

The Forgetfulness of Beings

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I am not a professional philosopher, but a writer on public policy for much of the time and on comparative literature for the rest. I cannot settle with authority questions about whether Heidegger's Ontological Difference was already present in Aquinas or other philosophical technicalities that shape postmodernism. In fact, a few years ago when I left the Georgetown Library after a day reading *Being and Time*, I couldn't remember where I'd parked the car. In overcoming the forgetfulness of Being, I'd become even more than usually forgetful of beings (something both my wife and assistant previously thought impossible).

But perhaps Heidegger's effect on my memory is not so merely a biographical accident. Except for some exceptionally hardy intellects, reading Heidegger has meant for many people in many fields precisely not being able to remember where the car is parked. As someone who splits his time between postmodern theory and postmodern Washington—the differences are not as great as might first appear—perhaps I might best contribute to an analysis of Thomism and postmodernism by looking at some of the already clear consequences, and likely future effects of the forgetfulness of beings in postmodernism.

Let us begin, like Plato, with a homely example:

An Englishman, a Frenchman, and a German each undertook a study of the camel. The Englishman, taking his tea basket and a good deal of camping equipment, went to set up camp in the Orient, returning after a sojourn of two or three years with a fat volume, full of raw, disorganized, and inconclusive facts which, nevertheless, had real documentary value. The Frenchman went to the Jardin des Plantes, spent half an hour there, questioned the guard, threw bread to the camel, poked it with the point of his umbrella, and, returning home, wrote an article for his paper full of sharp and witty observations. As for the German, filled with disdain for the Frenchman's frivolity and the Englishman's lack of general ideas, he locked himself into his room, and there he drafted a multiple-volume work entitled: *The Idea of the Camel Derived from the Concept of the Ego*.¹

The story used to end here, but I'd like to add a coda:

An American postmodernist became acquainted with the camel problematic in a graduate seminar on "Speciesism in the Bible." She did not feel comfortable with the Englishman's acquiescence in established social hierarchies, the Frenchman's obviously phallic probing with his umbrella, and the German's attachment to metaphysics, and started a series of self-help workshops (soon to be the subject of a PBS special hosted by Bill Moyers) entitled "Beyond the Eye of the Needle, or Getting Through the Eurocentric Reduction of Non-Western Signs and Species to Patriarchal, Phallogentric, and Onto-theo-logic Hegemonies."

That we can now easily identify and even parody the rhetoric and aims of much postmodern discourse suggests to me that we are really at a point that I would call post-postmodern. The owl of Minerva, as we know, flies only at dusk. And in the better perspective we have gained from no little acquaintance with postmodern theory, I would like to explore a set of postmodern problems that I hope Thomism and postmodern Thomists may help answer for those of us who are not professional philosophers.

I

There is a great deal that is both good and powerful in postmodernism and poststructuralism. It is important, in my view to keep these two terms distinct, even though they are related. Poststructuralism, as I would use the term, refers to a family of theories about language, truth, identity, and organizing "master narratives" of various kinds. For the most part, these theories basically take their origins from a group of French Heideggerians. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut have formulated this neatly: Foucault = Heidegger + Nietzsche; Lacan = Heidegger + Freud; the French political theorist Pierre Bourdieu = Heidegger + Marx; and Derrida = Heidegger + the style of Derrida. Whatever the justice of this formula, it shows how the old modern binary cleavages such as rational and irrational in Nietzsche, unconscious and ego in Freud, bourgeoisie and proletariat in Marx—which were all once thought to explain one known identity by reference to a slightly more obscure identity—have all been undermined and rendered problematic by French Heideggerians.

Postmodernism as I use the term is broader than these specific changes both in its conceptualization and, I believe, in staying power. Outside of formal

¹ Quoted as the frontispiece to Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H.S. Cattani (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990). The story originally appeared in *Le Pèlerin*, 1 September 1929, 13. I have rearranged the story slightly to make its connections with the text more orderly.

philosophy, postmodernism reflects a curious large-scale perception already present in the nineteenth century. There is no better formulation than Matthew Arnold's in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," where he speaks of our age as "Wandering between two worlds, one dead/The other powerless to be born." The dead world was the old modern world including, we can now see, its Christian vestiges. The world powerless to be born is partly modern and partly something hard to specify. It's very essence is to remain in a zone of unresolvable ambivalence: hence the name, postmodern.

Clearly, such an epochal shift is a serious affair. Nietzsche and Heidegger recognize as much, Derrida too, to a less serious extent. And this makes the often silly politicization of postmodern and poststructuralist thought (as in our camel parable) all the more distressing. Arnold's notion of powerlessness, of impotence and incapacity to issue in a live birth, is something I want to dwell on for a few minutes, because I have the impression that the silliness results precisely from something that postmodern philosophy either cannot or has not done in its emphasis on the difficult task of remembering Being.

Let me start with Jean-François Lyotard, the most influential French theorist of postmodernism. Lyotard in a typically combative formula called philosophy "the mental illness of the West."² Many people who come upon phrases like that in postmodern theory understandably get the impression that postmodernism is itself a mental illness and that it portends the decline of the West. In fairness to what is good in postmodernism, I'd like to draw a distinction that may prevent unnecessary conflict. During the existence of the late, unlamented Soviet Union, sophisticated Marxists, mostly in the West, defended themselves by denouncing "vulgar Marxists." I would argue that there is a fairly large cadre of vulgar postmodernists, mostly situated on campuses and in editorial offices and in television and film studios, who know little of Heidegger or Nietzsche, and operate in a spirit far different from theirs. And they give ample reason to fear that we are in the throes of a barbarian invasion in which all human structures and civilization shall be undermined and "problematized" in the name of we know not what.

Yet knowing a bit about Lyotard's work, when I first read the statement about philosophy as mental illness, it reminded me not of Oswald Spengler, but of G. K. Chesterton, who titled a famous chapter in his *Autobiography* "How to Be a Lunatic." Chesterton recounts how as a young man the passion to be absolutely rational, in the modern sense of rational, drove him back to thinking about the very wellsprings of thought—and also almost drove him

² Thomas Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 31.

mad. In *Heretics and Orthodoxy* he describes the narrow infinity of a certain kind of reason that presumes it can specify all of reality as the maddest use of mind. It takes an effort of imagination to break out of this iron circle—something I want to come back to later. Imagination in these conditions is not mere fantasy or poetry, in the bad sense of the term.

I don't invoke Chesterton here for mere nostalgia's sake. In Chesterton, several things are present that, in spite of his non-philosophical method, put into question whether postmodernism is quite as unprecedented as we suppose. Chesterton and some other pre-modern figures, I would place Maritain's friend Charles Péguy among them, were pre-moderns who nevertheless anticipated both where modernism was headed and some of the postmodern reactions to that course. Paradox plays a large role in Chesterton, for example, precisely because he knows that any simple discursive use of language at the end of the modern age must appear either as a reductivist objectivity bordering on scientism, or as impressionist subjectivism. I do not know whether the ontological difference may already be found in Saint Thomas, but I am sure that Chesterton, who was no mystic, intuited it, or something very like it, on the basis of orthodox Christianity and Western sanity. If you doubt this, re-read the failures of explanation and the failure of an entire menagerie of animals to suggest the identity of Sunday, who is God or something like Being, at the conclusion of *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

Chesterton, who I'm sure never even heard of Heidegger, often sounds like him. For example, who wrote this?

There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real. It is the fundamental fact of being, as against not being; it is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthink it, though we may sometimes be unthinking about it; unthinking and especially unthanking. For he who has realized this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for negation, and that under all our grumblings there is a substance of gratitude.³

Or this? "All our heart's courage is the/echoing response to the/first call of Being which/ gathers our thinking into the/play of the world."⁴ The first was Chesterton, the second, Heidegger.

The literary critic George Steiner emphasizes a dimension of Heidegger,

³ G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 26. Though a late text in the original edition (1932), this passage echoes a sentiment that may be found in varying forms throughout Chesterton's whole *oeuvre*.

⁴ From Martin Heidegger, "The Thinker as Poet," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 9.

little-noticed among the fruitier postmodern literary theorists but not lost on pure philosophers and theologians: "I have come to believe that Heidegger's use and exploration of the seventeenth-century Pietist tag *Denken ist Danken*, 'To think is to thank,' may well be indispensable if we are to carry on as articulate and moral beings."⁵ That basic gratitude and piety, "a piety of thinking" toward Being as Heidegger always insisted, is lacking in many of what I have called the vulgar postmodernists. And it is no wonder that many people therefore think that postmodernism makes it, in Steiner's words, impossible to carry on as articulate and moral beings.

Following Steiner's lead, we might look at how the postmodern might be made to confront some older concepts. And as a comprehensive set of pegs on which to hang some reflections I thought I might use the three transcendentals: the good, the true, and the beautiful.

II

Let's begin with the good. I find postmodernism most vulnerable in its apparent inability to state an ethic. And by an ethic I mean something more than the mere deconstruction of "master narratives," the reversals of margin and center, and the questioning of identities that make up the moral appeal of postmodernism to those so inclined. To put this very simply, we may undermine existing religion, metaphysics, politics, and domestic life because we think their foundations are insubstantial and their traditional conceptualization oppressive—or even terroristic. But that does not guarantee that the result will be more free and just. Most American inner cities today contain large numbers of young people who have been freed from the old Western master narratives of patriarchy, religion, and enlightenment democracy, and in light of the result of that liberation it would seem, to borrow a well-known formula of Heidegger's, that "only a god can save us now." Also, in a world where ethnic cleansing, political uses of famine, and totalitarian regimes still exist, ironic undermining is a very weak weapon with which to pursue justice. At the absurd limit, we find figures like Richard Rorty saying that because liberal societies lack universal foundations the "liberal ironist," like himself, faced with an Adolf Hitler could only try to "josh him out of" his anti-Semitic obsessions.⁶

In addition, I think we have to say the real-life histories of the central postmodern figures present us with a cautionary tale. Nietzsche and Heidegger

⁵ George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 15, 131, and 146.

⁶ See, for example Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

both display strong signs of what Philippa Foot has recently called simple "immoralism."⁷ The Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche of course falsified his work somewhat. And Heidegger's adherence to nazism—an adherence he never entirely renounced—must be thought through in non-Heideggerian terms. The famous sentence from the *Der Spiegel* interview in which he describes the inner greatness of Nazism as its participation in the global struggle with technology puts the case in a nutshell. All that may very well be. But with all due respect to Martin Heidegger, who is beyond doubt one of the great philosophical figures of this century, if you get the proportions of actual existing nazism wrong on such a scale, you might do better to sit down and figure out where the car is parked before you say any more about history and technology.

I cannot go here into the intricacies of the argument, but let me state baldly that both Nietzsche and Heidegger fail—and cannot help but fail—as moral thinkers because, whatever their other accomplishments, they have no place for absolute moral truths or universal principles of justice. Maritain discerned a similar problem in the "ontological gap" of Bergson: "The most captivating thing about Bergsonian ethics is precisely that morality, in the strictest sense of the word, has been eliminated from it. In it, man is caught between something *social*, infra-rational, and something *mystical*, supra-rational."⁸ *Mutatis mutandis* the same might be said of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

To put an end to slavery, for instance, as happened primarily through the agency of British Christianity in the nineteenth century, requires a deep belief in and willingness to sacrifice for the truth that slavery is wrong. Would Nietzsche, looking at the pitiful condition of the so-called "last men" ravaged by Christian "slave morality" and the modern world feel such a burning need? Nietzscheans will no doubt object that his revolt against that decadence was spurred precisely by the will to free those poor creatures. But in the meantime, it is clear, he feels—and shows—a good deal of contempt for the slaves.

A related set of problems persists in Jacques Derrida in spite of his own worries about Nietzsche and Heidegger's connections to Nazism. In particular, Derrida worries that any "proper of man," as Heidegger put it in his "Letter on Humanism," is the root of all Nazisms.⁹ Astonishingly, however, Derrida says in his latest book *The Other Heading (L'autre cap)* that universal principles of justice must be maintained in human societies, or disasters will follow.¹⁰ As

⁷ See Philippa Foot, "Nietzsche's Immoralism," *New York Review of Books*, 13 June 1991, 18-22.

⁸ Cf. Jacques Maritain, "Bergson's Morality and Religion," in *Redeeming the Time* (London: Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary Press, 1944), 82.

⁹ See my "Human Nature and Unnatural Humanisms" in *From Twilight to Dawn*, ed. Peter Redpath, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

Europe goes about unifying itself, he continues, it must also deconstruct the old hegemonic view of itself as the exemplary culture. Europe must see itself as defined both by its past and by its openness and recognition of the Other.

I agree with all of this, after a fashion. But I don't understand where in Derrida's thought these universals could possibly find a place, let alone a grounding. Deconstruction is almost by definition the enemy of identity, "henophobic." For the vulgar postmodernists, at least, there is no self who could be the subject of rights or universal principles. Paradoxically, for the same vulgar postmodernists along with many other people, this insubstantial self still has an ever expanding set of desires conceived of as rights.

I would propose Thomists try a different starting point to address this question of universal principles. In writing my book *1492 and All That*,¹¹ I ran across the central ethical question of the European expansion throughout the world: by what principles do we judge good and bad behavior in Western and non-Western societies? I am prepared to say that we do so on the basis of Western notions that emerged in the reflection of a group of scholastic theologians at Salamanca in Spain, Francisco de Vitoria, most prominently among them.¹² These theologians had to decide how Christians should treat the newly discovered peoples in the Americas—peoples who clearly had had no significant previous contact with Europe, could not have known the Old or New Testaments, and lived in societies that partly observed, and also grossly violated the natural law.

The answers of Vitoria, Cano, and—later—Suarez set us on the road toward Locke, the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, modern international law, and the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads in many places as if it had been lifted from Vitoria. I am well aware that these later developments are not without their own philosophical difficulties. To go back to Vitoria, however, might enable us to make a fresh start at thinking about rights again, but at a point before some of the later difficulties in rights theories appear. If we all value, at least to some extent, modern rights and liberties, we might do well to recall from what soil they sprang. It was not from the soil of sentimental bows to the Other, or from the undermining and

¹⁰ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (*L'autre cap*) Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Nass, trans., (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Robert Royal, *1492 and All That: Political Manipulations of History* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992).

¹² On this point, see James Brown Scott, *The Spanish Origins of International Law* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1928).

unmasking of our own discourses of power, but from a scholasticism confronting a wholly new human condition.

We may see the importance of universal principles in a recent and notorious case. Salman Rushdie has written what I consider to be one of the most remarkable postmodern fictions, I mean *The Satanic Verses*. Despite his quarrels with Islam and his often silly denigration of Margaret Thatcher and the United States, Rushdie paints a remarkably funny, rich, and imaginative portrait of the strange disorientations of self, society, and reality currently under way in the entire world as various cultures meet and mingle. That said, though, Rushdie's real-life adventures do not lead us to put much confidence in Rushdie-the-novelist's postmodern discourse on multiculturalism and non-Eurocentric categories.

Margaret Thatcher used to be called the Iron Lady. But had she been a postmodern Ironist Lady and not been supremely confident in the justice of using the British Special Forces to protect Rushdie from the Other, namely the Ayatollah Khomeini, Rushdie's doubts about the truth of Islam and the existence of the world to come would have been settled, one way or another, long ago. No amount of talk about multiculturalism, anti-colonialism, perspectivism, relativism, or antifoundationalism can get around disputes of this kind. We have to decide what we think good and right here, and be able to give reasons that can have cash value, as William James used to say, in the world.

For me, the best place to begin thinking about that ethical question is in late scholasticism, not Heidegger.

III

What about the second transcendental, the true? In spite of vulgar postmodernism's posturings and play with the abyss, one of the strongest claims of postmodernism, it seems to me, is its greater truth compared with the old modernism, even if postmodernists would probably not put the relationship quite that way. The reductive visions of modernism and technological scientism are so obviously false that almost any movement that reopens forgotten regions of Being cannot help but appeal to anyone sensitive to the riches and mysteries of the world. When all is said and done, Heidegger simply has a vision of the world that is a recognizably more human place than the old modernity. Death means something there besides extinction. Things are both themselves and part of something larger and more significant.

Postmodern literature has been the locus for some of the most lush effects of those insights. On the whole, I prefer the Latin American and Central European postmodernists rather than the North Americans. North American

postmodernist writers, like North American postmodernist theorists, tend to run riot with subvertings and decenterings of hegemonies that, compared to their counterparts at most times and places in human history, are not very powerful or oppressive in the first place. Some postmodern critics have argued that the first-world postmodern fiction is really hypermodern fiction and therefore not a contribution to solving the old modern aporias.¹³ There is unfortunately no terminological police force or justice system to which we can appeal on these issues. So it is useful to keep in mind that there are several forms of sensibility that have been given the name postmodern.

The Czech Milan Kundera, for example, exhibits something that rises beyond the mere destruction, *mise en abîme*, and shaking of foundations that characterizes much American and French postmodernism. At the end of the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we find this remarkable scene at—of all places—a Czechoslovakian nude beach:

a man with an extraordinary paunch began developing the theory that Western civilization was on its way out and we would soon be freed once and for all from the bonds of Judeo-Christian thought—statements Jan had heard ten, twenty, thirty, a hundred, five hundred, a thousand times before—and for the time being those few feet of beach felt like a university auditorium. On and on the man talked. The others listened with interest, their naked genitals staring dully, sadly, listlessly at the yellow sand.

Could any American, with the exception perhaps of the late Walker Percy, have written that moving statement of the potency of postmodern sexual aspirations and, at the same time, the clear postmodern or post-postmodern insight that all this points only to dust and death?

Kundera has quarrelled with another Czech postmodernist, the current president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel in ways we should look at briefly. Tomás, a character in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, chooses to make his wife happy by staying with her instead of participating in a public protest on the grounds that the resistance to a totalitarian regime “can’t do any good anyway.” Havel, of course, has spent much of his life trying to live out what had become a slogan among the Eastern European thinkers influenced by Husserl and Heidegger. They speak of “living in Truth.” Living in truth meant not compromising with the system and accepting that seemingly hopeless acts of resistance would be useless only if you yourself decided to lose hope.

Havel and Kundera have each had their solid successes, but in light of the second transcendental, the True, I think we can begin to see the problem with

¹³ See, for example, the terminological distinctions drawn by Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

some of the postmodern attempts to subvert all large-scale theories of meaning, whether pre-modern or modern. The postmodern strategy usually denies those "master narratives" in favor of the *petites histoires*, that is, personal stories as the only locus of rich meaning open to us. In this view, all the old *grands récits*—Christianity, Hegelianism, Marxism, even Liberalism—are dangerous totalizing and terroristic illusions.

We should probably not identify Kundera's character Tomás, with Kundera himself. But can Havel's "living in truth" be accommodated in postmodernism? Perhaps the most powerful attempt to derive that sort of commitment from postmodernism is Edith Wyschogrod's *Saints and Postmodernism*.¹⁴ For Wyschogrod, saints are a non-originating, non-foundational stimulus to act selflessly, but not in imitation or repetition of them. Perhaps someone may be so moved. I think it much more likely, however, that "living in truth" is both a better account and a better model for the work of the world. Havel even speaks in his book entitled *Living in Truth* of the virtue of Hope, a strange virtue based not on any immediate earthly prospect of success that yet carries on for a worldly purpose.

The contemporary Thomist, faced with continuing political and spiritual struggles, may wish to consider how hope and living in truth may be justified in spite of all postmodern challenges. After all, if the *petites histoires* were everything, much of the world might still be enslaved, and more would be threatened. Alexander Solzhenitsyn prophetically concluded his Nobel Prize lecture with the old Russian aphorism: "One word of truth outweighs the whole world." If we admire the results of such heroism, we must find better ways to account for it.

IV

This brings us to our third transcendental, the beautiful, and the question of aesthetics. Art has become more important in the postmodern world, it seems to me, because the truth claims of philosophy, theology, ethics, and even nature seem weak. The argument on many campuses over the canon has taken on added heat precisely because, where truth is assumed a priori not to exist, images and atmosphere will shape how most people think.

Literature in particular is one of the few remaining loci where we come upon whispers of transcendence. Sensing that postmodern theory and practice threaten to close off even that escape hatch, George Steiner has defended some older views of works of art under the intentionally religious title *Real*

¹⁴ *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

Presences.¹⁵ At the outset, he disputes all the current postmodern theories claiming that languages can refer only to other uses of language. Instead, he argues that the “capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence.”¹⁶

In the inquiring spirit of Maritain’s *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, however, we have to approach the multiple, polylectic, at times self-contradictory forms of postmodern art and aesthetics for what they tell us about current notions of the world. Lyotard has formulated the task of postmodern art as “presenting the unrepresentable in presentation itself” an almost religious aspiration. And under postmodern conditions this means denying ourselves what Lyotard calls the “consolation of beautiful forms.” At the other extreme, Susan Shell has explained the difference between existential and postmodern art as follows:

The dizzying horror of the abyss is replaced by the virtuosity of performance—a kind of perpetual mid-air tap dance, in which the ground isn’t needed—not as in the land of [car]toons, because its absence isn’t noticed, but because the ground itself is no longer sought.¹⁷

These two formulations show the ambivalent—even contradictory—aspirations of postmodern aesthetics. In part, with Heidegger, it points toward what exceeds the concept in the direction of Being and of the Kantian sublime. For the much larger part, however, it looks to performance art, because performance “artists” are always still available to us when all that is solid melts into air.

Sometimes the two tendencies appear in the same work. For example, the American Paul Auster’s anti-detective novel, *City of Glass*. An anti-detective novel, if you have not read Auster or Robbes-Grillet’s *Les Gommés*, turns the usual story line upside down. The detective starts out with the familiar investigation, but then identities, meanings, characters start to slip into an abyss of mysteries. Sometimes the real-life author shows up by name as a troubled and troubling character. It’s as if Kafka were called in to do a re-write of Raymond Chandler. There is both a destruction of the usual frameworks of life on the way toward a transcendence that never comes and a tapdancing in mid air. I confess to a soft spot for this kind of stuff. (Chesterton curiously anticipated this, too, in *The Man Who Was Thursday*).

The two different postmodern aesthetics, the sublime and the performative

¹⁵ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ Susan Shell, “Preserving the Humanities,” Address to the Madison Center Conference on the Humanities, Washington, D.C., 1989.

seem opposed but stem, I think, from a common source, a turning away from existing beings. For example, there is little discussion of natural beauty in postmodern theory largely because postmodern belief in the constructedness of all reality has occluded nature itself, even though nature is talked about a great deal. This does not bode well, by the way, for those trying to think through the question of technology and, more broadly, questions about the environment.

When pre-modern people looked at nature they saw both change and, more rarely, permanence. Whatever order and reason could be introduced into the environment by pre-modern man was seen as an achievement that perfected untutored and often threatening nature. At the same time, attempts to reproduce the cosmological order in political systems and even within the human spirit (microcosm answering to macrocosm) sought to rise above the inevitable processes of generation and corruption. In his poem "Sailing to Byzantium," W. B. Yeats shows a similar impulse in protesting against his own old age:

O sages dancing in God's Holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall
 Come from the fire, perne in a gyre
 And be the dancing masters of my soul.
 Sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is. And gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

Note the connection here: eternity is, for man, the product of a wisdom, almost a craft, that enables him to step outside even his own most intense desires. Yeats is a modernist, but his existential situation, his realization of being-toward-death, leads him back to an old solution for old mortality.

A much different mood emerged as modern technologies began their dominance over the world. Since at least the eighteenth century, for most artists regular mechanism and artifice have become "mechanical and artificial." The romantic revolt against artificiality and dead social and moral forms is more than an emotional outburst. Mechanism, more than at any time in human history, is perceived as threatening human particularity and spontaneity. In a world of mechanism, all that seems left for the authentically human is the uncanny, the inassimilable, perhaps even the teratological. Much of the postmodern talk about transgressing boundaries, open or fragmentary art forms, draws on this sentiment.

Those postmodern currents that took their start from a one-sided desire to free the human person from all mechanism and "closed" social systems have now worked out their own logic. They wind up denying the existence of the person, the intelligibility of world, and the possibility of a just order. Given the vacuum they have created it is no wonder that nature has rushed in to fill the void and we find quite authoritarian forms of feminism, gay rights, and anti-

European ideologies speaking, quite incongruously, a uniform language of deconstruction in several diverse fields. Iris Murdoch has recently explained why:

Philosophy, anthropology, history, literature have different procedures and methods of verification. It is only when the idea of truth as relation to separate reality is removed that they can seem in this odd hallucinatory light to be similar. With the idea of truth, the idea of value also vanishes. Here the deep affinity, the holding hands under the table, between structuralism and Marxism, becomes intelligible.¹⁸

Philosophy must be philosophy, not poetry, but in spite of imagination's dangers, which Plato already warned about, I would still like to point out that imagination, even postmodern imagination, may be a powerful tool for the philosopher. While no one with any sense expects a novelist or poet, painter or composer, to render the philosophical truth about the human condition, forms of the imagination, as Maritain shows clearly in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, are an important testimony of the modes of being and truth in any period.

But I think we need to go even a step further. There are some forms of art that do not seem to me to be merely fantasies, but point toward transcendent truths and realities. Some art is only amusing or decorative, and has its own reason for being in that. However I agree with Simone Weil that art may also be a form of attention, or the first faint flickering of a light that can lead us out of the Platonic cave.

The particular difficulty in dealing with postmodern art forms is that they combine the potentially transcendent and the trivial in ways that leave you dissatisfied with both, as in Auster. Thus the power of true imagination, which Coleridge was the first to distinguish from mere fantasy, is darkened. Postmodern philosophy has allowed various forms of fantasy, not imagination, to present themselves as profoundly philosophical art works. Any image that can claim vague relationship with the subverting of identities in Heidegger or Derrida is automatically granted a certain profundity before we have even looked at the real aesthetic value of the product; hence the crucifixes in the jars of urine and the performance artists smearing their bodies in chocolate who receive financial support from the U.S. government itself and claim they are penetrating commentators on postmodern reality.

True imagination will emerge where and in whatever forms it wishes. But in the spirit of Maritain I think some counter-theorizing now has to be undertaken to show first, that many postmodern themes were not entirely

¹⁸ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1993), 202.

unknown to pre-modern thinkers and artists. But second, we also need a philosophical border patrol that will undertake to show, without a clumsy crushing of exploratory imagination, that some postmodern situations may bear quite different artistic registrations and resolutions than currently thought.

V

Let me conclude with a plea that Thomists in particular, like Thomas, begin to reconstruct a language that is philosophically potent enough to allow the new, powerless world, first discerned by Matthew Arnold, finally to be born. That language must not talk solely of difference and absence, it must be able to affirm in some fashion, especially for non-philosophers, identity and presence. At the limit it must of course be able to defend not only presences, but — for some of us — the Real Presence. To do so does not require, I think, a school of vulgar Thomists to meet the vulgar postmodernists point for point. Rather, we need a whole generation of philosophers who better understand their obligations not only to Being, but to beings — including human beings.

The conclusion of Chesterton's *Heretics* sounds the battle charge for the kind of struggle I envision. I regard this passage as a kind of post-postmodern ideal that both tap dances over the void as lightly as any postmodern Fred Astaire, yet never forgets where the car is parked:

Truths turn into dogmas the instant they are disputed. Thus every man who utters a doubt defines a religion. And the skepticism of our time does not really destroy the beliefs, rather it creates them; gives them their limits and their plain and defiant shape. We who are Liberals once held Liberalism lightly as a truism. Now it has been disputed, and we hold it fiercely as a faith. We who believe in patriotism once thought patriotism to be reasonable, and thought little more about it. Now we know it to be unreasonable, and know it to be right. We who are Christians never knew the great philosophic common sense which inheres in that mystery until the anti-Christian writers pointed it out to us. The great march of mental destruction will go on. Everything will be denied. Everything will become a creed. It is a reasonable position to deny the stones in the street; fires will be a kindled to testify that two and two make four. Swords will be drawn to prove that leaves are green in summer. We shall be left defending, not only the incredible virtues and sanities of human life, but something more incredible still, this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be of those who have seen and yet have believed.¹⁹

¹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 304-5.