The Gift of the Night

The night comes softly, beyond the powerline and the blacktop, where the long-abandoned wagon road fades amid the new growth. It does not crowd the lingering day. There is a time of passage as the bright light of the summer day, cool green and intensely blue, slowly yields to the deep, virgin darkness. Quietly, the darkness grows in the forest, seeping into the clearing and penetrating the soul, all-healing, all-reconciling, renewing the world for a new day. Were there no darkness to restore the soul, humans would quickly burn out their finite store of dreams. Unresting, unreconciled, they would grow brittle and break easily, like an oak flag dried through the seasons. When electric glare

takes away the all-reconciling night, the hours added to the day are a dubious gain. A mile beyond the powerline, the night still comes to restore the soul, deep virgin darkness between the embers of the dying fire and the star-scattered vastness of the sky.

The night comes softly, almost imperceptibly. The darkness gathers unnoted amid the undergrowth, in the shelter of the hemlocks and beneath the boulders of the old dam, slowly seeping out to cover the ground. There is still light on high. Only down on the ground the splitting wedges, bright and keen through the day, melt with the shards of bark around the splitting block. Then it is time to gather up the tools, to straighten a body bent with the day's toil, and to look up from the darkling earth to the still light sky. It is the time of radiant maples.

The sun has not yet set: though its rays no longer reach down to the ground, they go on shining above it across the treetops, letting the shadows rise up among the trees and fill the valley. Contrary to legend, evening shadows do not fall: they rise up from the thickets as the sun edges toward the rim of the treeline. Only the tallest maples reach up above the pool of shadow and, for a few moments, catch the last rays of the sun. That is their moment of glory. All through the day they had merged with the profuse green of the treetops. Now they exult in the sunlight, radiant clusters above the darkened forest. It is a time to lean back and to give thanks for the miracle of the radiant maples.

Then the shadows rise up and drown the fire of the maples. The trees around the clearing gradually darken, their trunks merging into the curtain of the forest. There is still light in the air, diffused in the particles of dust and the droplets of moisture from the water tumbling over the boulders. There still is light, but a human eye cannot gather it. Neither can the tree trunks, the satin maples, the coarse oaks and the flaking cherries, nor the ageless, lichen-covered boulders. They stand subdued in the gathering dusk. Only the birches, the glorious great birches, focus that light. Their chalk-white bark comes aglow, rising out of the gathering darkness, white, glowing, glorious. Theirs, too, is a moment of immense wonder. I can understand why the good people of Shelburne, in the northern part of the state, erected no marble war monument but chose instead to plant great birches in memory of all who did not return. No monument could speak out the sorrow. Only the birches, glowing at dusk, can do that.

Then the birches, too, merge in the curtain of the forest. There is darkness all around, only high above the sky is still pale, outlining the black lace of the treetops and leading the eyes of humans, earth-bound through the day, up to the heavens. You would watch in vain for the

stars to emerge from it. The stars do not emerge: they happen with the suddenness of a pinprick in the celestial dome. Many a night I have watched the sky, knowing full well where the first star would appear, yet have never seen it happen. Perhaps I rested my eyes momentarily, perhaps I let my attention wander. One moment there is only the unbroken sky, growing dark overhead. Then, without a transition, a star is there, bright and clear, then another and another until the entire wondrous dome sparkles with lights. That, too, is a moment of wonder, precious in our time. The stars do not insist: even the glare of a white gas lantern or the reflected glow of neon will drown them out. Only where humans respect the night can they see the wonder of the starry heaven as the Psalmist saw it.

The night has other lights as well. There are the fireflies of a summer night, the flies of Saint John to my ancestors, tracing their paths across the clearing in occulting flashes of cool green light. There are the mushrooms, glowing yellow in the tree stumps slowly reverting to humus. The lights of human presence are warm, a match struck among the trees, the glow of a cigarette, a flashlight. The lights of the night are as cool as the night to which they belong, Saint John's flies, mushrooms, the blue lights on the bog and the silver-white lights which apear, unexplained, deep among the trees. All through one August moon, one would appear each night after the last traces of daylight faded, always in the same spot atop the old dam, a cool, glowing disk the size of my palm. Was it the moon reflected on a damp leaf? A flake of silica in a boulder? Or a tobacco can dropped by a logger? I do not know. Several times I tried to walk up to a night light among the trees, carefully keeping it in view. Each time it would disappear before me. One night I drove in aiming stakes so that I could inspect the spot by daylight, yet I found nothing and gave up the effort. There are things which it is so beside the point to explain! It is much more important to cherish and give thanks for the lights that enrich the night. Explaining, making, those are the priorities of the day which conceal the world around us. In the dusk of a forest clearing, other things matter—to respect first, then to understand, only then, perhaps, to explain.

The night embraces the human and opens itself to him, though not in his role of *homo faber.* It belongs not to him but to its lights—the glow among the trees, the stars, the moon in its seasons. It rises slowly, a huge silver disk behind the tracery of branches across the river, until it swings up over the treeline and floods the clearing with liquid silver. The glow of the moon is less a light than a darkness rendered visible, revealing a nighttime world which light would dispel, a stilled world

of hidden kinships. On winter nights, that is the time of silver beeches. All through the day, their gray, green-speckled bark merges inconspicuously with the forest. Only the liquid darkness of the moon brings them out, a silver filigree incredibly delicate in the night. That is the time to wander across the crusted snow, up the moonlit path toward the orchard, past the old cellar hole, watching while all that had stood out clear and distinct by daylight settles back softly in the reconciling darkness. There was day, and there was dusk. It is time to let the night come.

Dusk is the time of philosophy. Daylight, with its individuating brightness and its pressing demands, is the time of *technē*. In its light, the beings of this world stand out in insistent individuality. Even the forest comes to seem an aggregate of trees and human life an aggregate of discrete acts. Their intricate kinship, the deep rhyme and reason of their being, recede from view much as the stars pale before the sun in the daylight sky. It is a matter-of-fact world whose multiplicity calls for the *technē* of doing and theorizing to bridge its discontinuities with acts of utility and constructs of causality. By daylight, nothing conjoins the two white planks, planed smooth, unless it be an eight-penny nail or a construct like "lumber," the *hylē* of ancient Greeks. In the brightness of daylight, even philosophy becomes a *technē*, substituting the precision of analysis and the artifice of constructs for the insight of a philosophic vision.

Nighttime, by contrast, is a time of *poiēsis*. The soft darkness penetrates the soul, fusing all in an intimate unity. The tree trunks, so sharp and distinct by daylight, fuse into the single presence of the forest around the clearing. Only their uppermost branches stand out against the still light sky. Then the sky, too, darkens and the earth and the sky merge under the immensity of the starry heavens. The insistent multiplicity of daylight fades to triviality before the overwhelming vastness of the One. Nothing is left to do, to say: a human can only stand in silent awe and thanking devotion before the immense wonder of it all. Night is the time of poetry, when *dichten* overtakes *denken*.[1] It is the time of deep dreams.

Philosophy, the daughter of poverty and plenty, is born of neither time. It is, most fundamentally, the art of the intermediate vision, of the transition between daylight and darkness when the failing light mutes the insistent individuality of the day but the darkness of the night has not yet fused all in a unity. Certainly, philosophy, like *poiēsis*, must acknowledge the wonder of Being, lest it become trivial. It must,

like *technē*, remain no less aware of the distinctiveness of beings, lest it become inarticulate. A philosopher insensitive to the vision of a Heidegger and to the rigor of a Quine would run a grave risk. Still, philosophy must do more; true to its birth, it must discern both the unity that structures the multiplicity and the multiplicity which articulates the unity. Its proper object is neither pure meaning nor sheer being but meaningful being—being animated by meaning, meaning incarnate as being. Its domain is the intermediate range between *poiēsis* and *technē*, its starting point and the condition of its distinctive possibility is the ability to see and grasp the *sense* of being. It is, primordially, the act of discerning the moral sense of life suspended between the poles of the speechless wonder of Being and the empirical datum of beings.[2]

That is why dusk is the time of philosophy. The *technē* of the day can teach us the factual difference between life and death in the order of time and instruct us in the skills of inflicting the one and preserving the other. *Poiēsis* can teach us the profound indifference of life and death in eternity and give us the wisdom of reconciliation to the one or the other. Philosophy must undertake the far harder task of discerning the rightness of time, of time to live and time to die. For if our choice of living and dying—and all the choices of right and wrong, good and evil—are not to be arbitrary, we must discern more than the empirical difference and the poetic indifference of life and death. We need to grasp their rightness, the moral sense which emerges when the fading daylight no longer blinds us to the deep bond among beings but darkness has not yet obliterated their distinctness. It is at dusk that humans can perceive the moral sense of life and the rightness of the seasons.

In the global city of our civilization we have banished the night and abolished the dusk. Here the merciless glare of electric lights extends the harshness of the day deep into a night restless with the hum of machinery and the eerie glow of neon. Unreflectingly, we think it a gain, and not without reason. We are creatures of daylight, locating ourselves in our world by sight more than by any other sense. We think of knowing as seeing. Light and darkness belong among our most primordial metaphors of good and evil. Darkness has ever appeared to us as the shroud of evil deeds. Ever since the dawn of history, humans have struggled to kindle a light against the darkness, making it, too, a place of works of charity and necessity. The unsleeping lights of the Monadnock Community Hospital, casting an auburn glow over the white pines below, may well appear to us as a symbol of human triumph over darkness.

Those lights are deeply good, as good as the labor of all who keep vigil by their glow. To think of them as a triumph over darkness, however, is far more problematic. We have thought in those terms for so long that night has come to appear alien and threatening, an enemy to be banished, no longer a place of our being. Yet half of our time on this earth is, perforce, lived in the night. Might we not do better to teach ourselves to think of the lights we make as a human way of dwelling at peace with the night?

As long as kindling a light meant no more than lighting an oil lamp, that question might well have appeared academic. The night was so vast and our lights so faint within it that we needed have no fear for its integrity. An oil lamp does not violate the night. The house is still dark and at peace, only over the table a golden circle of light inserts a sphere of human doing, at peace with the enfolding darkness. The lights of recent years, gas lights and electric lights, are qualitatively different. They flood the room, giving us the godlike power of banishing the night—without, however, God's wisdom in using it. For the most part, we do not use our lights specifically to illuminate a nighttime task. We use them generically, to banish the night. We flood our rooms with it, even the unoccupied ones, and surround our dwellings with floodlights, creating the illusion of a perpetual day.

Yet we are not only creatures of the light. We are creatures of the rhythm of day and night, and the night, too, is our dwelling place. Darkness enriches even our days. Pure light would blind us: our perception depends on discerning contrasts, the interplay of light and darkness. Without the rhythm of day and night, of going forth and resting, our lives would flatten out in unchanging monotony and our philosophy in an undifferentiated *technē*. It is good, deeply good, to kindle a light in the darkness, though not against it. There must be also night. Philosophy needs to recover the darkness that comes not as a menacing stranger but as a gift of the night, the time of philosophizing.

There is a second task as well—to reclaim the gift of solitude. For most of us, even to think of solitude as a gift requires an effort. We fear solitude no less than we fear darkness, and have striven no less strenuously to banish it from our lives. We are convinced that truth is in communication, as we are convinced that there is seeing only in light—and, again, it is a part of the truth.

Yet a part only. Philosophy must speak, though if it would speak of aught but the turmoil of our passions, it must first hear and see,

and that is not a task for crowds and committees. The consensus of a crowd can constitute a conventional world far too readily, far too soon. Husserl's analysis of the intersubjective constitution of "objective" reality is no speculative construction.[3] It is a description. When two or three are gathered together, they seldom have the patience of letting be, of listening and seeing. All too eager to speak, they constitute, in their consensus, a conventional image which they interpose between themselves and the living world around them. The small creature who darts across the clearing is promptly labeled with a name and the identification confirmed: it is a *burundík*—a chipmunk, if there is an English speaker among us—and its behavior explained in biological or psychological categories. Deafened by consensus, we lack the humility to watch the chipmunk, busy at his tasks, to let him present himself. He remains as unseen as the *Ding an sich* in its autonomy,[4] as the fiery crowns of the maples and the silver tracery of the beech to a crowd of revelers trampling through the forest. The intersubjective consensus establishes something very like a collective solipsism. Speakers, seconding each other, constitute a shared, internally determined monad into which the world can enter only in predetermined categories. Within it the human has nothing to save him from his knavery and folly, now sanctioned by the consensus of consenting adults. A philosophy which begins with a consensus will not easily penetrate beyond the shell of our collective monad. To do that, we must first suspend that consensus in the radical brackets of solitude.

Without an Other to lend his conventions the weight of objectivity, a human cannot impose them upon the world quite so easily. Perhaps in the transient quasi-isolation of a book-lined study, a human can fantasize a reality of his making, since there is not only no one to second it but also nothing to challenge it. The deep solitude of the gray wintry ocean or of the summer forest is different. Here nature presses in. It is too vast for the human to outshout it, too close for him to withdraw from it into speculation. The world the human confronts here is not the phenomenal world, a convention of a human community or a speculative construct of studies and laboratories. It is, in a Kantian term used in a thoroughly non-Kantian way, the *thing in itself*, present to be acknowledged, making its own demands.[5] Solitude is the great liberating gift from which philosophy can be born, not as the way of seeming but as the way of truth.

Yes, "two are better than one, for they have good reward for their labor," as the Preacher tells us,[6] and his words have lost none of their validity. All beings need, deeply, the company of their kind. But as it takes darkness to understand the light, it takes solitude to realize how

fundamental that need is. In a crowd, the fellowship of kindred beings can appear as no more than a convention—a marriage, say, as a contract for the exchange of services that can be abrogated at will and convenience, lightly entered into and lightly left. In the stillness of solitude, the vision is deeper: the bonds that bind humans to their kind stand out as sacred, a fundamental law of all being, vital and moral alike, precious in its wonder. The bluejay and his mate honor that law, perhaps unknowing, as they build their nest each year in the tangled hemlock. The porcupines know it, in whatever way porcupines know, as they raise their young. It would be a desperately impoverished vision of nature which did not see, acted out in it, the wonder of the intrinsic sense of life. Two *are* better than one: the beauty of the trillium is not fulfilled in seeing alone, only in a vision shared. Only where life is shared can it be fulfilled and renewed. Yet even the wonder of sharing can remain concealed in the everydayness of crowds unless humans dare yield their pride of place as the makers and the measure of all things and are willing to encounter the presence of reality humbly, as dwellers, in the great solitude at dusk.

I know that I cherish the visits of my kind. The stillness of the house fills with human presence. The earthenware pitcher, filled with the fruit of the vine, focuses the open sky and the good earth, the glimpse of the holy and our own humanity.[7] There are songs, the wistful songs of the Moravian plains, the defiant songs of the Slovak mountain lads, songs of memories, songs of the land. A people that had no songs would soon grow one-dimensional. A written text may speak about its subject, but a song recalls it, relives it, shattering the solipsistic enclosure of the here and now.

The visits are intensely good. The evenings seldom end before the moon is high, the forest still and the pitcher empty. But then it is time to kindle the lantern and light the visitors up the path, past the cellar hole and the old orchard and onto the road. They fire up their motorcars, breaking the stillness and blinding the night with their headlights. The logging road that had rested at peace in the moonlight comes alive, suddenly leading to the highway and on to the city where the sounds of human work never cease, the light never fades, and the monadic *Umwelt* of a human community seems to exhaust all reality.[8]

I have chosen to bracket that consensus. I shall follow the path through the cool darkness of the forest to the house. If there is a moon, I shall douse the lantern: the path is intimately familiar. The house will be still once more, at peace with the forest. Only the wine tumblers and the full ashtrays will recall the songs and the people who shared my evening, but those will soon be cleared away. The only sound will

be the river outside the window. I shall climb up to the loft, pausing to look at the moonlit forest without, undisturbed by my presence. There are miles of woods all around, still, cool and moon-bright. An owl is awake, but the nearest human is miles away, in a different world. I am alone, and grateful for the gift of solitude.

For solitude, too, can be a gift of the night. The perennial question, "Don't you get lonely, all alone out here?" prejudices any answer by obscuring the distinction between solitude and loneliness. In our deeply ingrained prereflective image of reality, solitude has indeed become synonymous with loneliness, the state of being cut off from all that supports and sustains us, alone in an alien world. Having conceived of that world as dead matter, we think of other humans as the only possible companions. Then stepping out of the intersubjective monad of our human community, even for a passing moment, appears to us to constitute a state of being alone. We fear solitude: in a curious inversion, we tend to suspect pathological motives in those who choose it, prescribing crowds as a cure in the boundary situations in which humans through the ages had diagnosed a need for solitude. We strive, stridently and compulsively, to overcome it, turning on our radios not to listen but to dispel silence, and seeking out human voices in the same way, for the same reason. The solitary walker of our time would deafen the forest with the blare of a monstrous tape-deck. Yet all the while we suspect that the effort is vain. No less a thinker than Paul Ricoeur, in a moving passage in his *Interpretation Theory*, speaks of the "fundamental solitude of each human."[9] I have often pondered that passage. It is, admittedly, a passing comment. The focus of Ricoeur's work is not loneliness but communication. Still, like so much that Ricoeur has written, it goes directly to the heart of the matter. Ours is the age to which the essential loneliness of being-human seems so evident that it requires no elaboration.

On reflection, it seems a puzzling conviction. How could loneliness, the state of being cut off, be the *essential* condition of an incarnate being who already through his body is intimately a part of nature, who is conceived in the loving union of a man and a woman and who learns to speak in a human community with which his very identity is bound up? Certainly, in the life of a being who remembers and anticipates, there will always be contingent loneliness. All of that life and its world cannot be present at once. There will be significant others and cherished parts of the world who are absent, there will be someone who is *not there*, someone beyond reach or not responding. There will be love going out and disappearing in the vastness. We can, as dwellers in time, speak of *inevitable* loneliness. Inevitable, however, is not yet

essential. The very fact that we experience the absence of another as a lack, a privation, testifies that it is an accidental, not an essential condition of our being. Only because being human is in its very core a being with others can the absence of a particular other appear as a deprivation.

Conventional explanations of the loneliness of our crowds rely, as a rule, on a catalogue of the objective conditions of life in a technological age. Technology, we are told, has displaced much of the casual daily contact with our fellow humans which is said to have characterized the pretechnological age. Barter and communal self-labor—four men around a threshing floor, bringing down their flails in time, make an appealing metaphor for anyone who has never actually tried it—have been replaced by cash exchange and automated production. Affluence makes possible individual housing, transportation, entertainment, while requiring impersonal, anonymous employment. An assembly line hardly makes for togetherness. We are oppressed by loneliness, or perhaps "alienated," we are told, because we have displaced the communal life of an earlier age with the individualism of a technological civilization.

All of that, to be sure, is true, and since our loneliness is real enough, it might sound like an explanation. We have, however, largely forgot the loneliness and the solitude of an earlier age. Walk the roads of New Hampshire and Vermont, the unpaved roads leading past isolated farmhouses set in a harsh, rocky landscape. Driving a car, you may think of them as constituting an idyllic rural community. Within living memory, however, they were an hour's walk apart. The general store, symbol of communal togetherness in our nostalgia, was two hours away by horse and wagon—a luxury when the strength of the horses was needed in the fields. Walk those roads, walk them long enough to start sensing the distance in terms of weary steps, of a tired team and a heavy load. Then you will sense the awesome solitude of another generation.

Humans in other ages knew as much or more isolation. They surely knew loneliness as well. Yet they seemed neither oppressed by it nor obsessed with escaping from it. What has changed in the way we experience solitude that it has become something to be dreaded rather than cherished?

A different experience, that of fear, may provide a clue. A person choosing to live alone must face the question, "Aren't you afraid, all

alone out here?" as regularly as the question about loneliness. It reflects another preoccupation of our time. Objectively, it makes little sense. There are no ferocious beasts in the benign forests that have taken over the abandoned pastures of New England. As for criminals, those you are far more likely to encounter in the interstices of our cities where people, their prey, gather. The people who pose the question themselves bolt and bar the doors of their apartments and with ample reason fear to venture out in the street at night. Few of the solitary houses scattered on the unpaved roads have locks on their doors. A solitary walker following the moonlit wagon road past the bog and up the esker to the shadows of what remains of the old Spring Hill gristmill would have far less to fear than he would on an urban street.

The fear is groundless. Perhaps others who live alone have never experienced it. I know there is no need for it. Still, when I first came to live in the clearing, a fear was often near me. By day, the forest was mine; I was at peace, at ease with it. With the failing light, the mood of the forest seemed to change. I grew alert, tense. Working with a chainsaw at dusk, deafened by its roar and so deprived of the warning of sound, I would often spin around suddenly, half expecting to see . . . I never knew what. As the night closed in around me, I would withdraw into the clearing lit by my fire. Even after I framed the house and enclosed it, I put up curtains: for warmth, of course. Yet I know that more than once I drew them closed to hide the blank, dark windows through which the night was staring at me. None of it made sense. Supposing there were danger, a man in the woods is safer by far in the open, silent in the dark, seeing but unseen, hearing but unheard. I knew that, as I knew there was no danger. Still, I preferred the clearing and the walls of my tent. They were familiar, the darkness was alien. It was then that I wished for the company of my kind.

Today the darkness is no longer alien. The woods have grown familiar in their silences and their sounds. I have grown used to the stillness of the house and the square of moonlight on the loft. The darkness which at first seemed a threatening emptiness has come to be a presence. The loneliness of those long-ago months faded with the fear, transformed into solitude.

That, I am convinced, is the key to the experience. Loneliness is the condition of feeling abandoned amid an alien world, cut off from communication. Solitude is the condition of being alone in the presence of a living, familiar world, willing to listen to it, to see and to understand it in *Einfühlung* and *Eindeutung*, sharing in its feel and meaning. The constructs and artifacts with which we have surrounded ourselves, cited in conventional explanations, do not so much increase our factual

isolation, perhaps just the contrary, but they do contribute to making the world seem alien. Typically, we no longer live outdoors, retiring within only for a purpose. Increasingly, we think of ourselves as living within enclosed spaces and do in fact so live, venturing out ever less frequently. Our effective world is a dead one, the darkness of nature's cycle of day and night appears to us alien, an intruder to be banished with lights.

Loneliness, the loss of solitude, is the price we pay. Yet solitude need not be loneliness: it can also be the cure of loneliness. It is not a matter of "learning to live without others," but rather of learning to live with nature and others, not outshouting them with our insistent presence, but being instead ready to see and hear, in love and respect. For, in understanding as in sense perception, it is when we stop speaking that we begin to hear; when we stop staring, things emerge before our eyes; when we stop insisting on our explanations, we can begin to understand. As solitude dissolves the opacity of our collective monad and the dusk lights up the moral sense of life, humans can begin to see.

The pattern, finally, is all too familiar. Having taught ourselves to conceive of our world as dead matter in meaningless motion, we experience solitude not as communion but as isolation amid lifeless, alien surroundings. Having conceived of our world as alien, we dare not trust it: we flood it with lights, blind to all but the products of our own labor therein, absurd in its self-serving futility. To grasp again the moral sense of our being, a second bracketing is needed: the bracketing of crowds which would enable us to recover the second gift of the night, the gift of solitude.

Darkness and solitude are both gifts of the night. There is, though, a third paradoxic gift, perhaps the hardest to accept—the gift of pain. It is a gift to philosophy because understanding is ultimately not only *Eindeutung*, but also *Einfühlung*, sharing not only understanding but also emotion.[10] A human needs to open himself—or, perhaps, needs to *be opened*—to the joy and pain of the other. Along with the paradoxic gifts of solitude and darkness which for three centuries we have taught ourselves to regard as enemies, we need to appropriate a third paradoxic gift, the gift of pain, integrating it into the rhyme and reason of our being.

Like darkness and solitude, pain, too, appears to us as an enemy, a feared intruder in the bright, communal and painless world of our daytime aspirations. Though, theoretically, we are not unaware of its

place in the economy of our lives—the pain which warns of potential injury is the example most often cited—we seldom try to understand it. We have committed ourselves, with a passion, to eliminating pain and that is, surely, a most laudable endeavor. There is such a vast surplus of pain in the universe, corroding life and absorbing energy that would be well used for joy, praise, and thanksgiving. Pain *ought* to be relieved: there is something perverse about a person who is capable of feeling infinite compassion without lifting a finger to alleviate the pain. Humankind have, far too often, resigned themselves to bearing pain in the name of wisdom long before they exhausted all possibilities of alleviating it in the name of charity. Surely no human effort is more noble than that which dedicates itself to the reduction of the immense surplus of pain in the cosmos—and no perversion more despicable and pitiable than those relished by the Marquis de Sade and the Ritter von Sacher-Masoch.

And yet, greatly though the works of mercy should be praised, were we to conceive of pain simply as a dread and incomprehensible enemy and of our task simply as one of its elimination, we would condemn ourselves to failure. We should, in our preoccupation, be ruled by pain, living in dread of it and fascinated by it. We should, as indeed we do, cease asking ourselves, "Would it be good?" restricting ourselves to the timid inquiry, "Would it hurt?"—and voluntarily surrender much of the greatness and the goodness of life because it brings pain or effort with it. We should, as indeed we do, drug ourselves to insensitivity—and turn to the horrible blasphemy of inflicting and bearing pain for pleasure or to reassure ourselves that even in our drugged stupor we are still capable of feeling something. For all of that, we should fail, as indeed we are failing, for pain is not an alien intruder that could be shut out of a sunny, companionable, and painfree life. Like solitude and darkness, it is an intrinsic part of the rhyme and reason of all life. Until philosophy can learn to accept it, too, as an intimate part of life, one of the paradoxic gifts of the night, it will remain inherently incapable of seeing and grasping the moral sense of a life which includes it intrinsically. It will remain where not nature but Thomas Hobbes placed it, in the bondage of "two sovereign masters, pleasure and pain," a bondage so integral to the artifact world as to appear "natural." To be free of that bondage, we need not only a different view of pleasure, encountered in the solitude at dusk, but also a radically different vision of pain, not as an intruder who will enslave us unless we banish it, but as kin—and a paradoxic gift of the night. Here philosophy needs to learn from *poiēsis*, whose vision of

the profound kinship of pain and joy sees beyond the implacable opposition in which daylight's *technē* places them.

Still, philosophy is not *poiēsis*—its task is not only to sense the dark unity of all being but to discriminate within it. For philosophic reflection, the best starting point for learning to live with and understand pain, accepting it as a gift, may be precisely the recognition of the effort to eliminate and alleviate pain as a moral demand. Humans *may not* consent to the surplus of pain. To give it battle is a common human task, as basic as the distinction of good and evil. Any attempt to reach a philosophic understanding of pain which fails to start with a clear acknowledgment of that basic recognition and commandment must inevitably be suspect. Alleviation must be the first answer to pain.

In the global city of our civilization, that first answer might easily appear as the whole answer as well. The blueprints of the alabaster city we have been building since the Enlightenment include, among its principal features, freedom from darkness, solitude, and pain. The dream of the alabaster city, unsleeping in its perennial day, where mass communication dispels solitude while chemistry and automation render life painless and effortless, is turning into an inhuman nightmare before our eyes, as much and more by its successes as by its failures. In the pain of its collapse, its inhabitants are once again, as so many times before in the history of our culture, turning from the pride of their works to the green, living nature where the world is still God's world and God is never far, where there still is darkness, solitude—and also effort and pain.

Why should that be? I doubt not for a moment the reality of the *vis medicatrix naturae*, the healing power of nature, even on the most mundane levels. The dominant colors of a forest clearing are green and light blue, both of which, as empirical psychology can attest, have a distinctly soothing effect on humans. The decibel levels here are geared to the tolerances of the human nervous system. The effort required by daily tasks, whether drawing water, building a fire, or making wood, provides regular physical exercise and has a beneficial psychological effect as well, building a sense of competence and confidence—the "mastery" of psychological lore.[11] The diurnal cycle, undisturbed by electric power, assures a healthful alternation of activity and rest, while, together with the phases of the moon and the seasons of the year, it gives life a rhythm it lacks in the unchanging urban environment. The environing world of a forest clearing is calm and unjarring, living its own familiar life, so unlike the threatening, unpredictable environment of the artifact world. Want to hear more? Read Tolstoy, Thoreau, Rousseau—or Vergil, long before them.

It is, incidentally, all quite true, good, and useful altogether, yet it is really not to the point. Perceived in terms of its alleged and freely admitted healing power, nature remains locked in the urban perspective, another artifact, albeit one "naturally" produced or created by God rather than man-made, serving an urban purpose much as a mountain village may serve as a "natural" sanatorium for a convalescent. It is to be praised and it is to be valued, yet the nature which presents itself to a dweller in the solitude at dusk is not such a natural artifact. Its tasks are not those of the city and its power is not simply the *vis medicatrix naturae* of the natural sanatorium. Its power is that of absorbing, not of avoiding pain.

There is, in fact, a great deal more rather than less mundane pain in living close to the land. There are the perennial cuts and bruises of the day's work, the hands and the ankles mangled in working with wood and stone, the raw, chapped hands of the winter, the blackflies and mosquitoes of the summer, the joints aching with dampness in the spring and fall. Nor is relief nearer. In the logging season, it would take a major disaster to bring work to a standstill for a trip to the hospital. Many of the injuries which keep urban emergency rooms busy warrant no more than a kerchief pressed to the wound and a wave of the hand. It is not that pain hurts less here. It does not, nor do wounds reopened by the strain of continued work heal more quickly. The pain simply *matters less*. There is so much more that matters. When humans no longer think themselves the measure of all things, their pain is no longer a cosmic catastrophe. It becomes a part of a greater whole.

The power of absorbing pain is not the healing power of nature which the convalescent seeks in "nature's sanatorium." It is the far more precious gift of a changing perspective, undoing in a small part the ill effects of Descartes's and Kant's Copernican revolution. Alone among artifacts, source of their meaning and of all value, the human is indeed the center of his universe—and his pain, be it a bruised hand or a bruised heart, appears to him as an event of cosmic significance, as if God the Creator had burned his hand creating a volcano. In the solitude at dusk, the world which presents itself to the dweller is not a world of his making, nor does it derive its meaning from him. He is not its center but a dweller within it.

There is pain, but there is also so much more. Even the task of avoiding or alleviating pain, while no less basic, acquires a wider context. It becomes a matter of judgment: is the relief, good in itself, worth the price it would demand? Is the comfort of the drug worth the loss of sensitivity it exacts? Is avoiding the discomfort of the cold

worth the price of giving up the sight of the January full moon rising behind the bare darkened trees? The point in each case may be moot but the question is at least raised. Perhaps our urban lives are so poverty-stricken also because the question appears answered: we have taken it as evident that the avoidance of pain, discomfort, and effort is our one, all-overriding task. Displacing ourselves from that Hobbesian bondage can have a liberating effect.

That recognition, however, can be taken as no more than sound prudent advice, acceptable within the limitations of a hedonistic calculus, without a radical displacement. We can and often do conclude that some things, though troublesome, are worth the trouble. The gift of the night is of a different order, a reconstitution of perspective in the face of the sorrows of finitude. It includes all the pain of life broken and love laid waste, of the helplessness of longing and the remorse of guilt, the hopelessness and pity of pain and destruction which cannot be undone, all the grief that a human can neither accept nor avoid. It is the pain of the spirit, but a human is a spirit incarnate. The pain spreads from the spirit to the mind and on to the body, settling as an aching lump on the chest and pressing on the heart. It is a pain that cannot be cured, a crushing pain that must be borne, so much of it in the lives of humans that, to Unamuno, it became life's very sense, the tragic sense of life. There is so much pain.

Following the strategy of ordinary pain, humans can try to escape grief, but all the strategies of escape share a common trait: the price is our humanity. Humans are beings who can remember and bear responsibility for their acts and enter in shared feeling and understanding into the life of the other. They can escape the burden of pain only by giving up those traits—committing, in effect, a suicide in body, mind, or spirit. Even forgetting cannot but be a self-destruction: a human escapes the grief of loss only by surrendering the truth, beauty, and goodness of what is lost. The more intensely he remains human, fully human, the more insistently does the pain go with him.

The sorrow and the pain go with him even when he leaves behind the neon and the asphalt: if the solitude at dusk is not to be the place of self-loss but of discovery, it must be a place of remembering, not of forgetting. Away from palliatives and distractions, the pain does not subside: it stands out in all its purity, purged of all self-justification and self-pity. What remains is pain, pure and clear as a bright crystal. There is no distraction, no escape. And yet something does happen, slowly, silently. The grief does not grow less beneath the vast sky, only it is not reflected back. Artifacts reflect grief. Having no meaning other than that with which humans endow them, they are charged with their

pain. The forest is different. It lives, it absorbs the grief. On moonlit nights, the river, low in the summer, turns to silver, cascading over the dark, half-exposed boulders. It absorbs the grief that hangs suspended over the clearing, bearing it downstream from the land, washing the land clean, dispersing the pain into the cosmos. The river, the silvery, dreamlike river, absorbs the grief.

A human alone, surrounded by the gleaming surfaces of his artifacts, cannot bear the pain. He can do that only when the grief can disperse, radiate out and be absorbed. Fellow humans and their works, bearing the same burden, cannot absorb it. Grief and remorse are reflected from them, ever reinforced, until the human, crazed by pain, strikes out and kills those around him or himself, or both. Murder and self-murder are the futile, desperate human ways of dealing with the vast surplus of grief that is never lifted off, reconciled.

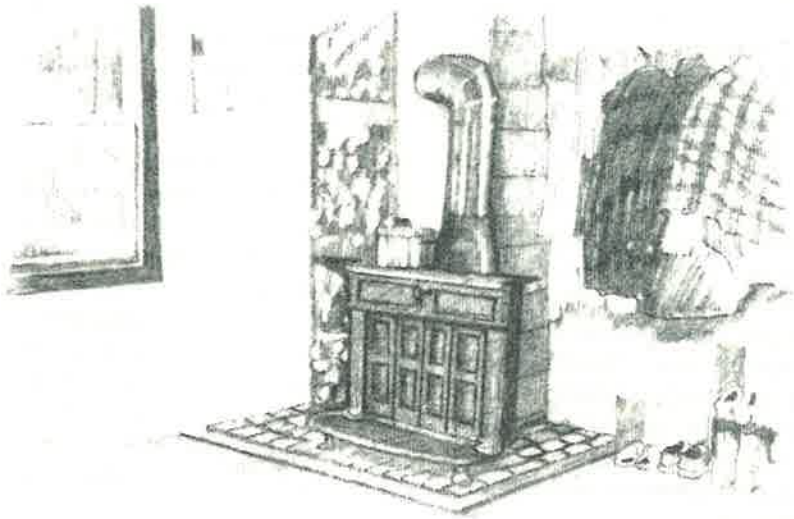
To reconcile, that is what the forest does, silent and accepting, as if God were present therein, taking the grief unto Himself. When humans no longer think themselves alone, masters of all they survey, when they discern the humility of their place in the vastness of God's creation, then that creation and its God can share the pain. For the Christians, the Cross symbolized that reality; confronted with it, the human is not freed of grief, but he is no longer alone to bear it. It is taken up, shared.

That is the age-old wisdom of the Book of Job, not of the folktale of the good man tested and, ultimately, rewarded for his faithfulness with even finer progeny and kine, but of the meditation on suffering which a later writer inserted into it. Job's counsellors exhaust all the conventional explanations; the zealous young Elihu offers the best that the rabbinic orthodoxy of his time had to offer. Yet that is all still the conventional wisdom of the collective human monad. When God speaks, the framework is different. He speaks not of pain but of the vastness of the creation, of the gazelle in her mountain fastness and the mighty creature of the deep sea. God is not avoiding the issue. He is teaching Job the wisdom of bearing the pain that can neither be avoided nor abolished but can be shared when there is a whole living creation to absorb it. That healing power then is no longer the *vis medicatrix naturae*. It is the *vis medicatrix Dei*.

When the human, in the solitude of dusk, surrenders his pride of place and learns to bear the shared pain, he can begin to understand the pain that cannot be avoided as a gift which teaches compassion and opens understanding. Seen out of pain, the porcupine in the clearing is no longer the object of our sovereign biological observation. He becomes a cherished fellow being who helps bear the pain. As solitude

dissolves the monad of our conventions, pain borne and shared dissolves the monad of our pride and self-righteousness. Happiness, to be sure, can also be generous, but as it opens to the other, the opening tends to be unidirectional. In its generosity, happiness can also be insensitive and self-righteous. Pain borne and shared, not imposed on the other but freely accepted by him, teaches the human his own insufficiency, his own need and, with it, gentleness. It opens him to receive, in empathy, the gift of the other, not in censure but in gratitude and love. The blindness of time, judging in terms of what happens to aid or to hinder, must yield to the wisdom of eternity, which sees, behind time's pleasures and annoyances, the eternal value of every fragment of what is good, true, beautiful. It is when solitude dissolves the collective monad and pain borne and shared teaches the human to accept gratefully a gift freely offered that philosophy can begin to see the moral sense of the creation, of nature, the human's place therein, and of the God of it all. It is not simply in wonder but in love that philosophy begins. The paradoxic gifts of darkness, solitude, and pain are the radical brackets, the brackets of practical reason, which enable philosophy not only to speculate but to see.

Philosophy, as the ancients knew, begins with wonder. That wonder, though, is not puzzlement. It is, far more, the openness of one who no longer clings to the confidence of conceptual and technological mastery. It is the openness of one willing to see, to hear, to receive. Whatever the flaws of phenomenology—and they are a legion—there is a greatness in its courage of leaving the safety of preconceptions behind in its act of radical bracketing. It is, though, not only concepts that blind us but also the artifacts in which we have embodied them. That is why a radical bracketing must be a practical one, reclaiming the gifts of darkness, solitude, and pain. Those gifts enable us to see.



The Gift of the Word

There still is night, beyond the powerline, where the silvery moonlit river transforms pain into a gift. In the purity of the starry night, humans can see not only the mundane fact and the vast wonder, but also the *sense* of being. Nor see only: they can also speak of it. For here words are not intruders, interposing themselves as a veil between humans and being. That may so appear when we conceive of being on the model of our artifacts, as dead matter impelled by blind force. For if we conceive of being as meaningless, then there is no meaning to which our words could point. Inevitably, they appear arbitrary. Discourse would have first to create meaning and to impose it on the