

Beyond Philosophy?

Mystical Reason, by William Earle,
Chicago: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1980.
xv + 203 pp. \$6.95.

TO MINDS WHOSE teeth have grown soft from the positivistic gruel that has been forced down the throats of Anglo-American philosophers for the past seventy or eighty years, this book will be inedible. On the other hand, to minds long since determined that positivism and its kind are, at best, attractive side dishes that give the appearance of being nutritious but merely cause indigestion, the book will be a welcome relief. It marks, as do Professor William Earle's books generally, a return to philosophy viewed as the love of wisdom rather than a compulsion for clarity as an end in itself.

To be more precise, this book is a return to the idealism of Hegel conjoined with the rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza approached by way of the phenomenology of Husserl. This is not to say that Earle is an historian but rather that he draws inspiration from these sources for his own philosophical vision. He seeks to reinstate intuition, imagination, and passion to philosophy; to restore the sublime and the mysterious to a discipline that has become cold and lifeless. Earle seeks to restore

philosophy to the realm of the immediate as Hegel did a century ago when he said:

The Spirit is turning away from the husks and, confessing that it is in trouble and cursing, it now demands from philosophy not so much self-knowledge as that philosophy should help the spirit to establish...substantiality and the solidity of being. Philosophy is asked to answer this need...by suppressing the discriminating concept, and by establishing the *feeling* of things, granting not so much insight as edification.

Following Hegel, Earle would seek to replace "the coldly progressing necessity of the subject matter" with "fermenting enthusiasm." This has been Earle's concern from the time of the appearance of his first major philosophical treatise in 1955 to the present opus. Convinced as he is that our current cultural milieu is in the process of rapid disintegration, Earle has shown increasing interest in realms of consciousness that are generally regarded as territory forbidden to philosophers, the "domain of the marvelous, the non-substantial but ephemeral, the evanescent, [and] the contradictory..." This is the realm of the *surreal*, of mysticism. It is forbidden territory, being treacherous for the philosopher burdened with the paraphernalia of discursive thought and the urge to conceptualize. The paradox is suggested by the title of the book under review.

Against this background, Earle's express purpose is "to develop as rigorously as possible an intentional or dialectical analysis of the mystic experience." The dialectic seeks to "bring out what is hidden" to consciousness, which for the phenomenologist is the arena of philosophical *engagement*. Universality, or objectivity, is achieved because the phenomenologist's concern is for that which is essential in his experience; it is essential because it is shared by all who care to perform the eidetic reduction and "return to the things themselves."

Are we to assume, then, that mystical experience is a feature of human experience generally? Earle's response is an

unequivocal "yes." The key move is to stop attending to "the world" and become conscious of the being that is conscious of the world, the transcendental ego, the ego that constitutes its world but is not identical with it. By describing ordinary "events" and states of mind as they appear to reflective, eidetic consciousness, we become aware of the interrelatedness of experience, that "each...distinctive mode of consciousness, in its unique way, discloses another domain of reality or another face of it..." We experience the insufficiency of each human experience which makes intuitively clear the fact of that which is self-sufficient. This self, in turn, is the transcendental ego, or God—since at the deepest levels of consciousness they can no longer be differentiated.

Much of this book is an attempt to carry us to the threshold of these deeper levels of consciousness; to expand our sense of what comprises reasonableness by showing us that, ultimately, all reason is mystical—and to show that the grounds of our knowledge of beauty, truth, and goodness arise from the homogeneous nature of spirit, the identity of all things spiritual with one another. Perhaps this can best be seen by examining, briefly, the "mystical sources of excellences," the good, the beautiful, and the true, as Earle discloses them.

The source of goodness is to be found in "the sacredness or dignity of the person as both the origin and end of morality." For Earle, it must be stressed, the "person" is not a postulate as it was for Kant; rather, it derives from "the consciousness of the transcendental ego as identical with the consciousness of God," that is to say, consciousness of the status of the human spirit as one with spirit generally, with the source of all being. The same consciousness of the identity of the self with the "absolute spirit" arises in our awareness of beauty. Indeed, the aesthetic attitude has been described by many philosophers as mystical in its ability to capture attention and hold it in the world of the object which, for that moment, becomes one with the world of the subject.

Earle's understanding of what constitutes truth ultimately requires the displacement of logic and conceptualization by intuition; a substitution of consciousness of God for "facts." It arises out of a sense of truth as *troth*, "which is the same as loyalty or faith. When true, I am faithful to friends and the God in them and in me. Therefore, the contrary to truth is not incorrectness, but betrayal..." Truth is therefore not attributable to judgment but rather to consciousness, and it is ultimately *moral*, since on the level of feeling, implicit in every conscious state, we are conscious of ourselves as one with one another and with God, "God in a living situation, but God nonetheless."

Lest it be supposed that this book wallows in a thick fog of obscure utterances that leave the reader Alice-like, filled with ideas but not knowing exactly what they are, we should note that in an eminently readable style Earle seeks to "aid in comprehension." The results comprise several roads to the same place: the outer limits of philosophical discourse where it begins to blur and become one with poetic insight. The goal may be obscure but the traveling is fascinating. So is the pivotal claim of the book: the limits of philosophical awareness are intuitive; reason is ultimately mystical.

With this central claim in mind we might also recall Earle's aforementioned concern over the current state of culture. One of the sure signs of the decay of our current culture is the increasing inclination of people to turn inward, to wallow in solipsism of the present moment. In this regard, there is a danger in Earle's insistence upon a return to mystical reason in that we might be unable to recognize self-transcendence and distinguish it from self-indulgence. We are told in an appendix that mystical consciousness differs from, say, a drug "trip" in that "genuine intuition gives itself over to the object and follows its essence, whereas pseudo-intuition refuses the invitation." But we must pause at the threshold of this totally new awareness and ask how, when we leave the law of contradiction and the categories of human understanding behind, we will

be able to make any distinctions at all, much less the important ones. It is instructive to note that Earle's book fascinates because it explores the region surrounding ordinary experience by using the tools of phenomenology, while embracing a deep love and knowledge of the history of philosophy. This reader, for one, doesn't want to turn loose from these moorings any more than Earle does, since without them we are lost.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER

The Humanist as Ghost?

The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75, Lionel Trilling, edited by Diana Trilling (Uniform Edition), *New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. 241 pp. \$9.95.*

THIS IS A volume, presumably the final one, in the collected edition of the *oeuvre* of one of our century's preeminent critics. Since its contents have so far been uncollected—two items left incomplete at the author's death (1975), another two never before in print—the book is something of an *omnium-gatherum*. Its variety, though, mars neither its coherence nor unity. Anyone interested in Trilling or concerned about today's cultural crises will welcome it. *The Last Decade* may not add notably to its author's stature, but it proves no falling-off of his powers.

The book comprises eleven pieces, a brief headnote dating and describing each. These range through introductions done for other volumes, long essay-reviews, lectures, essays, and an appendix, "Some Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture." To our loss, this last was the start of a memoir Trilling planned as his next project when death intervened. Two of the essays are more or less directly political, dealing with the radicalism of the Great