THE SPIRIT CRIES OUT

Under many 'noes', a small 'yes'

By JUSTIN J. KELLY

I believe that by studying man carefully, one will undoubtedly discover that, just as the grain of wheat presupposes the earth and the fish, the water, man presupposes God. . . . If we search untiringly at the bottom of all human abdications we will always end by finding, under so many 'noes', a small 'yes' which will outweigh every objection and will be sufficient to rebuild everything.

Ugo Betti, *Religion and the Theatre.*[1]

The gray-haired man, his nostrils dilating, appeared to take a fairly deep breath. 'We're all animals', he said. 'Basically, we're all animals.'

'Like hell we are. I'm no goddam animal. I may be a stupid, fouled up twentieth-century son of a bitch, but I'm no animal. Don't gimme that. I'm no animal'.

J. D. Salinger, *Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes.*[2]

MODERN literature, crammed to the trash-can lid with both abdications and denials, also has its affirmations: small 'yeses' to human transcendence, almost grudging recognitions that we are more than our animality, our obsessions, our failures. More often than not, these admissions are wrung from someone undergoing the extremes of futility and degradation, as in Salinger's story. It is as if any less anguished witness were discredited in advance, made implausible by modern man's and woman's experience of themselves. In the dim light of that experience, there often seems to be little room not merely for hero-worship but even for self-respect. 'Can a man of perception respect himself at all?' demands Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, that prototype of modern self-consciousness, for whom man was best

[1] Trans. by Gino Rizzo and William Merriweather, in *Tulane Drama Review*, 5 (1960), p 11.
[2] *Nine Stories* (New York, 1964), p 120.

defined as 'the ungrateful biped'.[3] Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* caricatures and subverts all the heroic posturings of human beings as they search for some reason to think well of themselves, to locate some special grounds of distinction:

> *Vladimir:* At this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate has consigned us! . . . We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?
> *Estragon:* Billions.[4]

Yet it is precisely from such abysses of cynicism and self-doubt that there have arisen the most ringing affirmations of human worth. Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* is a passionate apologia for freedom and human transcendence. In the teeth of a shallow, pseudo-scientific rationalism that reduces the human mystery to laws 'like the multiplication table', and insists, naïvely, that man will ultimately act 'according to his best advantage', his tortured narrator challenges: 'Advantage! What is advantage? And will you take it upon yourself to define with perfect accuracy in what the advantage of man consists?'[5] And Beckett's two lonely tramps, unable to explain why they must go on waiting for a Godot who never comes, discover that even their tedious dialogues and time-killing routines cannot be quite emptied of meaning, or at least the need for it:

> *Vladimir:* This is becoming really insignificant.
> *Estragon:* Not enough.[6]

And so the yeses, however grudging, persist. It follows, as Betti goes on to say, that 'we need not be afraid of the desert'. Or (to alter the metaphor) of the sea. 'In the destructive element immerse', runs the advice of the botanist Stein to the hero of Conrad's *Lord Jim*; by submitting yourself to the water, instead of trying, like the inexperienced swimmer, to climb out of it, you will make 'the deep, deep sea keep you up'.[7] Such surrender to what looks like destruction

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[3] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'Notes from Underground', in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland and New York, 1956), pp 63, 74.
[4] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York, 1954), p 51.
[5] Dostoyevsky, p 67.
[6] Beckett, p 44.
[7] Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (New York, 1963), pp 158-9.

expresses a law as old as the gospel, as old as life. 'For whoever tries to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it'.[8] The negations, the stripping-down, uncover a bedrock reality more certain than what has been denied; the dissolving of illusions permits the truly real to assert itself.

The following pages will offer some further examples of this process drawn from various sources, literary and psychological, and reflect on their meaning in the light of christian faith. Central to these reflections is the conviction that the 'yes' discovered under all the 'noes' of existence is addressed not only to the self or to life but to God.[9] Ultimately, it means believing in the resurrection of the dead. For the discovery of value and meaning underlying all life's emptiness and disorder involves what Karl Rahner calls 'the transcendental experience of the expectation of one's own resurrection'. Anyone who affirms his existence as permanently valid and redeemable — 'worthwhile' — is, according to Rahner, 'affirming his resurrection in hope' at the same time.[10] For the promise of resurrection for the individual, a promise already actual in the risen Jesus, is the only adequate objective ground for affirming the ultimate worthwhileness of life. This is why Carl Braaten can assert that 'the symbol of the resurrection is the answer to the quest for a transcendent meaning of life'. It is the objective correlative to a subjective but universal longing. Says Braaten:

> Man has a passion to be whole and wholly human that cannot be relieved by any of the roles he plays or by the things he possesses or by the awards he accumulates. The apocalyptic hope for resurrection keeps the person on the way to a total unburdening, a full freedom, a perfect righteousness, in the Kingdom of God. This is the eschatological negation of all the negativities of existence.[11]

Rahner calls this hope 'transcendental' because it is absolutely universal: found wherever the human spirit is found, present even by the fact of being denied. One may say of it what a former archbishop of Bombay, the late Archbishop Roberts, once said of Christianity in India: 'Christianity came to India when the first

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[8] Mt 16, 25.

[9] Cf my article, 'Faith: the Human Dimension', in *The Way*, 11 (July 1971), pp 187ff.

[10] *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, (trans. William V. Dych, New York, 1978), pp 268, 273.

[11] 'The Significance of Apocalypticism for Systematic Theology', in *Interpretation*, 25 (1971), p 494.

man came to India'. It is present (to quote Rahner again) in 'the experience of endless longing, of radical optimism, of unquenchable dissatisfaction, of the torment of the insufficiency of all material things, of the radical protest against death'. Though an effect of God's free grace, it is experienced as belonging to the essence of man, 'for man's essence is so constituted that we experience it where we experience grace, and we experience grace where natural spirit is'.[12] This can stand as our warrant for seeking signs of grace, and of the resurrection hope, in some secular (and perhaps very unlikely) contexts.

Through death to resurrection: King Lear and Judith Hearne

Shakespeare put such a process — losing oneself in order to find oneself, dying in order to rise — at the heart of what many consider his greatest play, *King Lear*. The self to be lost is in this case a false self, an inflated and unreal image of himself as a kind of demigod which the old king has at the start of his tragedy. Against his will but by his own folly, Lear undergoes the violent tearing away of the props on which he had based his sense of being a wise ruler and a beloved father. Stripped one by one of his external predicates — his power to rule, his retinue of knights, the affection of his daughters — he begins to question his own identity. 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' (I, iv, 36). At last he sees his own image in the half-naked madman he encounters on the heath: 'Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art' (III, iv, 110). Unable to turn his mind away from its obsession with injustices done him, he is driven mad, dashing his frail personality against the rock of his frustrations.

Yet the loss of everything, including his own sanity and sense of self, leads paradoxically to the discovery of something more true and reliable: the love of his youngest child, Cordelia, which refuses to be overcome by rejection and banishment. Lear not only recovers his sanity but finds a new self through her forgiveness, and the existence he has in her eyes and in those of his loyal earl, Kent. In the latter's words, he wakes up to find himself 'in your own kingdom, sir' (IV, vii, 77). Though in the end his folly will cost no less than the life of his beloved Cordelia and his own, he touches in her (and through him the audience or reader touches) a reality absolutely superior to change, suffering, and death: the reality of love. It is

[12] *Nature and Grace*, trans. Diana Wharton (London, 1963), p 137.

this experience, and the awed sense of human grandeur Lear himself evokes, that (as Maynard Mack observes) gives to the audience's applause at the end of a great performance 'a quality of exaltation'.[13] This exaltation, and the experience of transcendence which the play mediates, is in direct proportion to the extremity of the preceding suffering, the totality of the negation. In the words of L. C. Knights:

> What Lear touches in Cordelia . . . is, we are made to feel, the reality, and the values revealed so surely there are established in the face of the worst that can be known of man or Nature. To keep nothing in reserve, to slur over no possible cruelty or misfortune, was the only way of ensuring that the positive values discovered and established in the play should keep their triumphant hold on our imagination.[14]

King Lear is, in a sense, Shakespeare's dramatic version of the passion narratives, in which the resurrection is experienced as already begun in the suffering and dying which preceded it.

Brian Moore's brilliant novel, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, presents a similar experience in a more familiar and unheroic setting. An unmarried woman in her early forties, unattractive, inhibited, alcoholic, Judith Hearne is a victim of the narrow and impoverished Belfast Catholicism that reared her. Her life is lived under the images of the Sacred Heart ('his eyes kindly, yet accusing') and of her late Aunt D'Arcy, a white-haired tyrant who in her last, mad years survived like a vampire on the blood of Judith's submissive care and service. Owner of a sexless body and a face from which men instinctively turn away, Judith is forced to live within suffocatingly narrow confines, trapped by her piety, her poverty, and assorted shabby-genteel rules of good behaviour (for example, 'the male must pursue'). In the lonely years after her aunt's death, she drifts from one cheap rooming house to another, with a dwindling income and a few friends, surviving with the help of furtively purchased bottles of cheap whisky — and the ever more improbable hope of meeting 'Mr Right'.

Enter 'Mr Right', in the person of James Madden, her current landlady's brother, and Judith's constricted world is suddenly cracked wide open. Madden is a middle-aged widower with a limp, an Irishman come home from New York, where he is said to have

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[13] *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), p 87.

[14] 'King Lear', in *Shakespeare Criticism 1935-1960*, ed. Ann Ridler (London 1970) p 288; reprinted from L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes* (London, 1960).

made a fortune 'in the hotel business'. (In fact, he is an ex-hotel doorman who collected a modest bundle in an out-of-court settlement after a 'bus accident.) Because Madden does not, like every other man Judith has ever met, spontaneously turn away from her; because she listens eagerly to the gab about America of a lonely Yankee in exile; because he mistakes her heirloom jewellery for opulence and sizes her up as a potential business partner in a scheme of his to set up an american-style coffee-shop in Dublin; because, finally, Judith is so simply and hopelessly desperate — her passion begins. Her emotional involvement with Madden, together with her addiction to the bottle, draw her more and more beyond the carefully protected limits of her life. At length she gambles her small savings, her friendships, and even her self-respect — and loses. Stunned by the discovery that 'Mr Right's' interests are financial and not romantic, Judith is driven, for the first time in her life, to question everything, even her religion. She squanders all her remaining funds on a wild binge which climaxes in a desperate, alcohol-fuelled assault on the tabernacle of her parish church. Is it God behind the door, waiting to strike her in his wrath — or only wafers of bread? Judith demands to know:

> Now! Now! She tore at the door. Now, the thunderbolt. But the door would not open. Small, golden, Holy of Holies, it remained shut against her trembling, weeping onslaught.[15]

Found by her parish priest collapsed and bleeding on the altar steps, she is sent to the place she has dreaded most — a convalescent home for elderly, impoverished ladies, presided over by firm-willed and inexorably cheerful nuns in starched habits.

But Judith does not give up the struggle. Unable to believe any longer, she continues her anguished searching for something or someone to deliver her from her state of utter aloneness. Her bare room in the Earnscliffe Home is like the empty church on Holy Saturday, like the tomb of Christ: 'No noise anywhere. In this place: white, stripped, still'. Unbelieving, she prays for faith, looks for a sign; there is none. 'If you do not believe, you are alone', she realizes. 'But I was of Ireland, among my people, a member of my faith. Now I have no — and if no faith, then no people. No, no, I have not given up. I cannot'. At last she consents to having her picture

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[15] Brian Moore, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (New York, 1955), p 210.

of the Sacred Heart set in place on the dressing table, alongside the picture of her aunt. It seems significant that it is no longer above her, but on her own level: as if she recognized its power over her as ultimately deriving from herself. She accepts it, but on a new basis:

> And You. Were You ever? Is this picture the only You? It is here and You are gone. It is You. No matter what You are, it still is part of me.[16]

Does Judith really recover her lost faith? The novel's ending is ambiguous, and deliberately so. What is unmistakably clear is that it shows her performing her first fully free and human act — an act of conscious self-acceptance, involving her acceptance of her religion as part of herself. As the imagery surrounding it suggests, it is both a resurrection and an incarnation. Having died to her unreal life of neurotic piety, a life which hid from her the true nature of her existence, she at last sees it for what it is and assents to it; in so doing, she is reborn as herself. In a sense the real Judith Hearne is conceived for the first time, becomes flesh, at the end. She finally emerges as a figure not merely of helpless suffering but of astonishing courage. Alone among the people in the novel, she changes in a significant way, transcends her original limits.[17] In her plain body and inelegant clothes, amid the drab meanness of pre-revolutionary Belfast, she commits herself unreservedly to her passion, with all the tragic hero's or heroine's lust for the absolute. And she succeeds. Abandoning every security, she finds reality, becomes herself.

In this perspective, the question about whether she returns to actual belief, or simply accepts her religion as an inescapable fact of her life, like her face and her nationality, is finally irrelevant. Not what Judith believes, but what she does and is, is the novel's testimonial to human transcendence — and, in this sense, to the presence of God in life. Indeed, the naked openness to the unknown and uncontrollable future which she allows herself to experience in her passion is almost a new definition of God. The sheer terror of being utterly beyond social forms and even moral constraints — 'There is no right or wrong in this'[18] — is mingled in the novel with the strange sense of being borne up by an absolute truth, which is finally compassionate. The novel ends, appropriately, with Judith looking

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[16] *Ibid.*, p 223.

[17] The same is true (with Edmund as one possible exception) of Lear in his drama.

[18] Moore, p 221.

at her two pictures: 'She closed her eyes. Funny about those two. When they're with me, watching over me, a new place becomes home'.[19]

Some psychological parallels

These dramatic and fictional examples of the process of dying in order to live are strikingly confirmed by their similarity to some basic patterns of psychological transformation. The cure of certain types of mental illness, for instance, often requires a similar immersion in a sea of seeming chaos, a surrender to the uncontrollable. Someone who has been trying, perhaps for a lifetime, to squeeze reality into the narrow mould of his preconceptions of it, must learn somehow to 'let go'. When this letting-go occurs — most often because the strain required to maintain the artificial pattern becomes too great, greater than the fear of what may happen if it is abandoned — a new and superior order is allowed to emerge (superior, first of all, because it is not arbitrary or imposed, but real). The person discovers, with an enormous sense of relief, that existence is o.k., that he or she can live comfortably with the world without having to falsify it. A woman client of Carl Rogers compared it to doing a jigsaw puzzle:

> You think you have to make the pattern yourself; but there are so many pieces, and it's so hard to see where they fit. Sometimes you put them in the wrong place, and the more pieces mis-fitted, the more effort it takes to hold them in place, until at last you are so tired that even that awful confusion is better than holding on any longer. Then you discover that left to themselves the jumbled pieces fall quite naturally into their own places, and a living pattern emerges without any effort at all on your part.[20]

Suffering through 'that awful confusion' to the point at which a new order and sense arises out of the old, is like a dying. It often involves an anguished sense of being abandoned and alone. It means passing through a dark night where all familiar landmarks are hidden. It may require a real struggle, an effort to think and 'feel through' one's previous experience and self-understanding to the point where a new understanding, a whole new sense of being, emerges.

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[19] *Ibid.*, p 223.

[20] Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston, 1961), p 114.

Rollo May gives a memorable example of this new self-sense and the process leading to it in his book *Existence*. He describes a patient, 'an intelligent woman of twenty-eight', who needed therapy because of serious spells of anxiety and self-doubt, and eruptions of rage that were sometimes uncontrollable. An illegitimate child, she had been unwanted by her mother, who had tried to abort her. Often during her upbringing relatives would remind her of her origin, saying things like 'You should have been choked the day you were born'. One day, after several months of therapy, she was walking under the elevated tracks in a slum area of town, feeling intensely her status as illegitimate and unwanted. She later recalled 'the sweat pouring forth in my anguish' as she tried to accept the fact, which she likened to being a black person in the midst of privileged whites, or blind among those who could see:

> Later on that night I woke up and it came to me this way: 'I accept the fact that I am an illegitimate child'. *But* 'I am not a child anymore'. So it is 'I am illegitimate'. That is not so either: 'I was born illegitimate'. Then what is left? What is left is this, '*I Am*'. This act of contact and acceptance with 'I am', once gotten hold of, gave me (what I think was for me the first time) the experience 'Since I Am, I have the right to be'.

She compared this new experience to a time in her early childhood when she had once reached the core of a peach and cracked the pit with her teeth, 'not knowing what I would find and then feeling the wonder of finding the inner seed, good to eat in its bitter sweetness'. It was, she said, like the experience of the mystics, 'except that instead of the pure feeling of and union with God it is the finding of and union with my own being'. It meant 'ceasing to feel like a theory toward one's self'. This 'I-am' feeling or sense of being is described by May as the goal of therapy — not as the solution to all problems but as the precondition for their solution. It is the small 'yes' on which other 'yeses' may eventually be built.[21]

In all the preceding examples, the peeling away of everything external and unreal, which first leaves the person feeling naked, defenceless, 'nothinged', leads to the discovery of something lovable, trustworthy, and true at the core. There at the heart of darkness is

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[21] Rollo May, 'Contributions of Existential Psychotherapy', in *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, eds. Rollo May, Ernest Angel, and Henri F. Ellenberger (New York, 1958), pp 42-44.

an inner seed, 'good to eat in its bitter sweetness'. It is as if the person has finally reached the centre of his or her own being, the point where it rises out of its ground: the self experienced as dependent on nothing but all-creating and absolute Love. Because this is so simple and so ultimate, it cannot be lost or taken away: 'Since I am, I have the right to be'. The little 'I am' of the self touches the mystery of its rootedness in the great 'I am that I am'.[22]

Whether explicitly religious in form or not, such self-discovery is always also, at some level, a discovery of God. For, to quote Rahner once more, 'the personal history of the experience of self is the personal history of the experience of God'.[23] What a person encounters at the depths of his own being and another's is the mystery of the transcendent. At the moment of experiencing the void, one is in contact with the mysterious love which wills to fill the void with himself. The 'secular' experiences of self-discovery (and self-recovery) described here have innumerable parallels in the literature of religious encounter. These narratives of salvation and deliverance take a multitude of forms, but their basic pattern is that of a movement from 'being lost' to 'being found', from aloneness to presence. The following example is typical:

> In the mental hospital, I was locked like an animal in a cage; no one came when I called begging to be taken to the bathroom, and I finally had to succumb to the inevitable. Blessedly, I was given daily shock treatment, insulin shock, and sufficient drugs so that I lost most of the next several weeks. . . . But in the darkness I had acquired a sense of my own mission in the world. . . . And because in the darkest moment of my life, when I lay abandoned like an animal in a cage, when because of the forgetfulness induced by electric shock therapy I *could not* call out to him, He was there. In the solitary darkness of the 'pit' where men had abandoned me, He was there. When I did not know His Name, He was there; God was there.[24]

Experiencing the resurrection

Anyone who has passed through such an experience himself is uniquely well qualified to grasp the meaning of the resurrection of

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[22] Exod 3, 14.

[23] 'Experience of Self and Experience of God', in *Theological Investigations* 13, trans. David Bourke (New York, 1975), p 125.

[24] A student of Viktor Frankl, quoted by Frankl in *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology* (New York, 1975), p 11.

Jesus. Indeed, the experience of the followers of Jesus between Good Friday and Easter is in a sense the archetype of this process. In the death of the one they had believed in and looked to for Israel's redemption, the utter contradiction of all their hopes, they struggle desperately to maintain their faith in Yahweh, their sense of a meaning in life. In doing so they undergo a kind of psychological death, akin in its own way to the death of their leader and Lord. Unable, finally, to make sense of it, they surrender to darkness in an act only distinct by a razor's edge from total despair: 'Into your hands' (one may imagine them praying) 'we commend our spirit'. And unforeseeably, miraculously, the 'sense' they have given up trying to make, appears, makes itself. They are overpowered by the knowledge that the Lord is truly risen; that having passed beyond death he is alive forever, is indeed Life. Having died once, he dies now no more.

Are the small 'yeses' of literature and our own experience ultimately one with the great Yes of the Easter Alleluia? I believe that they are, for they spring from the same source, the Spirit who cries out with 'unspeakable groanings' from a world in travail,[25] bringing forth the 'Abba' and the final 'Amen' with which creation worships its Lord.[26]

[25] Cf Rom 8, 14-27.

[26] The title of this article is derived from Isai 55, 11. An early and much abbreviated version of it appeared, under its subtitle, in *On the Edge*, the *Detroit Catholic Worker* newspaper, 19 May, 1978.