

Vertigo and Genuflection: A Philosophical Meditation

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EDMUND BURKE observes in his essay on our experience of the sublime and the beautiful "that height is less grand than depth; and that we are more struck at looking down from a precipice, than at looking up at an object of equal height."¹ Yet he immediately confesses, "I am not very positive about this." Modernity is not known for its images of the beautiful. But we know all about precipices. Whatever faults one might find in the great voices and visionaries of modernity—from Nietzsche to Bergman, from Van Gogh to Heidegger—one cannot accuse them of having shied away from the abyss. Even if we are horrified by the nihilistic consequences that often seem to flow from it, we suspect that the encounter with nothingness which the great works of our culture depict and try to provoke in us is the most devastating, and therefore, in Burke's terms, the most sublime of all human experiences. Looking down into nothingness has taken the place of looking up at a divine face as the ultimate event of our lives. If the great visionaries of nothingness now seem to have been superseded in our culture by the triumph of a therapeutic mentality,² that fact itself shows how deeply the foundations of traditional belief have been undermined by the visionary critique. The willingness to experience nothingness remains the distinctively modern form of heroism. It is the experience that each of us knows, in his heart of hearts, he would most like to avoid.

Familiar as we are with the existentialist account of Burke's precipice, and the nothingness one glimpses when one peers over its edge, we should not be as uncer-

tain as he was whether we are "more struck at looking down . . . than at looking up." What could be more upsetting, what could entail a more complete undoing of our lives, than this nothingness at the bottom of our hearts that we finally face in our most heroic moments? What could pull the ground out from under us more effectively than a bottomless abyss? It would appear that this is the root claim at the basis of our modernity, the conviction that runs deeper in us than any uplifting belief and thus undermines all the higher truths which once made human life an ascending pilgrimage. If we sometimes feel a certain apocalyptic undercurrent in what happens to us, perhaps it is as much due to this unspoken intimacy we have with nothingness as it is to the public danger of literal extinction. It is when we look inward that we find ourselves on the verge of the worst abyss. In these reflections I would like to try to practice this inward looking in order to explore the conviction of our modernist visionaries that the encounter with nothingness is the deepest and most demanding of heroisms.

I

TOLSTOY'S *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* remains the most accessible account of what occurs in an encounter with nothingness, although, unlike Sartre, he portrays it as culminating in a religious conversion instead of in heroic despair and nausea. Ultimately, as in Ivan's case, the encounter with nothingness takes place when one stares with a wordless horror more devastating than fear or even terror into the void which death opens up.³ But long before

that terminal realization of one's mortality, one suffers the smaller breakdowns and interruptions, the little punctures and disturbances, that presage in the very midst of one's everyday life an underlying horror one would do anything to avoid.

Everyone has, like Tolstoy's Ivan, a ready repertoire of techniques for coping with the details of one's ordinary life. Coping is the paradigm verb for modernity in its non-heroic everydayness. When I "cope" with the things that happen to me, I "deal" with them successfully, I'm able to "handle" problems not just in the literal sense of being able to solve them but more importantly in the psychological sense of not allowing them to upset me. If there has been a shift in our culture from the primacy of physical technology to the primacy of therapeutic techniques, it has resulted from the realization that one can cope with anything, even the most incapacitating situations, if one knows how to avoid being upset by them. The small interruptions caused by flat tires and long waiting lines, the serious ruptures caused by being "terminated" at work, or by the break-up of a relationship—none of these need finally undermine my sense of being in control of my life. For I can always find some way to manage whatever grief they cause me. The application of techniques of management to the most intimate matters of the heart represents far better than any spaceship the final achievement of that control over nature that Bacon dreamed about at the beginning of modernist culture. What needed to be controlled all along was not the terrors that nature makes us heir to but precisely our susceptibility to being upset by them. If I can find ways to cope therapeutically with even the most upsetting experiences, nothing will ever be able to disrupt me in the core of my being—not even nothingness itself.

Death need not any longer confront us moderns with a final limit to our will to be in control. We can learn how to undergo our own deaths therapeutically, and so not be devastated by them. Tolstoy's Ivan tried in his untutored, amateurish way to

"cope with" death's ultimate disruption of his routines but he did not have at his disposal, as we do, a complete repertoire of therapeutic techniques for dealing with each stage of his long, torturous dying.⁴ Consequently, he had to undergo an ordeal of suffering that we later moderns can prepare ourselves to avoid. It might be objected that our thanatologists acknowledge the importance of "acceptance" and even go so far as to make it the final stage in a therapeutic progression.⁵ But "acceptance" as thus understood has nothing to do with *allowing* the reality of death to have its fully devastating impact on one's being. In fact the precise benefit of "acceptance," as therapeutically conceived, is that it enables one to stop resisting death and thereby makes it possible for one to cease being upset by it. If there is no mention, in contemporary descriptions of the stages of dying, of the horror Tolstoy's Ivan underwent when he looked into the void of his own nothingness, that is because the whole purpose of learning how to die therapeutically is to avoid suffering that horror. Real acceptance, on the other hand, would require opening up the very core of one's heart so as to be devastated by one's death in an irrevocable and irreparable way. A real encounter with nothingness leaves nothing in one's self intact. The management of grief, or any other kind of suffering, is a contradiction in terms. To be stricken to the core by one's dying means precisely to have one's will to control incapacitated by it.

Now just as in a religious culture the prophets and the saints called ordinary men to leave the urban comforts of their everydayness so that they might find in the desert the pillar of divine fire, our great modernist visionaries call us to let go of all our therapies so that we might find on the edge of a precipice the void we spend our lives avoiding. In their minds the authenticity achieved in such an encounter takes the place of sanctity in the traditional sense and can have a transformative effect on human character similar to that resulting from religious conversion. We are called to be the monks of nothingness.

In calling us to nothingness, our prophets touch what they know to be the central nerve hidden under our modern everydayness, the one thing they know our hearts are most deeply set against doing: giving up the very will to control that has been brought to perfection by our therapeutic culture. The exact antithesis of all our therapeutic avoidances, existential dread in the face of death requires a conversion of the heart at the deepest level. In that sense it constitutes an undoing of the modernist will to control at its very core.

Tolstoy's Ivan reaches the existential precipice when he finally acknowledges that the "It" which has been tormenting him is not his caecum, not any nameable disease, not even death itself as a biological event, but simply nothingness. How is one to speak of this void that haunts the modern imagination even though, like the God it replaces, no images are adequate to it? Tolstoy could only call it "It" and compare it to a black sack, a dark hole one falls into when one gets to the bottom of the deepest anguish.⁶ So inaccessible is it to our ordinary way of thinking that, like the positivists, we are tempted to dismiss all talk about it as nonsensical.⁷ It is not so easily exorcised from the heart. Someone who is dying in one way or another, someone whose whole way of living is being radically ruptured, finds talk about nothingness all too meaningful. His heart is in his mouth.

We might think here, for instance, about the termination of a relationship that had formed the very center of one's life, a relationship around which everything had revolved and in terms of which one understood every other project and commitment. The emptiness in the pit of one's stomach grows larger and larger until it becomes all-engulfing and one feels one's very self disappearing into it. The thing that held one's life together and made it whole has ceased to exist. Such a radical upsetting of one's life can have the same incapacitating effect as the more literal proximity of death ceased by a terminal disease. The same repertoire of therapeutic avoidances can be used to avert it.

The same existential heroism is needed to suffer it in all its devastating ramifications. There are many ways of access to nothingness but they all cut through one avoidance after another straight to the very core of one's being.

When a crisis touches the very core of one's being in this way, it is the totality of one's life that is affected, not just one particular dimension of it; not any one aspect of one's being but one's very being at all, one's very existence in its entirety.⁸ Such a crisis can be precipitated by the loss of one particular being—*e.g.*, the one person who formed the center of my life—but what it brings on is a realization that my very being in itself and in its totality is endangered. When my ordinary life as a whole collapses, it can no longer serve to protect me from the precipice that, up till now, the routines of everydayness have enabled me to avoid. Nothingness, at that point, ceases to be a vague metaphysical abstraction. It is not another being which up to now I have overlooked but rather the radical possibility of not being at all.

All along, that precipice has been within myself. We feel nothingness intervening in our ordinary lives in late night silences, in brief moments of uncanny foreboding, in occasional spells of unspeakable loneliness. Ordinarily we succeed by keeping it at bay. Its intrusions are short-lived and barely felt. They are never named. But in moments of supreme crisis, when the thing that meant everything in the world to one is lost, one realizes that it has been there all along, like a congenital wound, in the deepest place of the heart. Hidden as we have kept it, we have always been all too dreadfully intimate with it. In the end we recognize it as what we have all along avoided.

Standing on that precipice, one knows that nothing within one will exempt one from falling over it. Nothingness is horrifying because I know the whole of my self is always on the verge of it. Heroic authenticity lies in the willingness to be vertiginous, to live on the verge of nothingness.⁹ How could there be a more ultimate heroism when there can be no danger more

personally intimate or upsetting? Standing on the verge of nothingness is the ultimate position for surveying human life.

II

SEEN FROM THAT perspective, one's ordinary life is understood in a radically new way. The dizziness of the void makes one remarkably clear-sighted when one turns around and looks back at everyday existence. It should not be surprising that the prophets of heroic authenticity are also the practitioners of the "hermeneutic of suspicion."¹⁰ One becomes suspicious of ordinary motives and beliefs when one begins interpreting them from a vantage point that enables one to discern their therapeutic function. Someone standing on the verge of nothingness is able to uncover all the avoidances we use to prevent ourselves from being put in that position. Ordinarily avoidances are never known as such; to achieve their purpose they must be disguised as important commitments.

An encounter with nothingness, and the existential conversion it entails, enables one to unmask, first of all, the hollowness of those values that govern the everyday life of modernity. How can one take seriously the rise in the business cycle, the gossip of the talk shows, the pursuit and the adulation of celebrity, a grand slam in whist, when one knows that behind one's back is an abyss? As Tolstoy's Ivan admits, it would be "preposterous" to be earnest about any of this.¹¹ For one knows now that all of it belongs to the elaborate project of avoidance which influences every detail of everyday life without our being aware of it. To borrow Saint Paul's phrase, the existential hero has no choice but to "put off this old man"; he will do so contemptuously or regretfully, depending on how heroic he is.

Nothingness has a way of insinuating itself into our lives, however efficient our avoidances. It does so with special effectiveness in moments of crisis of the type we have discussed, when death in one form or another reminds us of our horrifying intimacy with the void we try to fill

with the knick-knacks of everydayness. In such critical times one must either be authentic and face that void, or one must find something outside one's everyday world to save one from it. Here we can see how the existentialist critique of everydayness is complemented by Freud's unmasking of the deepest devices employed by the self in its strategy of avoidance. That master of suspicion saw that in our worst moments, when we are most utterly incapacitated by the abyss that has suddenly appeared at our feet, we need to look up.¹² Looking back (to one's everyday commitments) no longer works; looking down is too horrifying. One needs an uplifting conviction.

Only the idea of God can lift one high enough to get one off the verge of nothingness. If Freud is right, Burke's uncertainty can be easily resolved. The awe we feel in the presence of our ultimate father-figure is mitigated by the fact that the underlying reason for looking up to him is to avoid looking down into an abyss infinitely more horrific and unbearable. Religion, it turns out, is the last and definitive therapy, though not one that Freud himself chose to practice. He was, like the existentialist prophets, too committed to the heroism of the void for that, and he hoped the rest of us would have the courage to prefer authenticity to avoidance. Therapy meant for Freud an undoing of avoidances, not, as for many of his successors, a reinforcement of them. The existentialist conversion is the ultimate version of that undoing. While we have occasionally compared it with the traditional religious change of heart, it now appears to be not just a replacement for the latter but the only authentic alternative to the self-delusions which traditional religion entails. For the person stripped of all avoidances, nothingness, not God, is, to use Anselm's words, "that than which none greater can be conceived."¹³

However, it is not just God that is eclipsed by nothingness. For what makes God therapeutic in the first place is his exemption from the nothingness to which I

myself am liable. God is needed for eternity; belief in an eternal order and in my kinship with it is needed if the possibility of nothingness is to cease haunting me. The same hermeneutic of suspicion which unmasks the therapeutic motive behind religious belief uncovers the insecurity that makes us desperate to cling to timeless truths of any sort.¹⁴ We clutch at such truths lest we perish. All our beliefs in a higher order give us something to look up to, lest we shudder in horror. The moral virtues that follow upon fidelity to that higher order only disguise the recoil of the heart from what it glimpses when it looks down. Recoiling from the void, one is willing to believe in anything rather than feel that paralyzing shudder. The dark night of existential dread, on the other hand, is not lightened by the promise of any Platonic sun. It is as cold and empty as nothingness itself. One can't stop one's teeth from chattering uncontrollably. But here alone, it seems, there is no betrayal.

Now we see why the prophets of nothingness are such profound diagnosticians of the heart. They know how to detect every one of our subtle evasions, the unconscious avoidances that motivate our apparent virtues, just as the saints of the past were purportedly equipped to divine secrets of the heart not even known to those who held them dear. But the seers of nothingness would unmask the saints themselves and show us the unwitting lie at the bottom of their sanctity. One cannot answer their diagnosis by pointing to the grim consequences that follow upon the loss of belief in any higher order. For in doing so one would be trying to rescue one's beliefs by showing the benefits derived from holding them to be true. And how can belief be earnest when it is animated by one's need to have it perform a therapeutic function?¹⁵ Today the existential critique worked out by the great visionaries of modernity has given rise to what might be called a traditionalist recoil from the nihilistic consequences that seemed to follow from that critique. This recoil impels one to grab onto any structure of religious or political belief that

promises to provide an orderly framework for one's life, without regard for the rational coherence or the truthfulness of the beliefs themselves. But the critique anticipated this response and is only more deeply confirmed by it. In a real sense the existentialists have succeeded. They gave us a glimpse into the abyss that lasted just long enough to make us realize that we have used our beliefs to avoid facing it. Contemporary man runs back to those beliefs with an unprecedented desperation. But once their therapeutic purpose has been unmasked, they cannot be held with the old conviction. We hold onto them in terror. And thus we prove the existential diagnosis of us to be true.

It is in this light that the contemporary reanimation of traditional religion and its reconciliation with modern psychology must be understood. Whatever the historical causes that have contributed to the nihilism in our culture, its root lies in the experience of horror at the bottom of our hearts. The religion practiced today with such fervor is largely the religion of being saved, and what we are to be saved from is precisely the experience of being in crisis, the experience of nothingness. In this post-existentialist period, religion has re-emerged—as therapy. If our psychologists welcome this revival instead of regretting it, that is because they recognize its therapeutic function and because they themselves, unlike Freud, measure the worth of any belief by the psychological benefits that result from clutching it. The truthfulness of beliefs is not their business; in that sense they have learned their nihilism well. They would help us limp away from the verge with any crutch that works. The therapeutic mind is, we might say, the illegitimate child of the existentialists, the child who sees just enough of the horror to turn away from it.

III

BURKE HAD THEN, it seems, no reason to pause. One need only reflect on one's own experiences to realize that the awe one feels standing at the foot of a mountain does not fill one with that sickening

sense of vertigo one feels when one stands on its peak and peers over. Burke rightly thought that we can enjoy such heights aesthetically only when protected from the edge by a guard-rail. In the existential predicament there is no such luxury, no neutral space in between the heroic acceptance of horror and a panicky flight from it. One either remains on the verge looking down or one pulls back and flees—into the arms of some higher power.

But Burke was a religious man and so he felt compelled to talk about looking up to God as the ultimate example of a sublime experience. Clearly he has no suspicion, as we do, of the therapeutic function that belief in God can perform in human life. On the contrary, he was hesitant “to introduce the idea of that great and tremendous being, as an example in an argument so light as this.”¹⁶ And perhaps he is dimly aware of the great contradiction between his claim that looking down is more devastating than looking up and his claim that the experience of God has an ultimacy that all other experiences of the sublime lack. Perhaps he senses that the motive underlying religious awe gives it a much deeper and more urgently personal import than is possessed by any merely aesthetic emotion. At any rate he tries to animate for us the dreadful component of religious experience. “Whilst we contemplate so vast an object,” he says, “...we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him.”¹⁷ Is this “shrinking back into our own nature” nothing more than the dread one feels before an awe-inspiring but finally therapeutic father-figure, as Freud suggested? Or does Burke glimpse here a truth about religious experience that lies even deeper than the one Freud unmasked?

Let us explore this second possibility by trying to turn the hermeneutic of suspicion on the person who up to this point has seemed above suspicion, the existentialist hero himself who stands in the ultimate position, on the verge of nothingness. One word here gives us reason to

pause. The word “stands” is prominent here as a key image of the existentialist’s heroic posture. That image accords with the distinctive sense of dignity that accompanies the achievement of authenticity. One remains on the verge and fights off every impulse to avert one’s gaze; one is barely able to keep one’s balance, so disorienting is the vertigo; and one knows for the first time what it really means to be human because only man has the capacity to see beyond beings into nothingness. Only the person on the edge of the precipice is entitled to be upright. Man achieves his full stature as man only when he assumes the erectness of authenticity in the face of death. His liability to nothingness makes him destitute but only someone incapable of bearing the horror of dying allows that poverty-stricken condition to turn him into a beggar. Authenticity is therefore nothing but this upright affirmation of one’s being even as one feels drawn into the void.

But if existential man remains standing on the verge of nothingness, he has not yet done the one thing needful for finding the truth at the bottom of that void. He has not become identified with nothingness itself. This, it might be objected, is something impossible for us to do in our condition as beings. Nothingness, it would seem, is not accessible to us as long as we are. But if that were the case, we could never get to the verge of it. Death would be no more than another event that happens in the world. The existential experience we undergo in periods of extreme personal crisis would be impossible. In order for the person on the edge of the abyss to argue that he can go no further than the verge, he would have to side in the end with the ordinary man who denies his nothingness instead of confronting it. The choice he made between authenticity and avoidance brings him, though he is not aware of it when he makes it, to the verge of a deeper choice between standing on the precipice and falling over it. And what would motivate him to remain upright on the verge if not a desire to recoil from an experience that promises to

be more upsetting than his vertigo?

But now we have to try to translate these metaphors so that we can see whether there is some intelligible meaning to this idea of falling into nothingness or if it signifies only a kind of absurd rush into madness, such as is pictured, for instance, in Van Gogh's last paintings. Can one go further than the edge of the abyss without descending into an utter void of meaninglessness? Does the existentialist's option of remaining on the edge enable him to retain a connection with the ordinary world that cannot be severed without losing sanity itself? Or does the failure to break that connection reveal a final and tragically ironic unwillingness to "put off the old man"? This, it seems, is the question which lies unmasked at the bottom of Burke's uncertainty about whether there is an experience more upsetting than looking down a precipice.

To answer it we have to return to the existentialist's realization of his liability to nothingness so that we can see if it contains the seed of something deeper. Nothingness, he realizes, is no alien intruder trespassing inside the inviolable precinct of our being. The falsity and the self-delusion of ordinary life are due precisely to the fact that we ordinarily pretend to ourselves that this is so. If we need such an elaborate network of avoidances to cover up the possibility of nothingness, it is because that possibility is as close to us as ourselves—it is a weakness, a fissure inside the very heart of one's being. The precipice we have been speaking of all along is in us—it is the fissure in our very being that opens upon nothingness. What does this fissure tell me about myself? *That I am, and yet am capable of not-being.* But putting it this way still makes it sound like that capability is merely tacked onto my being like an almost overlooked addendum. How much closer, how much more intimate it is than that! If my very being is able to not be, there is no necessity to it, no absolute and binding need for it. Otherwise there would be no real possibility of one's not existing, and I know, from looking through the fissure at

the bottom of my heart, that this possibility is all too real. Now if there is no necessity to my being, this means that *I could just as easily not be and yet I am.* What subtle, almost imperceptible change of position has occurred between the preceding formulation and this last one? When one says "I am, and yet am capable of not-being" one is standing on the edge of being looking over at the possibility of one's nothingness. Where is one standing when one says "I am capable of not being—and yet I am"?

One is not standing anywhere. One is realizing that, even though I am, *in and of myself, I am nothingness.* One is looking up from one's intrinsic nothingness at the gift of being. Standing on the verge of nothingness, I am still treating existence as if it were my own, as if I owned it, as if I do not really have anything in common with this void that opens out before me at my feet. I am still in a superior position with regard to it, and no matter how long I stare down at it I will continue to treat it as something beneath me. And even when I fall over that edge and plummet, all during my descent I am looking down on nothingness from a position of real, if fast diminishing superiority. And when I get there and lay face down at the bottom of that void, in hopeless and bitter despair, like that pictured in Van Gogh's *Wheat-field with Crows*, my very despair reveals a final and desperate unwillingness to accept the void as my self. I do not accept nothingness as mine until I stop looking down on it and instead turn around and look up from the very bottom of it. Only at that point do I give up at last the position of superiority I have needed to have all along to avoid acknowledging my oneness with it. What horrified me from the first was having to accept the inferiority of nothingness as my own.¹⁸

If we do not call this new perspective a new "position" for understanding the human condition, it is because the person who has it knows he has no stature. He realizes his destitution is complete. "In and of myself I am *nothing*—and yet I *am*." But the fact that I am does not abolish the fact

that I am coeval with nothingness; it does not cure my congenital poverty. Were everything that has been given me taken away, were I stripped down to what I am in my essence, apart from the gift of being, I would be lying naked even now in nothingness. Can we not recognize in this poverty the lack of stature Burke referred to when he described an experience in which "we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated. . . ." The abyss of our minuteness has no bottom and, for that reason, as T. S. Eliot says, humility is endless.

For Burke the compulsion to shrink back into our nothingness arises when we find ourselves in the presence of the sacred, and ultimately, in the presence of God. But for us moderns, God ordinarily becomes real only when we come close enough to the experience of nothingness to turn away from it in terror; and the nothingness we glimpse penetrates too deeply for us to believe that God is anything but the father-figure whose protection we need to escape it. God, we think, lies on this side of the horrible abyss we spend our lives avoiding; our religions do not ordinarily help us "shrink back into our nothingness" but rather help us limp away from it. But if for us God is no help in discovering our nothingness, it may be the case that the experience of nothingness is our one and only access to the discovery not of the God who saves us from our poverty but confirms us in it.

For what, after all, is to be seen when one looks up from the perspective of one's ineradicable poverty? That I have had it in my heart all along to be God, to have no fissure in my being, to be exempt from nothingness. The idea of God has been there all along—as what I wanted to be myself. The fact that I am not God is the unbearable horror secreted away in the heart underneath all its avoidances, for it is what one must accept in finally ceasing to recoil from one's nothingness. Those avoidances are put in place, as the modern masters of suspicion have taught us, in order to prevent our having to suffer

a devastating experience from which it is impossible to return in one piece. They did not suspect that this experience occurs only in the act of worship.

The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* advises the reader:

. . . I do not want you to be anywhere; no, not outside, above or beside yourself.

But to this you say: "Where then shall I be? By your reckoning I am to be nowhere!" Exactly. In fact, you have expressed it rather well, for I would indeed have you be nowhere. . . . Your senses . . . will chide you for doing nothing. But never mind. Go on with this nothing. . . .

Many arrive at this juncture in the interior life but the terrible, comfortless agony they experience facing themselves drives them back. . . .¹⁹

If we have turned at this point to the words of a mystic, it is not because the person who acknowledges his nothingness for the first time has already reached thereby the depth of poverty the mystic experiences. On the contrary. The mystics themselves tell us that it takes years and years of poverty and destitution to become truly familiar with one's nothingness. But there is already operative even in that first admission a fundamental willingness to turn around and look up, from the perspective of one's own poverty, toward a reality to which one can only say, "Thou art all, I am nothing." That prayer is wrung from the heart like the horrific shudder of death itself. It is one's dying to one's self. The act of worship, to the degree that it is authentic in the existentialist sense, springs out of that shudder.

This description does not accord at first glance with the emphasis on celebration thought to be indispensable to religious worship. That is not because celebration is absent from the prayer we have described. Indeed, could one's acceptance of one's nothingness be complete if one continued to . . . resent it? Resentment is the last avoidance. One breaks through it only when one clasps one's poverty joyfully. But that joy is no therapeutic compensation for suffering. The suffering does not

cease, the nothingness does not go away—and yet one wonders, in the mystic's words, "if this nothingness is not some heavenly paradise after all."²⁰ This joy does not look anything like celebration in the ordinary sense of that term because it arises at the heart of the horror our ordinary celebrations are devised to obscure. It is a joy one suffers like death, our death.

IV

WE KNOW FROM our own aesthetic experiences what it is like to look up at something awe-full when one has one's feet planted firmly on the ground. We know from our therapeutic instincts how desperately we cling to something higher when we feel the ground slipping from our feet. We would know, if we had the existentialist's courage, what it feels like to look down at the abyss opening up beneath us. But we would have to be saints to know fully what it is like to look up from the bottom of one's nothingness. Only when we moderns realize that sanctity is to be found by taking one step beyond existential vertigo, not by recoiling from it, do we realize how far we are from it. The absence of that realization constitutes, it would seem, the tragic irony of modernist heroism. Its practitioners thought they were moving beyond the faulty heroism of the saints, not taking a step back to a more comfortable position. But humility is more devastating than vertigo. Adoration is more dreadful than despair. It is gratitude, not nihilism, that costs not less than everything. For there is no way to get more deeply into nothingness than to identify oneself with it graciously, as the act of worship requires.

What posture, what manner of carrying himself, is assumed by the person moved in the very center of his heart by this paradoxical joy? Such a person would not walk with the self-possession and self-assurance of one governed by the will to control. He would not limp like someone desperate for

crutches. He would not stand heroically erect like someone straddling an ever-widening fissure. He would not lie face down in a black hole of despair. He would raise himself up from his nothingness just enough to genuflect.

¹Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 72. ²Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York, 1968). ³Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), sections 40, 46-53. I translate "angst" as horror. ⁴Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. by Lynn Solotaroff (New York, 1981), chapters 4 and 5. ⁵Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York, 1970), chapter 7. ⁶Tolstoy, chapters 5 and 6. *Cf.* also Heidegger, sections 46-53. ⁷*Cf.* Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe, Ill., 1959). ⁸Heidegger, sections 46-53. ⁹This claim is made, I think, by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, by Sartre in *Nausea*, trans. by Lloyd Alexander (New York, 1964), pp. 94-103, by Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, though each develops a distinctive account of life on the verge of and of the virtue of authenticity that living there requires. I should make it very clear that I do not think these great visionaries of nothingness can be called nihilists since each of them utters some kind of "Yes" to life, even as he stands on the verge of the void. ¹⁰The phrase is taken from Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. by Denis Savage (New York, 1970). ¹¹Tolstoy, p. 82. *Cf.* Heidegger, sections 51 and 52. ¹²Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. by James Strachey (New York, 1961), sections 3 and 4. ¹³As Heidegger puts it, death is "that possibility...which is not to be outstripped." *Being and Time*, p. 294. ¹⁴Nietzsche's critique of absolute values is grounded in his unmasking of the heart's yearning to overcome finitude. This is worked out most deeply in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. ¹⁵This is the dilemma faced by both the therapist and his clients in John Barth's *The End of the Road* (New York, 1969). *Cf.* Philip Rieff's commentary on the novel in *Fellow Teachers* (New York, 1973). *Cf.* also Philip Rieff, "The Impossible Culture," *Encounter*, XXXV (September, 1970), 33-44. ¹⁶Burke, pp. 67-68. ¹⁷Burke, p. 68. ¹⁸I am trying to articulate here the existential realization that lies concealed inside Aquinas's argument for God on the basis of contingency. Jacques Maritain hints at this realization in *Approaches to God*, trans. by Peter O'Reilly (New York, 1954), pp. 18-20. ¹⁹William Johnston, trans., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Garden City, 1973), p. 136. ²⁰*The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 136.