

A Theme with Variations

I

*I think we do not much like looking up
For the vault surges, deep and inhuman,
And the vapors drift, forming, falling,
 reforming,
To remind us of the time before our time.
Far beyond are the stars, the countless
Billions, in galaxies, unnamed and unseen:
Stars which once provided sure directions,
Which now move, on all sides, away from us,
Departing at speeds which are numbing to
 the mind
Into the dark whose boundary is unknown.*

*I think we do not much like looking up
For just overhead the ideas are waiting.
Voiceless, patient, invisible as gods,
Each unexhausted by the way it is known,
By the centuries of names, terms, languages:
The perfect man being Moses, Christ,
 Mohammed.
They wait indifferently, no respecter of
 persons,*

*In fact, they ask for self-forgetfulness.
To receive them is to suffer their conse-
 quences—
Discomfort to the flesh, frustration of acts.
And yet the ideas are all that is left
And can make us feel strangely complete.*

II

*What are the mathematicians naming
When they conceive a point where motion
 ends;
And write it as a number which has no
 worth,
Using the zero, borrowed from Hindu Priests?
What are they doing, adding zero to the
 sums,
And showing it unchanged after division?

They are naming nothing: inventing terms
For infinities of distance and time;
Infinities which can bend a beam of light,
Bend the longest and fastest of straight lines,
Until it arcs and returns like a boomerang
To form a zero, to measure nothing.*

*They are taming the unknown with terms,
Naming an idea Greek sages called the One;
And the Indians, Wakonda, and the Chris-
tians, God.*

*Naming the zero-zone of darkness, gas, and
dust*

*Out of which the light-giving stars once spun;
And toward which they now are burning,
dying down.*

*They are naming nothing, a place without
time,*

*Where the beginning and the end are one;
Where the round gate between the woman's
thighs*

*Is the grave, the waiting, opened ground:
A dark hole, unmoving, exuding depth,
Forming a zero-point for all the days and
works.*

III

*The tale is never told. Remember that.
So did Rousseau name man a noble savage
After hearing of an Indian brought to London
Who was unmoved by luxuries of modern life
And longed to return to his homeland.
He named the savage noble, having never
seen*

*New World altars where the Aztec priests
Tied down brethren, and cut out their hearts,
Cut the hearts from terror-stricken, heaving
chests,
And boiled them in silver chafing dishes.*

*The tale is never told. So did Marx name
The perfect state a Communism. After
reading
Rousseau's writings in a smoky London flat,
He was each person bowing to a collective
Will: "Giving according to his capacity,
Receiving according to his need." He named*

*Without grasping the dark source of freedom
In the Ungrund—countless possible being—
Which calls each one to determine his
existence*

And reminds him that he will die alone.

*The tale is never told. So did Mother Church
Dress the nymphs Greeks imagined in
woodlands.*

*She robbed the forms singing naked in the
streams,*

*Fixed wings to shoulder-blades, named them
angels,
And paid Bernini to set them in stone.*

*Now modern producers have undressed them
again,*

*Parading long limbs and luminous flesh
Across huge screens for the pleasure of the
masses.*

*And renaming them starlets and movie
queens,
They describe the mythic lives in magazines.*

*Three names for one form, made of perfect
lines,*

*Drawn upon imagination: all sigh sweetly
Of their beginning in a place, or a time,
Which is not unlike heaven. There youth,
There tenderness go on and on, as if
May and June should continue all year long.
The question is not whether one name or
tale*

*Is correct, but whether the theme, like all
ideas,*

*Concerns perfection, concerns a good
requiring action.*

Yet no one learns the answer until the end.

—Mark Christhilf