to the man who is freezing with cold or being scorched by the sun and to the man who is tunnelling mountains or navigating the seas. "Real" nature is that which operates upon us or is operated upon by us, which "does" and to which we "do" something. On the other hand the Nature which is part of our apprehension of quality, or significance, and which connects us, or is connected by us, with the source of creativity, or the "Creator", as his "creation", consists, not of "natural phenomena", but of Biblical floods and trees that clap their hands, mountains and hills that break forth into singing or skip like rams and lambs, or which, along with waves and skies, are a "feeling" to Byron and "an appetite, a feeling and a love" to Wordsworth. That Nature does nothing to us except inspire us and we certainly do nothing to her. Hence she is considered a creation of our feeling only, of the "pathetic fallacy"; even a poet, Coleridge, says of her that "Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud".

The nature which science studies is that which is co-extensive with the field of operation, and that field is far vaster now than it ever was, extending even into outer

space, and of course it engrosses our attention much more than it ever did. Abstraction or not, that is the nature which we have to interpret if we are to regain, by intellectual means, the hope and faith which will penetrate the Blank Wall.

*Evolution*

A most inspiring interpretation of it is the attempt by the late Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to restore the theory of Evolution to the place it used to occupy in men's minds inseparably associated with the idea of Progress before the last two wars shattered that idea irreparably, as it seemed. I came across it providentially, I could not help feeling, just as I was about to reach the nethermost point in the exploration of the nether nihilism I had been impelled to undertake.

Very briefly, and without the details that make it so extraordinarily telling, it may be put as follows. All is evolution, or evolving; the whole cosmos is evolving, it is cosmogenesis. The "tree of life" whose branches are the various forms of vegetable and animal life is like a real tree, e.g. an oak, and the rest of the cosmos is its soil, or rather roots: this means that its growth exhibits a unity, or pattern, as does the growth of an oak. The fact that its growth is not "orthogenetic", i.e. in a straight line, does not matter: neither is that of an oak or of a man, both of which include many "accidents", as Aristotle calls them, or features irrelevant or even contrary to the pattern. What matters is that in spite of these maturation can be traced: in the oak it is from the acorn through the various stages to the fully grown form; in the "tree of life" it is towards the so far latest stage, i.e. man.

The latter sums up in himself both all the past of evolution and its potentially unlimited future. For evolution is the emergence of more and more tools, and more and more social forms, multiplying or at least diversifying command over the environment. An animal *is* the tool (e.g. a fish *is* the submarine, a bird *is* the aeroplane) and so is limited in its power to whatever the tool can perform. Man, on the other hand, *has* his tools and so can be all the other animals (e.g. he can be both fish and bird); and there seems to be no theoretical limit to these tools, which, moreover, he is developing at a tremendously accelerated pace. In the animal world (e.g. in that of the insects) the individual is simply a cog in the social machine, and hence society is static; human society consists of creative centres, each capable of increasing the creativity of the others, with the consequent possibility of unlimited power (e.g. the power conferred by knowledge). In man evolution has become conscious and self-directing or, better still, capable of being directed by the inspiration coming from the source of all creativity.

This is not the age-old argument from design. There is no argument, but only the exhibition of a pattern; and there is no more "design" than is implied by the pattern of the oak's growth. It does, however, exhibit a universe, i.e. a unified whole, instead of the nulliverse studied by physics to which the courtesy title "universe" is applied because of no more than a minimal and not very significant unity. Looking at his place in the pattern of the whole, man can scarcely feel himself "a nullity in a Nulliverse" or debarred from hope and faith because these are shown as absurdities by the "facts".

*From Inspiration to Operation?*

So far the treatment is a kind of phenomenology:* it simply sets forth the phenomena of the sciencies in the pattern into which they appear inevitably to fall. When, however, he goes beyond phenomenology, de Chardin is less satisfactory, chiefly because he is not quite clear what the phenomenological method justifies him in stating or when he is changing to another method. But we may make the change ourselves, noting more carefully than he does the points at which it occurs, i.e. where explanation begins to replace description.

Though we cannot trace any planning in the universe and therefore cannot infer any planner of it, nevertheless we can see in it a pattern, a pattern comparable to that of a poem, which, incidentally, is also not exactly "planned". We might therefore say that the physical universe is a poem ultimately "created by" the source of all creativity in the same way and in the same sense as our own poem is ultimately "created by" it. But this would definitely be mere theory or explanation, and not an easy one either. Nor would it be quite justified by the analogy. The creation of our poem is something we experience, and we experience it as going on mediately through ourselves and with pre-existing materials. The same might be said of the experience of "spiritual healing"; and the experience of moving mountains by faith would be as much the experience of something done through us as is that of moving them by dynamite. To pass from this to the creation of physical nature is to pass from one kind of activity to another, from inspiration to operation. The only evidence we could have of it would

* See his *The Phenomenon of Man.*

be seeing with our own eyes physical things arising out of nothing, like ectoplasms, but without the mediation of a medium. And then how could we say that they arise from what we experience as the source of creativity?*

*Creativity and the Created World*

With such an explanation we may be transgressing the limits set apparently by creativity itself or at any rate constitutive of the human condition; we may be confusing two worlds, as Gnosticism has in different ways always done. De Chardin's vision, hope-inspiring as it is at the moment when the world is very badly in need of hope, seems to encourage us to do just this. Its fault may be that it is too hopeful, or hopeful in the wrong way. Hence, however prejudiced one may be against his Jesuit superiors, one may feel that they were perhaps guided not just by theological pedantry, but also by some feeling for rightness in forbidding him to broadcast his theory in print.

For this problem in particular brings us to the Great Divide† which, I have said, we must be careful neither to overlook nor rashly to overleap. We must take care not to dissipate in the wrong way a certain ambiguity which, in different and changing forms, seems to be, like freedom—they are both species of indeterminacy—a condition of creativeness.‡

This Divide has been variously made and named: between reality and illusion (in Hinduism); between the

* In this connection it is interesting to recall that according to one early Christian heresy the physical world was created not by the "true" God (i.e. the God revealed to us in our living), but by a false and wicked Jehovah.

† Cf. above, pp. 64 and 88.

‡ Cf. above, pp. 99 and 101–3, and below, p. 126.

world of pure, or absolute, Being and the world compounded of Being and not-being (by Plato); between the Thing-in-itself and phenomena (by Kant). In the ratiocinations about it and in histories of philosophy it appears as something reached in the search for an explanation of the external world and of our knowledge of that world, and then it seems a "ballet of bloodless categories" circling round and round knowledge without ever really advancing our knowledge as the sciences do or serving any purpose other than that of its own perpetuation. But when we come to it in our search for the Way we recognise with a thrill that the others also may have reached it in the same quest,* and then what was meaningless before assumes a really vital interest, like that of bread to the starving man or of water to the man dying of thirst.

In the form given to it here it comes closest to that found in the Bible, with certain affinities to, but also disparities from, what we meet with in Plato on the one hand and Kant on the other. It is the divide between the world of creativity and indeterminateness which is the object of hope and faith, and the world of the determinate, of the created or made, *factum* or fact, which is the object of knowledge proper.

I must repeat here from a somewhat different point of view what I have given in Chapter III.

The world of the determinate is the world of limitation: to be determinate, to be a something, is to have limits; for it is not to be something else. Knowledge is knowledge of limitations: it delimits, circumscribes, or defines, one something from, or against, other some-

* Plato obviously did.

things. The limits of, or in, the physical world are given in the "laws of nature" studied by the sciences. But the determinate world includes also the acts or facts of man, and these too have their laws, or limits, far less rigid and definable, allowing far greater variability, but still laws, or limits: they include the laws discovered by psychology and history, the laws of the behaviour of individuals and societies.

Strictly speaking, this world has one tense only, the past: even when we say it is now exactly 10 a.m. we mean it was that before we began saying it; by a kind of extrapolation we believe in continuation, especially that what has always been the case always is and always will be (i.e. that there are "laws"). The limit to everything in this world is, of course, death: the death of the moment, the death of individuals, of peoples, of civilisations, of movements, of causes, of the physical universe. This world is the world of death, and our knowledge of it, the knowledge of what has been, is the same as our knowledge of the living body got from the dissecting table.

The indeterminate world of creativity, on the other hand, is the world of the unlimited, for to be indeterminate is to be unlimited (which is not the same as to be an unlimited amount of a limited something). It is not a world of *facta*, or facts, of the already made, but only of *fieri*, or being made, and of *facienda*, or the to-be-made. Only the source of creativity is apprehended as not-made, not-being-made, not-to-be-made.

This world has only one tense, the future (except for its source). The "knowledge" of it consists of hope and faith; these are the eyes and ears with which we apprehend it, but also the hands with which we make its

appearances. The "knowing" is in the making: e.g. the poet is confident that the poem, something he-knows-not-what, will come to him; being confident, he makes it, and in making "knows" both the poem and the Muse.

*Theory and the Divide*

To unite theoretically these two worlds, that of the determinate and that of the indeterminate, that of the past and that of the future, under the name "Reality", and to state what this "Reality" "is", involves one in the peril of talking nonsense. But if we are content to use a kind of hybrid language which is a mixture of the language of seeing and that of theorising and explaining, we may say, remembering prudently what it is we are doing, that "Reality" "is" what it will be in an indefinite future. For the reality of the determinate world is incomplete and has to wait for its completion on the future: the determinate world is only an excretion of the indeterminate world, or the shadow or footprint of the future on the sands of time.*

It is at this point that de Chardin's equation, cosmos = cosmogenesis, is at its most inspiring. For it suggests that we may speak similarly of the physical universe also. Strictly speaking, the universe is not, we may say; still less are the laws which limit what it or its components can be or shall be. It has unity and is not a nulliverse

* This, I would like to remind the, I hope, still patient reader, is description, not explanation. If he met it in a poem, he would take it and its meaning in his stride, without being troubled by the thought that it contradicts the ordinary conception of the relation of the tenses to each other. But even in science, in Biology at least, it would not be absurd to assert that the future determines, or at least explains, the past and the present: the acorn was what it was and is what it is because of the oak that it is going to be. This is good Aristotelianism at any rate.

only in so far as it keeps unity of direction—towards the future. Summed up in ourselves, it will be what we shall make of ourselves, what we shall be. What we shall be "doth not yet appear". But we "know"—i.e. we hope and trust—that we shall be a truer and truer reflection of the source of creativeness. Thus speaks the new *Genesis*.

*Practice and the Divide*

Practically, however, man must somehow unite, or at least relate, establish a *modus vivendi* between, the two worlds. For he has to live in both, for which reason he has been called "the great Amphibium".* He moves between the two as on a tight-rope, from which he may fall any moment into an abyss of nonsense or dishonesty or both. The funambulist art of life consists in observing and preserving the proper relationship between the two worlds. The tight-rope walker needs the Socratic wisdom, the knowledge that he does not know. That alone can balance him.

The determinate world must never be relied on to prove anything in or about the indeterminate world. For if it is, we shall find our faith and hope (i.e. the eyes with which we see the inderterminate and the hands with which we make its appearances) threatened by any change in that which at any time is accepted as the body of knowledge, a body which changes as constantly as does the physical body. To ward off such a threat we shall be tempted either to deny pig-headedly, or tamper with our reasoning and falsify our reason, or make impostor claims to speak revelations about determinate things, to a kind of superior para-knowledge.

* By Sir Thomas Browne.

This is the reason why de Chardin's interpretation can be a danger: the support it gives to faith is so firm and fitting that it may come to appear indispensable to it, and the disproof of the theory of Evolution may come to be considered as great a threat to faith as was its proof in the last century.

But if the determinate world must not be relied on for the confirmation, neither must it be listened to for the refutation, of the indeterminate—i.e. of hope and faith as such, or of their ground so long as this ground is simply the creative Nothing. To statements such as that man is a speck in a dance of dust stirred up by the vacuum cleaner, or the helpless sport of random forces and the product of indifferent elements—to all such statements we must reply: "Yes, this may be the conclusion of the knowledge available up to date. But the assertion that that is *all* has the unmistakable *feel* of nonsense, of the patently incomplete masquerading as completeness. This is only one side of the story; there is another side, or another story: there is something else besides knowledge—mystery. (In Kant's language, the "Practical Reason", the reason by which we live, requires something else.)

We are confronted by mystery, I have said, whenever we try to grasp our knowledge as a whole, which then become a fantastic puzzle. For mystery we need faith. Indeed without faith there can be no creative activity, not even the search for knowledge, which is also a creative activity, since it is a search for something, for a unity, which is not "there" but has to be made. The greater the knowledge, the sharper-sighted the intellect and the wider the comprehension a man has—the more,

that is to say, he sees—the simpler—i.e. purer—must be his faith, the faith in the invisible reality which, through that faith and the search it stimulates, is made visible.

*The Crucifixion of Faith*

On the other hand, the determinate world may be and should be used for the criticism of hope and faith when the ground of these is something determinate: when they are for some *particular* reason. This criticism is also legitimate whenever some *particular* thing is abstracted from the realm of possible knowledge and promoted to that of mystery. For vitally important as it is that our hope, faith and sense of mystery and awe should be unlimited, it is no less vitally important that the object of unlimited hope, faith and awe should be the Unlimited only. Otherwise we are setting up idols, replacing the Unlimited by the limited. In limited objects we must have only limited hope and faith; we must believe in mystery, but in no *particular* mystery.

The whole of the determinate world is the field allowed the Critic for the exercise of his criticism. If I may continue to identify the Critic in each one of us with Satan and speak mythically, we may say that he has been made Prince of this world in order to test crucially the genuineness of man's response to the Indeterminate—in order, not to prop up, but to crucify, faith; that is the role and liberty assigned to him in *Job*. He is the crucifier and thus in spite of himself the purifier, and thus the defender, of the faith. He is the defender so long as he merely insists that a primrose by the river's brim a simple primrose is and not the more to which it directs the

Wordsworthian poet: he is the destroyer of the faith if he reasons that therefore the more does not exist.

His crucifixion-purification of the faith can best be summed up in the words of *The Man without Qualities*, that most strange and modern Pilgrim's Progress by that ultra-modern Bunyan, soldier-engineer-mathematician-psychologist-philosopher-novelist, Robert Musil: "But the notion that haunted Ulrich was this: 'Supposing precisely this ungodliness were the appropriate contemporary way to God! Every era has had its own way there, corresponding to its most potent spiritual resources: might it not then be our destiny, the destiny of an era of ingenious and enterprising experience, to reject all dreams, legends, and sophistries solely because on the heights of discovery about the natural world we shall turn towards him again and shall begin to achieve a relationship based on experience?' "

Those had pure faith, if there were any, who, driven in herds into the gas chambers by men to whom they knew they were mere vermin or garden rubbish so that there could be no communication with or hope from them, went to their death with hope and faith for no *particular* reason and in nothing *in particular*, not even in a clearly conceived life after death.

That man had pure faith who, having lost in this way all those dear to him, was confirmed in his belief in a Redeemer because otherwise he would have had to believe that all the millions implicated in that genocide were irredeemable.

The faith that inspired the pre-1914 generation was an impure faith. It was the "certainty" that the world had been made safe finally for the "safe" man—for the man

safely ensconced in his position, with his safe income, safe reputation, safe opinions, safe religion. That "certainty" has been blown sky-high by the two World wars. Pure hope and faith will be ours if, in spite of believing that in all probability we shall blow ourselves and the planet sky-high in the next war because of our own folly and wickedness, we refuse to despair, but keep our certainty that, in Lady Julian's words, "All shall be well, all manner of things shall be well," though not necessarily well as we think of "well" now.

Such hope and faith are invincible precisely because they are in nothing *in particular*. It is they that suggest the idea of omnipatience which is omnipotence. It is only they that can make us feel it is worth while trying not to blow ourselves up.

The classic of pure faith is *The Book of Job*.

My hope and faith in nihilism are that the contemporary world—or if not it, one of its successors—will be brought to pure hope and faith by very nihilism.

## CHAPTER VI

# IMMORTALITY

*Enigmatic Help*

Death used to be a classic occasion for a special literary *genre*, the Consolation, and the Consolation consisted of an assurance of immortality, a *post-mortem* to remove death's sting. The Funeral Service, or the Christian Funeral Service, still is this, of course ("O Death, where is thy sting?"). To come along where comfort has always been thought to be needed, not as a comforter, but, like Socrates at his most exasperating,* simply with a puzzle, indeed with the puzzle of all puzzles, seemed to me to call for only what he got—the hemlock cup. And since I had nothing on this subject that I could honestly present as other than such a puzzle, I decided at first to say nothing on it. But then I reflected that, after all, I had been led to proclaim Socrates as my special prophet precisely in the course of trying to express as honestly, and as effectively, as possible what in me was seeking to be expressed: his "I don't know", "How?", "Why?", "What is what?" say more to the modern mind than the Hewbrew prophet's "Thus it is", "Thus saith the Lord", even though in essentials the Greek and Hebrew prophets agree. I have also indicated that to expose clearly what precisely we cannot understand and why, is no less of a help than to set forth as precisely as possible what we do understand.† I must not therefore shirk being Socratic just

* By "Socrates" I mean Socrates as he is represented by Plato.

† See above, p. 64.

because of the feeling that simple certitude is desired—some simple certitude, comparable, though perhaps in a different key, to that of fields of asphodel, glorious fighting and drinking, houris, or harps and hymns. Besides, Socrates did proclaim immortality, if only as a puzzle, question and challenge, and he was the authority or patron saint of all the authors of Consolations in classical Antiquity and even the originator of the fashion, followed by later Stoics, of making the Consolation a preface, instead of a sequel, to dying—the consoler's own. Indeed, the idea of immortality, though essential to Christianity and preached in it so Hebraically, is Greek (i.e. chiefly Socratic), since the Hebrews, or the Hebrews of the Bible, were too absorbed in the awareness of the Immortal, or the Creator, to give much thought to "immortality", i.e. the immortality of the creature.

*Death the Stultifier of Life*

The idea of immortality is generally explained as the product of man's universal fear of death, as his protection against that fear. But unless by "fear" we mean the body's shrinking from its own disintegration, is the fear of death so very universal? Is not the desire for death, the "death wish", that modern discovery and the psychological counterpart of the entropy, or running-down, of the physical universe, just as common or even more common? To me the most revealing thing about our *psychological* attitude to death is this: when we are afraid of life, we are also afraid of death; when we welcome life, we do not shrink from death either. The idea of immortality, it seems to me, is our protest, not against the terror of death, but against its absurdity; certainly that is what

it appears to be in the arguments of Socrates' pupil, Plato.

But we certainly do not know what exactly we mean by "immortality", and if the latter stands for what we want, and want supremely—as it does—then we do not know what precisely that is which we want above everything else or more deeply than everything else. Indeed, knowledge seems to be itself a kind of death, or on the side of death, and immortality essentially a not-knowing, mystery. One thing, however, we do know, one thing we *see*: death is not everything, death is not the end, death is not final. And the chief function of the assertion of immortality is to assert this. For if the moment, however great and glorious, is, passes away, and that is all; or if we and our achievements, however creative, are, pass away, and that is all; or if the moment and we and our achievements simply live on as effects or traces; above all, if the universe, having been, shall pass away and that will be all; then everything is nonsense, nothing is worth while, "value" is meaningless, the creative life is a chimera.

"But why? After all, if something is worth while then it is worth while even if one day it will be no more. And if it has been worth while, then it has been worth while even if it is no more." That is the usual question and challenge put to us if we maintain that "immortality" stands for something necessary, though we do not know precisely what. They are very difficult to answer, especially as they put us on the spot, so to speak: we are made to figure as low-motived creatures who want some kind of reward for their efforts and strivings, while the questioner-challenger appears to be satisfied nobly "to sustain

alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas", in the young Bertrand Russell's words, "the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power".* And yet we cannot help feeling that these are just words, heroics rather than heroic.

The answer, I think, comes from the experience of the creative life as contrasted with ordinary life, the suicide by inches, which alone the questioner-challenger has in view. That experience, we have seen, is the experience of making—including the making of ourselves, of our own unity—which will always be and therefore will never end. To try and be creative and yet accept death for what it is usually supposed to be, the end, is to try to make something which one knows will never be made instead of continuing always to be made; it is to try to make a perfect house, for example, on which one knows one will never put a roof, a perfect carriage which will never have wheels, a perfect bridge which will never reach the other bank—in general, to be willing to conceive something one knows will never be born or will be stillborn (and which includes oneself, one's own unity). The creative life is a perpetual promise; death makes of it a perpetual lie. The creative drive urges us on with "Life begins tomorrow"; death pulls us back with "Life begins never". To believe death and yet obey the urge of life, is to be, if a giant at all, a giant fool.

The idea of death is as completely excluded by the creative, as by the purely instinctive, consciousness: if an animal could conceive of its own death, it would, presumably, already *be* dead.

* See above, p. 109, note.

*Immortality and Survival*

There is a kind of negative knowledge about immortality corresponding to Negative Theology about God: we know that immortality is and what it is not. To be immortal is not to come to an end. But neither is it simply to go on and on without end (though what I said above about the experience of the creative life might suggest that it is). Hence, though always thought of as the opposite of death, immortality, or "eternity", has been distinguished by Christianity from mere survival, or duration after death: it has been called a quality of life, not necessarily confined to the "next life". In this, Christianity was anticipated by Greek and Roman mythology: in the latter, assumption into the company of the gods, conferred upon a few choice mortals and won, if not begun, on earth, was different from mere existence after death, common to all, and it symbolised the raising of life to the *n*th power.

*The Immortal Moment and Time*

Traditionally "immortality" is an inseparable part of the expression "the immortality of the soul". Nevertheless the basic immortality is not the immortality of the soul, but the immortality of the moment. It is of the immortality of the moment that we can have experience, and without that experience "immortality" can stand only for a notional entity. And of course if there is no immortal moment, neither is there an immortal soul or an immortal anything. Shakespeare describes an immortal moment when he makes Cleopatra say:

"Eternity was in our lips and eyes,
Bliss in our brows bent; none our parts so poor,
But was a race of heaven."

Reflection on such an experience shows us how far immortality is from being the same as going on and on without end. The transience of time is not its opposite or enemy, as it has traditionally been taken to be ever since the time of Plato. It is rather the complementary without which it could not be, or could not be experienced: if time stood still, there would be no immortal moment, but rather excruciating boredom. This relationship to time is expressed by Blake in his lines on *Eternity*:

"He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise."

"He who binds to himself a joy", or, as the line ran originally, "He who binds himself to a joy" and would have time stand still has neither experience nor thought of immortality or joy. All time save the one moment is damnation for him because he is fascinated by that one moment; or he is fascinated by the one moment because he expects damnation for the rest of time. Thus, Ovid's words, "Run slowly, slowly run, ye steeds of night", are the utterance of one enthralled by lust and are repeated by Marlowe's Doctor Faustus who clings to the present moment because he expects to be carried off the next moment to hell. "Ah, Faustus," he laments,

"Now hast thou but one hour to live,
And then thou must be damned perpetually.
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of Heaven,
That time may cease, and midnight never come."

The immortal moment is not just present. At any rate to be appreciated as immortal it must be apprehended as also past; it must be, in Wordsworth's words, "emotion recollected in tranquillity".

The immortal moment is a moment of time, and yet not a moment of time; temporal and yet not temporal: if it involves a "before" and "after", these are not just temporal. So Rilke writes:

"O hours of childhood,
hours when behind the figures, there was more
than mere past, and when what lay before us
was not the future."*

So, too, Traherne writes of his childhood: "All time was Eternity and a perpetual Sabbath . . . The corn was orient and immortal wheat which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. Boys and girls tumbling in the streets were morning jewels: I knew not that they were born and should die. . . . Eternity was manifest in the Light of Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared, which talked with my expectation and moved my desire."† Wordsworth also speaks of childhood as the period when

* Elegies (translated by Leishman and Spender).
† *Centuries of Meditation.*

"immortality
Broods like the Day, a master o'er a slave,
A presence which is not to be put by."

These quotations make the puzzle much more of a puzzle than it is when immortality, or eternity, is considered simply the contrary or contradictory of time But they also make at least one thing clear: immortality cannot be defined; it is of the indefinable, indeterminate; in Shakespeare's words, it is of "a race of heaven". Herein lies its difference from mere survival: survival is continuation of the determinate, though perhaps in a different form, in another world which, though different from ours in some respects, is still, like it, a world of determinates; indeed, the two worlds are so alike, that, according to some accounts or speculations, it takes the dead quite a time to realise that they are dead.

The indeterminate, on the other hand, differs from the determinate, not just in some respects, but *toto caelo*, by the whole of heaven.

*Unified Time and Eternity*

Immortality is, in fact, of the more or less uncircumscribable *plus*, apprehended through greater or lesser devotion, which I have already dealt with. Only, it is of that *plus* with special reference to time. The immortality of the moment is the self-transcendence of the temporal moment; it is the *plus* stretching the temporal moment, breaking it as a circumscribed part of reality and opening it to the uncircumscribable:

"Each moment, quickening, packs
More throes of death and birth and growth,
and cracks
Time's womb big with Eternity, its child."*

The immortal moment is a pointer to what is more than time. Like all the other pointers I have mentioned, it does its work through the unification of multiplicity, in this case the multiplicity of the tenses. So Pater, in the same passage in which he describes the remarkable unification he sees in the smile of the *Monna Lisa*,† speaks also of "the gesture which absorbs all the past and future in an intense consciousness of the present". So too every enthusiast is apt to speak of the object of his devotion as the meeting ground of the present, the Golden Age and the Millennium. There have been various attempts to describe this unification reached by the extrapolation of some experience or other. Since, naturally, I can understand and vouch for my own description best, I will quote from myself:‡

"The feeling or experience, then, . . . whether it consists of an hour, a day, or years, of clock time, lies in the feeling of unity, harmony, and connectedness of the parts and in our absorption in every moment. The past seems to be resumed always without any loss in the present, and the future is experienced through the present by a kind of creative prophecy; the whole is all the time penetrated and held together by one

* From some verses of my own on inspired living.
† See above, p. 80.
‡ From *The Philosophy of Courage.*

meaning or one plan and constitutes what is generally called an eternal present. . . . Let us imagine a symphony or drama which is a perfect unity and which at the same time is so rich and involves us so actively that it absorbs the whole of us, our will and desire as well as our feeling and imagination, all the time. Our absorption, whether it lasted by the clock an hour, or days or years, would be felt as one moment. If it were interrupted by what did not fit into the symphony or drama, it would constitute the experience of the seconds (two, three, four, etc., according to the number of interruptions) of that moment. If it came to an end and were succeeded by absorptions in different symphonies or dramas, the different absorptions would constitute the experience of many moments. If, on the other hand, our absorption were in one uninterrupted, endless, rich symphony or play, there would be no experience of time, but only the experience of one eternal moment. In other words, the experience of eternity is the experience of perfect and rich unity which is neither interrupted nor succeeded by anything, while the experience of time is the experience of interruption and distraction, of gaps, of disconnectedness or mere conjunction—the experience of the mere "and" (of this moment *and* that moment *and* that moment *and* so on)."

I go on to state that Heaven, or eternity (i.e. immortality) is absorption in God, (i.e. in the Nothingness which "is" also perfect Oneness).

*The Immortal Soul*

And this brings us to the immortality of the soul, the person, or the individual.

Man, the person, the individual, is, I have said, amphibian, or ambiguous, a member of the world of determinates, but also of the indeterminate world. Death is the mark of the first world and as a member of that world he dies. Now, the death of a determinate, of a something, is the end or disappearance of the determinations which make it that something and mark it off from other somethings: thus a wireless is said to be dead when it no longer performs the functions which make it a wireless or that particular wireless. Similarly a man is said to be dead when the functions, the appetitions and ambitions, and the activities expressing them, which make up his determinate life have come to an end. If, however, he is not just a multiplicity, but a one, the centre for all these, other than and over and above them, then we have really nothing to say about him from the observation, or point of view, from which we normally predicate death. But such a centre, or one, is precisely what he tries to make himself through the Negative Way, or naughting, or the "rehearsal of death", when he aims to liberate himself from all determinations and to become nothing, or bare receptivity open to the creative Nothing, the Source of all life and all immortality. It is as such a centre, or one, that immortality has been ascribed to him from Plato onwards. The ascription comes from an intuition expanded into a theory. I do not wish to discuss the theory except to say that as such a centre, or one, man is always only being born and therefore cannot die: he is immortal, but his immortality, like his holiness, with which it is

identical or on which it depends, is never "there", except as an unfinished symphony. It might also be said that the man who has practised nauthting all his life has practised death all his life and so has overcome it.

*The Immortality of the Soul, and Experience*

What I wish to discuss, or rather to describe, is, once more, experience. Is there experience of the immortality of a person which corresponds to the experience of an immortal moment? I believe it is quite common, certainly to all those who have truly loved anyone—i.e. loved with an uncircumscribed love, marked, whether they are explicitly aware of it or not, whether they have any theory or dogma about it or not, by the indefinite overtone, or *plus*—and who then have lost by death the object of their love. When they accept the loss fully for what it is—that is to say, when they let themselves realise with all their imagination and feeling that they will never again see or hear, touch or be touched by, or in any way be able to exchange signs of affection with the beloved—and when, not trying to soften in any way the anguish of this realisation, they nevertheless refuse to despair in Life, then, unexpected and unsolicited, the beloved comes to them, no longer as the dear multiplicity of familiar gestures, habits, actions, which they themselves would have tried to conjure up, had they not accepted the separation, but as a whole or unity, as a presence, power or quality—a whole or unity apprehended much more clearly than it ever was when the beloved was alive and when, indeed, the beloved physical presence seems actually to have obscured it. I have mentioned this experience earlier on. It is as objective (i.e. not initiated by the

subject) as the sudden and unexpected sight of a mountain round the corner. Yet it is quite different from perception. And it is still more different from any "psychic" experience (e.g. seeing a ghost) or from imagining or remembering. It is *sui generis*, but comparable to hearing a new tune or realising a new meaning. It is, I take it, some such realisation as this that is meant by seeing the dead as one with the One, or in God or Christ. The experience, I said, is quite common. At any rate it would be, were it not for explanatory, or rather explaining-away, theories which destroy or dissipate all genuine vision, especially the theory which, like a fatal fungus, covers and kills all but the crudest and poorest experiences—namely, the theory that such vision is the product just of "feeling".

If only we could bring ourselves to admit that we have not got the categories to explain everything, and did not try to deny what we cannot explain! The most important things we see only "through a glass, darkly". But need we therefore accuse the glass of lying?

I have certainly spoken of what is perhaps the most important of these important things very darkly, very oracularly. But what speech befits better such an ambiguous topic than the oracular, i.e. the ambiguous? For the death-immortality antithesis is at the very heart of man's ambiguity. Immortality is undoubtedly that heart's desire. But not only do we not know what precisely that heart's desire is. We cannot know, it seems; indeed, we may not—it is the forbidden tree of life. For if we did know, that would really be the death of us, immortality would vanish: instead of inexhaustible mystery, it would be exhausted. And yet we must also

seek to know everything, and if we stopped seeking to know everything that would also be the death of us. Still, to speak oracularly is to say something, something which is by no means nonsense. "The oracle," that oracular philosopher, Heraclitus, "the Dark One", declared, "neither conceals nor reveals, but intimates."

The alternative to speaking oracularly in this case is, it seems to me, to speak nonsensically.

# CHAPTER VII

# PROVIDENCE

*Is Mine Christianity or Humanism?*

The account offered here is intended, and, I hope, sufficient, to enunciate a certain attitude. This attitude includes respect for facts, for the determinate, and for every kind of knowledge, each with its own logic or laws; not, however, respect for a closed world of facts, a closed compendium of knowledge, and a closed circuit of explanatory concepts. But in addition it has room for unlimited mystery, the sense of that which we know we do not know, and of our dependence upon it; for wonder, awe and worship; for hope and faith; for aspiration and inspiration—for all without which the creative impulse expires, for all that the deepest religion fosters but without the disadvantages of the canonising, canalising and crystallising of superficial religion.

This attitude may be summed up in what Keats has called "Negative Capability" and described as "the capability of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason". This is the ambiguity or agnosticism of all deep religion, which is always the worship of "the unknown God"—e.g. the religion of *The Cloud of Unknowing* or of that Muslim saint who makes God say, "Who beholds Me formulates it not, and whoso formulates Me beholds Me not. A man who beholds and then formulates is veiled from Me by the

formulation." It is also the agnosticism of any really thinking Agnosticism.

Is this attitude Christianity (or, generally, religion) or is it Humanism?

It is something reached by re-thinking fundamental issues. The advance made by such re-thinking and its fruitfulness can be measured by the number and nature of old antitheses, or oppositions, it displaces, though these may be replaced by new ones: the new ones do mean at least new insights, if not a final solution.

For me at any rate the re-thinking has moved out of the Way the supremely obstructive opposition between belief and unbelief. Do you believe in God or not? Does God exist or not? Does the supernatural exist or not?—these questions, or forms of one and the same question, have become meaningless from the new position I have attained. Or at any rate they have joined such questions as "Do external objects exist?" "Do other persons exist?" The academic question, "What do you believe?" simply obscures the vital question—particularly vital for our age—"What do you choose? The closed life or the open life? The life determined by the past or the life promised by the future? The routine or the inspired life? To be the plaything of conditions and circumstances, or the artist of life to whom these are but materials and who listens to what they have to say to him in their imperfect accents as the sculptor listens to the brute stone, and then proceeds to supplement and perfect these accents? To play the part of the potter's clay or of the potter?"

With the opposition between belief and unbelief go various other oppositions connected with it: the opposition between idealism and realism, and its twin, that

between optimism and pessimism; that between freedom and determinism; that between self-reliance and God-reliance; that between this-worldliness and other-worldliness.

Idealism or realism, and optimism or pessimism: The idealist/optimist maintains that somehow our ideals and values are of the essence of the real, can be realised and are secured or guaranteed. He is right in that there is no real life without them, they arise from our contact with the source of livingness and can go on being realised; but they are secured or guaranteed only in a paradoxical sense: there is no end to them only in the sense that there is no end to their realisation. On the other hand, the realist/pessimist is right in holding that they are not "there", that they are never realised (i.e. completed) and are not secured or guaranteed by anything determinate or the "universe" of determinates, to which, in fact, they do not belong; he is, however, wrong in thinking that they are illusory and that life is possible without them. Both sides are wrong and both right; the opposition creates nothing but confusion.

Freedom or determinism: Man is both determined and free. He is determined in so far as he has failed to naught the "self" of self-seeking and self-centredness, so that his determinism is, after all, "self"-determination. But he is free to the extent to which he has naughted that "self": to that extent he creates his life out of nothing; his life is an art, and it is most that when it starts every minute from scratch, from nothing.

Self-reliance or God-reliance: Man is most independent, most self-reliant, when he is most living, for then he makes himself. But it is precisely when he is

making himself that he is aware of his Maker and relies on his Maker, for then he relies on inspiration.

This-worldliness or other-worldliness: In making himself man makes his world, "this" world. The making is out of nothing in contact with the Nothingness and involves the awareness of the Nothingness—i.e. the "religious consciousness", or "other-worldliness". The experience of God, of heaven, of "the other world", is not a night-dream or day-dream experience nor a seeing of spooks, but the experience of "this world" arising every minute from nothing. The antithesis between this-worldliness and other-worldliness is meaningless; it arises from not understanding either term.

*The God Within*

The Maker of whom I have said man is aware in making himself is the God of inspiration. He is the God within, the God, whom, presumably, the Bishop of Woolwich is willing to leave us after doing away with the "Supernatural", though it is not clear from those utterances of his I have seen that he thinks we need anything more than attachment to Christ or "Christ" (the person or name). Of this God it is not difficult to understand Aristotle's saying that he moves the universe "as being loved". But Aristotle meant—mysteriously, to be sure—the physical universe, and this God does not *do* or at any rate is not seen to *do* anything except through us, by inspiring us; and this, I have said, would still be the case even if we were to move mountains by faith. He is, assuredly, not the Lord in the great strong wind that rends the mountains and breaks in pieces the rocks, or in the earthquake, or in the fire. He is only a still small

voice. "A harmless God", I can hear someone—myself in certain moods, I am afraid—say. "A poetic God, or rather a poetic description of our better self, for is not the still small voice just our better self? A God who is scarcely distinguishable from our belief in him, so that it is as easy to maintain that we have created him as that he has created us."

*The God Without*

But now let us imagine ourselves not merely being inspired with the right word and phrase. Let us suppose that as a result of, or in connection with, the self-emptying and self-opening which preceded the inspiration, we are provided, exactly at the right moment, with the right pen, paper and publisher, with the right audience also, i.e. the most receptive of the inspiration we have received ourselves. Let us further suppose this kind of thing happening when the emptying and opening are not just of our poetic imagination, but of our heart, will, or living. Let us imagine also that we experience this happening with a certain regularity which excludes the possibility of mere coincidence. Then our life will begin to feel like a poem and ourselves like words fitted into it.

Connecting such happenings with the God of inspiration, we should begin to think of him as the "inspirer" of a whole complex pattern of events. Some of these events might be between persons, but not foreseen or planned by them either separately or together (e.g. momentous meetings at critical moments); others might be physical (e.g. fine weather or a storm at the same critical moments with the most momentous results). The whole pattern might display a unity like that of a poem, and this unity

could not be attributed to the conspiration of the persons involved any more than the unity of the poem can to the conspiration of the words; nor, of course, could it be put down to mere chance any more than the poem can.

With the idea of such an inspirer we should reach the idea of particular Providence. Such a God would, of course, be more like what the God of the Old and the New Testaments (especially of the Old) looks like on the surface at any rate, and also more like the God of whom we could say with Aristotle that he moves the physical universe. He would be clearly a transcendent God, other than ourselves as the physical universe is.

Perhaps it is such a God that is needed to awaken the sleeping attention of the modern world and to arrest the career of megalomaniac modern man towards the universal madhouse. He would certainly be welcome to the humanist, who would find in him something solid to get his critical, miscreant teeth into and would rejoice in something he could definitely say he disbelieved in without having to weigh imponderables or struggle in the coils of subtle disquisitions about the nature of personality and inspiration.

*Difficulties of the Idea of the God Without*

Why, then, is not my whole book about this God? Why am I just bringing him in as an afterthought? Do I not believe in such happenings and in such a God? Is that why my Christian critic accused me of being just a Platonist—because I do not believe in a "historical God", in a God operating and manifested in history?

I "believe in" such happenings. That is, I have experienced them, witnessed them and heard of them from those

whose credibility I could assess, and of course anyone can read about them in many biographies and autobiographies. I also believe in their great significance.

But what that significance is, what is meant by a "historical God", what kind of causality is involved in his operation—how could I deal with such questions by the method I have chosen, that of mere inspection of experience? I might as well undertake to assess the value of the deliverances of astro-physics—e.g. the value of the theories of the expanding universe and of its continuous creation—by gazing at a few stars with the naked eye. To have tried to deal with such questions would have been to go in for theory and explanation, to write theology or philosophy.

This is a true reason. But it also covers an evasion.

For why have I chosen this method instead of writing theology or philosophy? Because I feared the abyss of nonsense or dishonesty or both: because I shrank from the danger (greater in theorising than in describing) of overlooking a felt difficulty—that, in fact, which in the description has emerged so prominently as the ambiguity of creativeness, or man's amphibian predicament.

To the belief in the "historical God" I did in practice commit myself in a very thorough-going way. It seemed to me it was the only way in which it was possible to commit oneself to the one Lord about whom we are told, "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and thou shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way,

and when thou liest down and when thou risest up". And that, I thought, was the only Lord worth having. I believed, in fact, that "God" could only be synonymous with "the object of unlimited devotion".

But it was precisely this belief that involved me in the personifying language and the play-acting I have already mentioned. For the trouble with this belief is that it tempts us to look upon God, if not as the doer, at any rate as the ordainer, prompter, or instigator of our actions, instead of as the source of the life from which they spring and only indirectly as their source in the same way as we might be regarded as the indirect source of our friend's actions, through our general influence on him, without our having suggested or even thought about or wished them. Inspection may show God as only such an indirect source of this or that action taken in isolation. But what if the action is an integral part of a pattern not designed by ourselves or by any human being? It was the will of God, we are inclined to decide, and the whole pattern, it seems, proves it to have been the will of God; the pattern looks like his seal or signature.

This may be an inspiring interpretation in the case of a few outstanding events and seems to be the one given in the Bible and in the biographies of great men, especially religious leaders. But when the will of God is sought and is imagined to have been manifested in every action and happening of our life, the interpretation can only be saved by the most improbable hypotheses whose sole function and justification is the saving of it: "God prompted me to this silly action in order to teach me sense." "God made me hit out at that man, whom I thought I loved, in order to show me that I really har-

boured hatred." "God took my wife from me in order to teach me to give my love to everyone and not just to one person." Even, most curiously, "He who makes us has so willed, that in mathematics indeed we should arrive at certitude by rigid demonstration, but in religious inquiry we should arrive at certitude by accumulated probabilities" !* Or irrelevant sin after irrelevant sin is dredged up purely in the service of this salvaging operation. The interpretation is "saved" in the way Ptolemaic astronomy used to be "saved" by the endless addition of cycle to cycle and epicycle to epicycle. It keeps us harking back to the past and yields contributions to an intriguing biography of God instead of understanding of our own actions and those of our fellow men. How, I asked myself, did sensible people use it without being troubled by the mass of nonsense it logically led to?

By not being logical, I concluded, but only edifying: by using it only in so far as it inspired them with patience, courage, repentance, correction, gratitude, hope and faith; by not connecting their statements so as to form a biography, a character or image of God. I therefore decided that the sane thing to do was to reject this clumsy linguistic aid and simply to accept everything that happened as an opportunity for creative living, to equate *amor Dei* (the love of God) with *amor fati* (the love of fate). That, I was convinced, was in fact what they did do, while those who did not contributed the largest contingent to the population of the lunatic fringe.

The interpretation can lead, of course, to worse than nonsense. It has led to very great disasters, especially on

* Newman, *Apologia.*

the scale of history. The thought of the ruthlessness of the "chosen" peoples and leaders of the past and of their "missions"—"missions" attested, and inflexible perseverance in them encouraged, by the aforesaid seal or signature of God—this thought makes us shudder. Even Hitler felt himself chosen, if not by God, at any rate by History, his obedient mistress, and the way even the weather fitted in with his criminal designs, until Russian General Winter came along, encouraged some people to think that perhaps he had a mission. (Perhaps, indeed, he had, though not the one he thought.) The way to hell, it seems, is paved with missionary intentions.

*Do Christians Believe Only in the God of Ancient History?*

Therein, I reflected, must lie the explanation of a phenomenon which had puzzled me a good deal about Christianity. Certainly, the Bible is the story of God working in history—indeed, in the Bible history is just that story. Certainly, Christian apologetics emphasise Christianity as a "historical religion" and on that ground contrast it with Platonism and with ancient Greek religion or Hinduism. Why, then, does one hear so little about the God in history except in connection with a few canonical events in these apologetics and in church on Sundays? Why does one not hear about God's hand in the everyday life of professing Christians? Has he changed his methods or his nature? The "historical God" is now, it seems, no more than a liturgical stereotype in the chief, the respectable, orthodox, or sound-thinking, Christian tradition, that which through the centuries has sifted what is durable because sensible. As an active force, the idea of such a God has been taken over by the pro-

fessed enemy of Christianity, atheistic Communism. It is Communism which is constantly pointing to the pattern of God (un-Christened and renamed "the Dialectic") in history as a guarantee of its own inevitable success in the future. And by doing this it convinces the Christian that this way of interpreting history had better be left to the idolaters.

For such an interpretation simply deifies success, or rather success of the most superficial kind, materialist success, instead of defying failure like the omnipotence which is omnipatience. Besides, how is success of any kind to be measured? By what time-scale shall we reckon? Even if our time-scale is such that a thousand years are but a day, it is ludicrously inadequate when we are dealing with the universe. Has the Crucifixion been a success? Can we guarantee or calculate that it will be?

And yet because something is dangerous, that does not make it untrue. After all, the greatest danger now, that of atomic war, is from the physical sciences, and it was the fear of their danger that inspired resistance to them at their early inception. But it is their truth that has brought about their danger—i.e. has led to the discovery of the Bomb. The humanities also, we have seen, are dangerous. All truth is dangerous and that, not just inertia or cussedness, is the reason why the advance of knowledge, or its too rapid advance, is resisted by conservatism. Dangerous the idea of Providence may be, but it may also be true.

Nor is a belief proved to be untrue because it has been dropped by orthodoxy or has gone dead in it. After all, Christian orthodoxy may simply have allowed itself to be defeated by intellectual and spiritual difficulties: every

Christian revival has asserted that this is the case. Is not this how every orthodoxy manages to go on being accepted as orthodoxy—by taking evasive action, by refusing to face "scandalous" difficulties? Am I not myself producing scandalous paradoxy instead of respectable orthodoxy by refusing not to face them?

Moreover, it can be shown that the belief in Providence does not really require us to think of God as the ordainer or prompter of our actions or as "doing" anything except inspiring, giving new life.

I think I can show it myself* and I long to do so. For if only I found, if only I used, the combination opening this particular safe, I tell myself, I would come upon, and bring out for all the world, the treasure of treasures: I would demonstrate the real God, the God of childhood and the imagination, the dear, if also feared, God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of whom no one, not even myself, could say that he was just oneself.

But having reached this point in my Gnostic day-dreaming or childish play-acting, I realise that I am simply bringing up again one part of the problem I have already considered, that of uniting, theoretically and practically, the indeterminate and the determinate worlds.†

The particular part is the problem of the historical process, which is even more puzzling than the cosmic process. The latter we obviously do not shape ourselves. But the historical process we sometimes dream that we do, only to wake up and find that we have simply been

* Cf. my *Body, Mind and Spirit.*

† See above, pp. 93 and 115–19.

making pieces which fit into a jig-saw puzzle we have never dreamed of and do not always particularly like. (It is a commonplace that any would-be maker of history, an Alexander, a Caesar, a Napoleon, a Hitler, above all a Lenin or any other revolutionary must be surprised indeed—and generally disappointed—at the picture into which the piece or pieces he has cut have eventually fallen.) Then more agonising questions trouble us about the historical than about the cosmic process. Who or what does shape history as a whole? What sense can there be in talking about history as a whole? What is the "Destiny" (if any) which shapes its ends (if any) "rough-hew them how we may"? Is that Destiny, after all, the "dreary, dark, dumb Thing" of that verse philosophy of history, Hardy's *Dynasts*, and are we the Thing's "fingers that click-clack off its pre-adjusted laws"?

*Theoretical Attitude towards Providence*

For the purpose of theoretical unification one might advance the hypothesis that all the universe, including that which is normally reckoned as the purely physical universe, consists of centres which, like ourselves, are capable of receiving inspiration, so that even physical events can be "inspired" like poems. (This has nothing to do with violating the laws of nature, any more than has the writing of a poem—by which I do not mean to imply that this violation is impossible.) Thus a consilience of events, some inter-personal, others purely physical, could be conceived as "inspired" in the same way as co-operation between persons who neither will nor plan it but find themselves co-operating just because they are inspired with the spirit of co-operation.

Such a hypothesis is permissible enough, provided we know what we are doing in making it—that we are indulging in a kind of game of the imagination. Such a game may satisfy the need that Goethe has in mind when he says that man must create from within an image of both himself and the world which does not clash with the "revealed mystery" of God given to him: man, Goethe explains, must preserve the vision of the world as his "proper home, appearing neither too great for his insignificance, nor too small for his greatness, neither too fantastic for his reason, nor too prosaic for his imagination; neither too unwieldy for his will, nor too unlovable for his affection". The game is safe as long as it is counterbalanced by Keats's "Negative Capability".

The hypothesis, however, must not be exalted to a legislative rank, so that it becomes a kind of theology from which all kinds of deductions are made. Above all, it must not be pressed into the service of explaining any particular event, e.g. Dunkirk or the Battle of Britain. For then it would be treated as part of knowledge. This it, or something like it, may one day become when our knowledge has itself become transformed and the performance of miracles like Jesus's and in Jesus's way is considered quite normal, when besides the miracles of science we shall have the science of miracles. Until then to treat it as knowledge is to set up a pseudo-para-knowledge.

Or perhaps such treatment of it may be compared to trying to find the mind of the composer of a symphony from one of its notes.

*Practical Attitude towards Providence*

The practical unification of the two worlds, on the other hand, must be more than a game; it is part of the tight-rope walking which is the search for the Way, the creative life itself. Practically we may be borne up by the faith that the historical process, like the cosmic process, is in the hands of God somehow, though we do not know how or indeed what precisely this proposition means, while nevertheless certain, quite rightly, that it means everything. We must do the planting we have been inspired to do with whatever skill we have been given for planting. But if having done that, we are assailed by fears that, after all, there may be no fruits, we must tell ourselves that the climate of Providence will see to it that there are, though we don't know how, when or what. For this faith no experience is necessary.

But to try and trace precisely the hand of God in this or that particular event is to commit a sin against God himself, the sin of unlivingness against the source of livingness; for it is to dwell on the past, to linger in the past, to want to repeat or imitate the past; and to do this is to be unliving. The past can hold us more by the elation than by the dejection with which it can fill us, and what can fill us with greater elation than that which we believe is the very sign-manual of God? The past can so enthrall us that we forget the future, and to forget the future is to forget the indeterminate, to forget God.

There is only one way of unifying the world of the past with the world of the future—by not looking back, but always looking forward. Inspiration, guidance, is for the future and must be from the future, not from the past. In the myth Orpheus is allowed to lead his beloved

Eurydice up from the dead on the condition that he does not look back at her until she is amongst the living. The myth can be treated as a parable illustrating the way to unify the past, the dead, with the living, the future.

*Conclusion?*

The problem of Providence is, of course, crucial, and I am sorry I cannot give a more unambiguous solution of it, just as I am sorry that I have not been implicated in more unambiguous providences, though for those things which have happened to me—they include mistakes and misfortunes—and which could be interpreted, if not unambiguously, at any rate not improbably either, as providences, I am very, very grateful.

As a matter of fact, I might cite amongst them the way this book came to be written and what happened during and in consequence of the writing. I shall not do so, however, but merely explain my reasons for not doing so —apart, that is to say, from the natural unwillingness to claim any undue authority for my words or any authority that is not intrinsic to them but due merely to the mode of their coming. For this explanation will by itself suffice to throw light on the nature, the ambiguity, of a providence. In the first place, it is very difficult to make out what comes from oneself and what from outside. Providence is most clearly realised to be at work when one is ready to take everything that comes as an opportunity for creativeness: it is then precisely that special opportunities seem to have been planted and to be waiting in ambush for one—a kind of frame-up proving the truth of the saw, "God helps those who help themselves". So, how can one tell which is oneself and which is Provi-

dence? The situation—i.e. the circumstances, happenings and their connections—begins to speak to one like signs which one has suddenly realised to be letters and sets about deciphering, and the state of things—i.e. the look of the sky, fields, mountains, rivers, trees—is invested with "A presence which is not to be put by" and which creatively "broods" over it "like the Day". All this suggests an explanation of how the ancients came to believe in omens, but it is too insubstantial to write about. What in it is "subjective" and what "objective"? In the second place, providences, no doubt because of something in human nature or the human predicament, are very commonly granted through our apparent triviality and silliness—like "Christ crucified", they appear both a scandal and foolishness*—so that to report them, one fears, will be to discredit them, certainly oneself. No doubt an impressive and convincing report is possible. But it would involve an elaborate and detailed inquiry which would give some determinate meaning to those much abused and abusive terms, "subjective", "feeling", "imagination", "wish-fulfilment", "compensation", etc. Perhaps it will be carried out by the generation to whom this book is dedicated in the person of one of them and who, one hopes and prays, will be more advanced in mystery, knowledge and wisdom than ourselves.

Meanwhile, not being able to do any better than I have done, I would like to ask others, Christians or, in general, believers, how they think the question of Providence can be answered in the contemporary situation.

* Hence the distinction between "human" and "divine" wisdom, so drawn that it is a dangerous one, since whenever we have reason to doubt our own wisdom we are tempted to think it divine.

The question was as important for Plato and the Stoics as it is for us. Plato seems to identify the work of Providence with the constant separation of the sheep from the goats, with bringing good together with good and evil with evil. Following him, we might perhaps see in Providence the positive factor which brings together beneficial mutations and so makes possible the rise of new species. "Natural selection", the negative factor which eliminates the harmful mutations, cannot by itself explain that rise any more than our rejection of the inappropriate or nonsensical ideas which are the concomitants of all inspiration and invention can explain our cathedrals, poems, plays, symphonies, bridges, aeroplanes, etc. Similarly we might attribute to Providence the bringing together of those "fortunate" events which make up creative history and which human agency cannot by itself assure. But this would be to speculate. If we wish to avoid speculation, the best thing to do is to treasure every phenomenon that can be brought under the notion of Providence, which alone makes possible and tolerable a synoptic view both of the cosmic and the historical processes, but to remember that at present at any rate we have no pigeon-hole into which to fit that notion: neither that of physical causality nor that of purposive agency will do. "He" [the Christian], wrote the late Michael B. Foster, "can be aware of God's working in the world, but cannot locate it in the world."*

Some will perhaps consider that the question of Providence is *the* religious question and that, because I have not answered it more definitely, the whole of my book is just a question. They will be right.

* *Mystery and Philosophy* (SCM Press), p. 50.

The quest, after all, is a question, and another question and another—always a question, a life-long question.

It is, however, also the answer, always the answer, the same answer, the life-long answer: to care deeply about, to hope for and have faith in, and to keep myself open to, the coming of more light and more light and more—from the Nothingness, the Mystery, the Darkness, from which all light dawns. In other words, to watch and pray.

## TWO IMAGES OF FAITH

### I

### The Plaything

I had a lovely plaything—
A lovely mystery.
Of what it was I can tell nought:
'Twas long ago and I've forgot.
But when therewith I'd play,
All merrily went the day,
And full of zest and glee
I'd leap and dance and sing.

There came a grave man gravely,
Who whispered fearfully
" 'Tis this that moves the world lad".
Then my delight
('Twas delicate and slight)
I broke in his despite,
To see what I should see.

A curse upon his gravity!
The world still moves, it moves like mad,
Or slowly drags, so sad! so sad!
A curse upon his gravity!

1927

II

## ARMAGEDDON

This is reality bedrock
  In a world run amock,
With all else by bombs blown away
As mere dust and mock,
This is reality bedrock:—
That man meeting man
    Should greet him,
    Not ill-treat him,
    Not beat him,
    Not eat him,
    When he can;
    Forgive him
    That he's man,
    Help give him
    When he can;
And should feel himself act
  In this strange way
    Not through convention,
    Old instinct's prevention,
      Or his own fear,
      Or anything dear
      In the other;
Not because of anything in himself or his brother,
  But because he feels a strange something about him,
    A light invisible something,
    A slight impalpable thing;

Because he feels about him a breath,
Because he feels God about him.

It is a good and right thing
  That our rock
  None dare mock
Should be this light thing,
This ethereal, slight thing,
  Our shield against death
  Only God's breath.

1940

Ishmaelite, "has room for an unlimited sense of unlimited mystery, the sense of that which we know we do not know, and of our dependence upon it; for wonder, awe and worship; for hope and faith; for aspiration and inspiration—for all without which the creative impulse expires, for all that the deepest religion fosters but without the disadvantages of the canonising, canalising and crystallising of superficial religion." "This attitude," he suggests, "may be summed up in what Keats has called 'Negative Capability' and described as 'the capability of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts or reason.' This is the ambiguity, or agnosticism, of all deep religion, also of any really thinking Agnosticism. And if this attitude is not Humanism, then I do not know what is." To those who may complain that the whole of his book is "just a question," Professor Leon answers: "They will be right. The quest, after all, is a question. It is, however, also the answer: to care deeply about, to hope for and have faith in, and to keep myself open to, the coming of more light and more light and more—from the Nothingness, the Mystery, the Darkness, from which all light dawns. In other words, to watch and pray."

This brave and fascinating book may well be, for many of the wanderers and wonderers in the vast depths that lie between—or beyond—belief and unbelief, the work they have long been awaiting. It uses an admittedly difficult concept, but is written with such refreshing simplicity, informality and concreteness, in language that is non-sectarian and non-specialist, that it can be understood by anyone who cares enough to want to read it. And we believe that a great many people will want to read it.