

The Steiner Imperative

by: Douglas Lockhart

The break with the postulate of the sacred is the break with any stable, potentially ascertainable meaning of meaning. Where the theologically and metaphysically posited principle of a continuous individuality, of a cognitively coherent and ethically responsible ego is dissolved (Husserl's phenomenology being the heroic but doomed rear-guard action in defense of this principle), there can be neither Kant's "subjective universality", nor that belief in shared truth-seeking which, from Plato to the present, from the Phaedrus to now, had underwritten the ideals of religion, of humanism and communication. It is this very impossibility that defines modernism.

George Steiner
Real Presences, p.132-3.

Hermeneutics as Active Apprehension

The above quote from George Steiner's book *Real Presences* sets the trajectory of this essay in that it challenges modernism's many bold assumptions about self, other and world. I am of course referring to second-stage modernism, not to the initial impulses of modernism's break with religion's supernatural milieu. That was a necessary move, a vital move in that it allowed a shaking loose from debilitating superstition. But as Steiner observes, modernism's present contribution is such that we have been forced to break with the "postulate of the sacred",¹ and that break has compromised our ability to detect the "potentially ascertainable meaning of meaning."² In losing sense of the sacred we have lost the capacity to properly evaluate what lies at the

core of language and meaning, and that has resulted in meaning's own inherent meaningfulness being discarded as an illusion. We have, in other words, wagered against the possibility of there being a transcendent core to meaning, and in doing so have robbed life itself of a transcendent dimension.³ As with a life, there is an enigma in the creation of a poem, a painting or a musical composition that is being overlooked, a sense of *full experience made sensible* that has been compromised through "a radical misconception of the functions of interpretation and of hermeneutics."⁴

Let's sort this out.

The dictionary definition of hermeneutic⁵ is that it relates to the interpretation of literary texts, or to the Bible, the term "hermeneutics" more specifically to the methodology of interpretation itself. That is an important distinction. We are alerted to how we go about the business of interpretation, then, by inference, to how we may actually use the term itself within a particular text. When using the term, what do we mean by it? Is it no more than an intellectual mechanism, or does it carry deeper connotations?

Picking up on this question, George Steiner defines hermeneutics as "the enactment of answerable understanding, of active apprehension."⁶ He sees an interpreter not merely as an investigator of meanings, but as someone who *acts out* the material "so as to give it intelligible life."⁷ Hermeneutics is then more than a detection, deciphering or communicating of meanings; it is also an "executant" role in that the interpreter should function as empathic *actor* when interpreting Agamemnon or Ophelia, as *dancer* when interpreting Balanchine's choreography, or as *composer* when interpreting a Bach partita.⁸ In such instances "interpretation is understanding *in action*; it is *immediacy* of

translation" (my italics) in the sense of it being a "response which makes sense sensible."⁹ In Steiner's scheme the potentialities of meaning in a text, a painting, a piece of music or sculpture have to be staged *within* the critic, that is, invested with the critic's deepest sensibilities during the process of interpretation.¹⁰ (my italics) The analytical and critical reading of a work of art or literary text ought to be a commitment at risk, not merely an external survey subservient to pride of intellect, professional peerage, reviewer or academic expert.¹¹ Interpretative methodology should be the staging of a drama of which reading aloud or thinking aloud is a vital expression. Master interpreters should be performers answerable to a text or work of art beyond surface engagement.¹²

The major insight to be gleaned from Steiner's text is that all serious art is a critical act that casts light on what has been, and what will be.¹³ The intensities of insight and speculative ordering function as a critique in themselves, art being the only viable judge of art. Real art is highly intelligent and needn't be dominated by the intellect to make what is plain plainer.¹⁴ Real art is by nature critical of itself *and* capable of critical judgment elsewhere because it is authoritatively penetrative¹⁵ (*feelingly* evaluative?). In the hands of a skilled interpreter texts lose nothing of their original integrity; they remain in their own present.¹⁶ A poet's criticism of a poet should be from *within* the poetry itself, from within a hermeneutic capable of rereading *the living text* of the poem that "Hermes, the messenger, has brought from the undying dead."¹⁷ Art, real art, serious art, should be an overreaching of one's life.¹⁸ The interpretative medium involved should constitute a reflection, or "mirroring", of the art work itself. Proof of this overreaching can be detected in musical composition where "The truths, the necessities of

ordered feeling in the musical experience are not irrational; [yet] irreducible to reason or pragmatic reckoning."¹⁹ This fact, this anomaly, constitutes the core of Steiner's argument in that it reveals the possibility of a peculiar openness that *possession by music* makes evident to the senses. (my italics) How so? Because musical experience "mingles the incorporeal energy of reason with the body",²⁰ all attempts to verbalise music being no more than impotent metaphors.²¹

These are strong words; they will frighten some - particularly philosophers. For what does Steiner mean when he refers to the necessities of ordered feeling? Or to the overreaching of one's life? Or to the experience of music as not irrational, yet irreducible to reason or pragmatic reckoning? In what way can that be so? In what way have we wagered against the possibility of there being a transcendent core to meaning, or discarded meaning's inherent meaningfulness? In what sense can full experience be made sensible? Such statements go beyond the bounds of reasonable reasoning. Gadamarian logic (Hans-Georg Gadamer) dictates that immediacy of experience cannot allow for immediacy as an experience in itself; immediacy disallows itself on the grounds that it is consciously unenterable. Immediacy of experience is without doubt our underlying experiential signature, but that does not herald some undetected route into immediacy beyond being able to talk about it in the abstract. There is no route into immediacy apart from immediacy and that leaves immediacy beyond our ken. And our notion of being a "self" for that matter. And "meaning" as something extant beyond meanings. All such notions have been dissolved in the acid bath of modernism's fast-advancing postmodern logic, a logic heading inexorably towards a final, inextinguishable darkness. Steiner detects this coming darkness as the concept of "absolute zero" in deconstructive

semiotics, a nihilism or nullity evident to him in Martin Heidegger's *Nichtigkeit*, in John Paul Sartre's *le neant*, and in Paul Ricoeur's *the dismantled fortress of consciousness*.²² Everything meaningfully human seems to be heading for the black hole of ultimate negation, our only hope "a readiness to envisage, literally to look upon the face of, foundations beyond the empirical."²³ Which, for Steiner, raises the question of whether there is an *opus metaphysicum* in art and literature and music capable of saving us from ourselves; or if the difficult-to-refute deconstructionist game being played out by our current masters of emptiness²⁴ should be allowed to roll on unchallenged? Do we have, in other words, sufficient mind and will left to construct a wholly new hermeneutical encounter with meaning that reinstates our mislaid postulate of sacredness? Or is it all a hopeless mess beyond conceptual repair with no decent place to end up because there was never a decent starting point in the first place? That, finally, is Steiner's question, and it is a very good question indeed.²⁵

Foundations Beyond the Empirical

Let's tackle this question from an unusual angle. If I close my eyes and remain unmoving for some time a curious thing begins to happen: I move inexorably towards sleep. Lack of movement lulls the conscious mind towards unconsciousness due, on the one hand, to a reduction in physical movement, and on the other to an intensification of affective awareness. A corollary of this is a weakening and eventual eclipsing of self-awareness, unconsciousness necessarily initiating loss of self-awareness due to self being, by definition, a conscious phenomenon in relation to sensed time. When awake and aware, time is either sensed, or

not sensed, due to mental or physical engagement; but it can also be sensed in terms of an ever-escaping, abstracted immediacy, an hypothetical point sandwiched between past and future. When asleep and unconscious, time has no sensory mode at all and is for that reason nonexistent in dream modalities in spite of the illusion of physical movement within a virtual reality populated by virtual beings. Dream reality is, in every *sense*, reality turned on its ear; we are at the mercy of events and happenings generated out of world as it is known and experienced refashioned into intricate visual storylines for which there is as yet no convincing explanation. Dreams carry significance, sometimes deep and lasting significance, but no detectable meaning. Yet they are not entirely meaningless; they carry an illusion of meaningfulness which quickly dissipates through re-engagement with the world. This suggests a difference between conceptual and perceptual meaning, the latter having to do with "action" rather than "objectification". Dreams are visually significant, often morally significant in their construction due to psyche's quite extraordinary ability to simulate self, other and world into configurations of subtle worth. They are, in other words, hieroglyphs that we unconsciously translate through our emotions and only later try to consciously understand. When we remember, that is. When we momentarily re-*member* the question our dreams seem to pose.

There is no "inner" dimension in postmodernism's modernism; world "worlds" us into conscious engagement to such an extent that we disappear altogether. Which makes Steiner's looking into the self's foundation *beyond* empirical claims an anarchic suggestion, the nihilistic alternative on offer a misreading of what is actually going on in psyche. World "worlding" may be the stuff that even our dreams are made of, but this theoretical construct, in spite of it being a perfectly workable hypothesis, is being used to bludgeon all notions of "sentience" out of

existence. Mind amputated from sense of self is doing us a mischief. Luckily, psyche is cleverer than mind in that it allows for a waking up of the self to the self in the midst of this worlding, a lucidity of mind triggered by incongruity that pulls the self back into self-cognisance. We can wake up to what is going on through fully inhabiting the space in which we exist (Monica Furlong), and in doing so become *fully* subjective over and against the objectifying world. There is an escape clause in dream (we wake up), and there is a parallel escape clause in the so-called awake state. Both states are bound by the dream of being awake and aware when engaged with life's stuff, and both afford the possibility of higher order awareness blossoming in the midst of that stuff. This, I would contend, is Steiner's looking into the self's foundation *beyond* empirical claims. Heidegger constantly plays around the edges of this possibility, but in the end all he has to offer is paragraphs of poetic obfuscation. Question is, what does it feel like to wake up in this extended fashion?

The more immediate question facing us is whether our present collective state of mind is stable given that we are being progressively locked into a philosophically bleak perception of life and living set in an equally bleak cosmological context. In spite of being inundated with postmodern certainties, we are mostly in the dark about what our current "masters of emptiness" are drumming up behind our backs, and equally oblivious to how their deconstructive semiotic chatter is edging us ever closer to the "inextinguishable darkness" they find so fascinating. And "fascinating" is the correct term to use, for it perfectly sums up the mesmerising power exercised by those presently charming us towards the conclusion that we, and they, exist without meaning in a meaningless universe. How fascinating, how charmingly delightful, how mysteriously irresistible and alluring to be let in on such a secret. We are, I suspect,

supposed to feel privileged to be alive in such a moment, grateful for such honesty, uplifted by the fact that we have become so intelligent, so insightful, so existentially courageous that the meaninglessness of meaning and the meaninglessness of our existence can be taken on the chin without flinching. That seems to be the attitude. It is as if the world is expected to burst into rapturous applause at the thought of its descent into nullity. Well, not quite. The declarations of whole-scale meaninglessness coming our way are generally couched in terms not recognisable as such; there's a game of words afoot, and it is getting ever more subtle.

George Steiner's evaluation of what is going on around us, and in us, will annoy and bemuse the Stephen Pinker's of this world as surely as the philosopher Thomas Nagel's questioning of the Darwinian premise caused Pinker to mouth an epithet in Nagel's direction. And both Steiner and Nagel seem to be dealing with the same question, the question of meaning and its status. Steiner puts it thus: "I want to ask whether a hermeneutic and reflex of valuation - the encounter with meaning in the verbal sign, in the painting, in the musical composition, and the assessment of the quality of such meaning in respect of form - can be made intelligible, can be made answerable to the existential facts, if they do not imply, if they do not contain, a postulate of transcendence."²⁶ And he adds tellingly "[S]uch a postulate is often hidden, it is often left undeclared or exploited metaphorically and without consequence."²⁷ The nihilistic alternative of inextinguishable darkness disguised as a positivist model of understanding is, for Steiner, untenable in the light of meaning's existence *as* meaning, which is of course our old friend "intelligibility" come back to taunt (haunt?) us. (see my essay "The Nagel-Pinker Divide") Meanings (plural) reflect the world's observable, categorisable intelligibility; meaning (singular) reflects the intelligibility of

that to which such meanings are intelligible. This suggests, to me at least, that our sentience is not just a matter of meanings somehow relating to other meanings in terms of brain and *language languaging us towards comprehension*, but because "us" signifies a deal more than it is presently being given credit. Language in itself, to itself, is nonsense, as I think Wittgenstein once stated. Language has to pass through the core self, through the matrix of Being before anything can be made of it.

And so we return to my contradictory proposition (see my essay "Time, Timelessness & the Graspable Self") concerning *timelessness as a state within time*, and to the nature of the self as an identical phenomenon in respect of it being Gadamer's *ungraspable* immediacy. The core self (the deep "us") is not conscious in any way that makes *graspable* sense, but it is aware, and its awareness is such that it can, as intuited by William James, broach ideas or problems in the conscious aspect of psyche from all conceivable angles. This is the essence of creative conscious scanning; we swap over, when and if we can, to an entirely different system of comprehension; a system operative at even the most basic levels of mental interaction as both Frege and Dudman were well aware. This is our core self in that we are, in our ungraspable immediacy as experience, timeless beings functioning both in and out of time simultaneously. To *see* this and understand its implications for mind is to touch and be touched by the timeless aspect of our own natures; it is to grasp the ungraspable in terms of the self being beyond our grasping for the same reason that "now" is beyond our grasping. Which takes us straight back into Steiner's intuited need for a "foundation [of the self] beyond the empirical",²⁸ an encounter with the meaning of meaning that reinstates the sacred as a postulate. Such an encounter is not an encounter with ontological meaning as category, it is an encounter with ourselves as beings capable of experientially intercepting

our own existence within a dimension of meaning that is, in itself, multi-dimensional.

The Sacred Encounter (1)

Reinstating the sacred as a postulate is a necessary intellectual step, being encountered by the sacred an experience that resets our existential trajectory. This is to visit the Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann's idea of an "archetypal encounter" which, for Neumann, "fills the psychological inwardness of the *anthropos* as creative centre". This tells us that as creatures of form we are expressions of the formless void (that from out of which "matter" and everything that *matters*, emerged), our encounter with the sacred being, by definition, an encounter with Being in terms of Steiner's "readiness to envisage, literally look upon the face of, foundations beyond the empirical."²⁹ It's either that or accept the nihilistic alternative proffered by science and philosophy's positivist model of understanding. Or do the unimaginable and attempt to *think our way out of the impasse*. Not possible, we are told. The emptiness at the heart of everything can no longer be interpreted in religious, or quasi-religious, terms. We have no option but to exchanged it for Steiner's rightly postulated "midnight of absence"³⁰ and swap the self's so-called "sacred encounter" for the concept of an inextinguishable darkness at the self's existential core.³¹

The problem with this approach is that nihilism's grand "nothingness" at the heart of everything is in fact a misreading of the available evidence. What we're looking at is a literalism born out of an apparently irrefutable logic constructed in relation to science's predetermined premise: a premise based on the necessity to keep

religious claims of a greater reality at arm's length. A God-empty nothingness at the heart of reality is now accepted on a wide front as the only tenable premise to work from: allow religion even minimal leverage and we'll regret it. Even tentative suggestions from an atheist such as Thomas Nagel have to be shunned. Give such views air and every crackpot in Christendom will end up believing they have the right to be heard. There is of course an undeniable element of truth in such claims, but the phobia against anything even vaguely conceived as religious is now being used as an excuse, rather than as a reason, to ignore quantitative and qualitative evidence contrary to this deeply-ingrained fear.

The principle thing being ignored is the self's archetypal encounter with itself as *formless* void, an encounter with sacred connotations that reintroduces the self to the self as *presence*. Not *a* presence; *as* presence. This raises the question of what this other self is if it is not the self generally engaged in thinking and doing, for when it erupts in the midst of thinking and doing there is an automatic breaking down of the self's capacity to think and do. Is this breaking down in thinking and doing merely self-consciousness disrupting the self's generally smooth system of operation, or is it something quite different? Could it be that attention-splitting in such moments heralds not a breakdown in conscious awareness, but rather the inauguration of a whole other form of awareness related to the core self? It may not feel like that, but only because the experience of self-presence sensed is so all-consuming it blots out our more limited conscious interactions with self, other or world. If this is the case, then we sometimes function *as* the core self without realising it, that is, as a curiously silent and still partner to ourselves, a problematical partner in that the *presence* of the core self, as it intensifies, causes the conscious mind to falter in its operations.

What we perceive as the conscious mind giving way to a derailing subjectivity may in fact constitute the route into a whole other form of consciousness of which we are aware, yet simultaneously unaware.

This is perhaps what the Zen philosopher Tetsuaki Kotoh describes as a meditative stillness and silence, and it may also have had something to do with the philosopher Edmund Husserl's claim that he could, at a glance, sidestep his ego. Husserl's phenomenology, in relation to the break with the postulate of the sacred, is described by Steiner as an "heroic but doomed rearguard action in defense of the theologically and metaphysically posited principle of a continuous individuality, of a cognitively and ethically responsible ego."³² Steiner equates such moments with Husserl's phenomenological method, and that perhaps strengthens my contention that Heidegger did not properly understand Husserl's principle phenomenological insight. (see my essays "The Heidegger Paradox" and "The Heidegger-Sartre Black Hole")

The Sacred Encounter (2)

At the heart of what a sacred encounter is in itself lies the question of what we mean by *presence*, particularly in relation to art and aesthetics. What is this "presence"? For Steiner, it is the presence of God, that without which "certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable."³³ There is, for Steiner, "some fundamental encounter with transcendence in the creation of art",³⁴ an encounter become "poetry" for those unable to find redemption in religious ideas and beliefs. Hence Hegel's "emptiness in the desert of reason", he tells us, an emptiness preferable to "the outright venom of dead creeds" in that it is an honest, lucid forgetting of the God on which those creeds are

founded. But not altogether forgotten, for the signature of this God's presence is still with us in this forgetting; we are in receipt of a "negative theism", an absence of the presence of God echoing with the "vibrance of departure".³⁵ And so we tend to explore that departure, that Heideggerian "echo", and in exploring it we inadvertently deepen it through the formulas of post-structuralism and deconstruction. Looming over us is "a meaninglessness [the dimensions of which are] untouched by human speech",³⁶ a skeptical rationality or distancing within which we rest in the presence of "immanence and verification"³⁷ alone. It is a distancing "charged with the pressures of a nearness out of reach"³⁸ that entrances us towards a final modernity, a postmodernity articulated in Paul Celan's *Psalms to No-one*³⁹ where language drains itself towards nullity.

I've taken the liberty of paraphrasing, of condensing, this latter section of Steiner's extraordinary text, but not, I hope, to the point of distortion. In a language of impertinent penetration he presents his vision and confronts and affronts us with a verbal, intellectual dexterity that even his detractors must recognise as inspired. Which is to say that his text carries "presence" in its own right, a presence one cannot ignore whatever one's stance in these matters. And one should not mistake Steiner's God for the jealous God of the creeds, the God of theology, the God of historical bluster and mistake. That is *not* Steiner's God; that is the travesty of the sacred we have all mostly flown from, or are in the process of fleeing from. I do not know what Steiner means by God, and I suspect he doesn't either. I suspect the God of which he speaks is more akin to Eckhart's "God beyond God", the God Eckhart pleaded with to relieve him of the God we were all brought up with. So I am not put off by Steiner's use of the term "God"; I am in fact delighted to find it there.

It shows unusual courage in the face of modernism's onslaught, and it helps focus the mind on that aspect of the sacred that is beyond our capacity to explain in sociological terms.

Truth is, we do not know what the "sacred" portends for the same reason that we do not know what God, in any sense, might mean; by its very nature the sacred foreshadows - outside of social consensus - wonderful and dreadful portents of experience. The sacred, let it be known, can also be terrifying and demanding in a fashion that can leave us shaken to the core. So too the creation of art at its most intense. Art is sacred in its own right as every artist knows from experience. Art is the *thing in itself* touching the mind into a state of reverence, not the mind cleverly conjuring something into aesthetic visibility. Aesthetic visibility is more than refined judgment or the study of various theories to do with art; it is the intelligible nature of reality burgeoning for recognition as an experience, not some sophisticated state of mind become evident through stylistics. It can be that, but it need not be that alone just as God need not be God in the old, tired, misused and historically obscene sense. Art, real art, serious art, is now being systematically overpowered by the ever-deepening mediocrity of the modern imagination. We are dumbing it down into dumbness, blinding it with our own blindness, reducing it to the level of our own reduced and nullified natures. There is all but nothing left of true imagining because we are ourselves all but reduced to a dispirited nothingness. We have become an entertainment to ourselves, a soap-opera endlessly permutated. We have painted reality and ourselves into a whole new deadly version of Plato's cave where, through lack of will or wit, escape is no longer feasible. All that stretches before us now is the sheen of technological mastery, a mastery of self, other and world couched in the frozen language of philosophy become technology, or metatwaddle.

Not knowing what "God" might mean is an important notion when linked to Steiner's notion of the creative act being an encounter with transcendence.⁴⁰ He interprets this encounter as the presence of God, I interpret it as a presencing of the core self to the conscious self. It's not that I discount Steiner's God; it's just that I prefer to place that encounter *within* rather than *without*, for that is the tendency when the word "God" is mentioned. An encounter with the sacred is an experience far in excess of, and utterly different from, normal thinking, a process of deep and often confronting self-evaluation through which flotillas of meanings cross the horizon of consciousness that should not be intercepted too soon. In this sense creativity is a form of prayer, an opening up of the self to what exists in a fashion far removed from conscious scrutiny, a waiting without intent in a space of fierce intent in the hope of witnessing truth. Art, real art, serious art, is truthfulness before it is anything else; it stops us from telling lies to ourselves, and to others. In this sense "truth" is not an idea, or a system of ideas; it is the hidden nature of meaning disclosed. The encounter with art is, first and foremostly, an encounter with meaning, not with meanings, and also, perhaps, an encounter with Steiner's God through art as a transcendent act. Hence perhaps the Nazarene's claim that he was the Way, the Truth, and the Life; it was probably his witty way of telling us that we, all of us, every last one of us, are similarly gifted.

The Sacred Encounter (3)

All of which confronts us with the "sacred encounter" as found in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1884) and Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), two philosophically oriented individuals whose evaluation of the sacred encounter have worked their magic on numerous scholars and

churchmen ever since. (see my essay "The Schleiermacher-Manichaeian Synthesis") Schleiermacher's influence on Otto is on record, Otto's disagreement with Schleiermacher on cardinal points of his thinking a matter of current debate. When both men's contributions are sifted, however, what surfaces are two very similar approaches couched in the language of their time, conceptions of the "sacred" that in both instances challenged Christianity's more stereotypical notions of the Divine.

In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto explores what he terms the non-rational (*not* "irrational") element in religious experience, and in *On Religion*, Schleiermacher speaks of religious experience as a "sense or taste for the infinite." In alignment with Schleiermacher, Otto grounds real religion not on a grocery list of beliefs, but on an experience of the "numinous", a term he derived from *numen*, the Latin word designating deity. An experience of the numinous was, for Otto, "ineffable" and at the heart of all religions, but experienced only by particularly sensitive individuals. In contrast to this, Schleiermacher grounded religion in "immediate" self-consciousness, his basic premise being based, like Otto's, on "feeling", not on rational understanding. And that in spite in spite of being accused by Otto of too naturalistic an analyses of religion: an analyses that threatened Christianity's claims to truth. In essence, that was the only real difference between the two men: Schleiermacher's experientially-based notion of "universal totality" caused him to jettison just about everything to do with Christianity, whereas Otto retained elements of Christianity's central focus, but with a twist: Christ was no longer the supreme *object* of spiritual attention, he was the supreme spiritually insightful *subject* and holy in himself. For Schleiermacher, the capacity for spiritual insight was active in everyone; for Otto this capacity was found only in certain gifted human beings.⁴¹ One major point of agreement should be noted, however: both men resisted the idea of

religion being reduced to morality: they perceived religious experience at depth as unconnected to moral judgments.

In her paper 'Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto', Jacqueline Marina, to whom I am indebted, tracks the thinking of these two revolutionary thinkers right into the heart of the questions we've been dealing with. Schleiermacher, she notes, "insists that religious feeling is grounded in an original unity of consciousness from which both theoretical and practical reason proceed."⁴² This makes the sacred (in German the term *heilig* can be translated as either "sacred" or "holy") a category of religious interpretation unto itself, hence the secular world's inability to make sense of religious experience: it is ineffable and only graspable through "an original unity of consciousness that precedes the subject-object dichotomy."⁴³ That is an interesting choice of words; it reminds me of Steiner's contention that only art or artist can really comprehend art or artist. Marina links it to a statement of Schleiermacher's where, on having described how perceptions arise, he says: "It is this earlier moment I mean, which you always experience yet never experience. The phenomenon of your life is just the result of its constant departure and return. It is scarcely in time at all, so swiftly it passes; it can scarcely be described, so little does it properly exist."⁴⁴ Experienced yet never experienced? Would I be incorrect in thinking that it was from Schleiermacher that Gadamer got his idea of non-temporality in relation to the immediacy of experience?

But let's double back, for Schleiermacher is not saying that the sacred, or the infinite, cannot be experienced; he is saying that ordinary consciousness cannot experience it. Ordinary consciousness, governed as it is by rational concepts (and by Heidegger's word-embedded perceptions), has to enter a state of perceptual immediacy capable of

disconnecting ordinary mind from its perpetually engaged conceptual base. Self and world have to unite beyond any suggestion of duality through an experiential merging of the one with the other. How this is to be accomplished is however not on record.

Otto is more forthcoming. For him, this non-rational, non-temporal apprehension of the sacred takes place in the "ground of the soul", which is another way of saying in the deepest recesses of psyche. It belongs to the self's foundational capacity for cognitive apprehension.⁴⁵ There is, according to Otto, a hidden substantive source in the mind independent of sense-experience that surpasses theoretical and practical reason, a source from which both theoretical and practical reason nevertheless arise - shades of Sartre's "Transparency Theory". (see my essay "The Heidegger-Sartre Black Hole") For Otto and Schleiermacher this source is "feeling", but should not be equated with the "emotions" evoked by religious belief. In this vein Schleiermacher made "feeling" the basis of doctrine, not doctrine the basis of feeling, and in doing so initiated what Marina terms a "Copernican revolution in theology"⁴⁶ where feeling (not feelings) displaced both Scripture and dogma as *methodology*. There is, in other words, a marked difference between "feeling" and "feelings", and that difference lies in the fact that feeling (singular) is *evaluative* in nature, whereas feelings (plural) are generally *reactive* in nature. In this sense, literally in this *sense*, feeling is a delicate methodological apprehension of something beyond rational explanation, whereas reactive emotion is an affective identification with emotionally-based aspects of, say, the religious canon or some academic equivalent.

At this point we have to delve into a murky and difficult-to-disentangle area of religious thinking, namely, that of differentiating between dogma and revelation. Dogma cannot in itself exist without revelation, but it can and almost inevitably does distort revelation in that

revelation, unlike dogma, operates at the deepest and most immediate levels of the self.⁴⁷ "Revelation" is of course an awkward concept to handle; it smacks of religious mania. But it need not be so. "Revelation" is just another way of talking about "ineffable" experience. That is *all* it is. It is not some crazy religious experience carrying intimations of unknown historical happenings gained directly from God. Revelation is not about *us* or *history* at all; it is about what we have come to describe as God experienced in finite human terms. In this sense neither is it God, just an experience of something later called God for want of a better term. Revelation, in essence, is comprehension as an experience in its own right; it is the ordinary self and its proclivities dropping away like the retro-rockets on a space ship bound for *deep space*. And that is a good analogy: deep space is what we're dealing with here, not some airy atmospheric jaunt of the mind. Revelation is the ship itself travelling unimaginably fast in the stillness and silence of the universe, a stillness/silence that by its very nature transforms the consciousness of the traveller as psychonaut.

So is it any surprise that Schleiermacher ended up not believing in religion at all, and that out of his experience of "universal infinity" he developed, as Marina records, a three-tier model of the human mind where, over and above crude animal consciousness and sensible, self-and-world distinguishing self-consciousness, he perceived there to be a higher form of consciousness? That was quite a jump for a Christian pastor, and it was based on a development in his thinking where this higher consciousness was only possible because self-and-world already existed in conscious terms. Why so? Because without a preceding capacity for self-consciousness the sacred encounter would be experientially inconceivable to the self when in its altered state.⁴⁸ Self-awareness is operative, but its self-and-world dividing aspect has been

transformed into a unitary form of seeing described by Schleiermacher as "the consummating point of self-consciousness."⁴⁹ This is to say that a unitary state of consciousness *is the whole point of our existing*, a suggestion that raises the question of how he could possibly know such a thing without having experienced it? This is not, as Gadamer and others have it, a vertiginous, intellectual grasping of all history and the universe beyond-imagining immensity; it is a non-rational, non-temporal experiential revelation of the undivided nature of self, other and world in relation to *cosmos*. But we are again left with no actual explanation as to how this unitary state of consciousness is to be accomplished.

Jacqueline Marina then makes a series of observations that help open up this deeply complex area for us, for she draws our attention to the key factor of "time" in Schleiermacher's philosophy where time as a series of connected moments is mistakenly concluded (by others) to be "that [which] determines states of the self [in relation to] intra-worldly causes." This suggests that each and every state of the self is determined by "prior states of the self and its interaction with the world in accordance with natural laws."⁵⁰ And "history", of course, which promotes "identification of the self with the body" and of our being "ultimately [and] completely determined by outside forces."⁵¹ Contrary to this, Otto's understanding of natural law is embedded in the mystery of our own existence, a mystery that can on occasions make us quiver in every nerve. If and when that happens, we are "struck dumb" by experiencing the numinous as "wholly other", or "alien", something altogether different from anything that we have ever known. This "other" cannot be taught, but it can, according to Otto, be *evoked and awakened* in the mind.

Marina notes that for Schleiermacher, as for Wittgenstein, how one perceives the world affects what is perceived, and that for Schleiermacher "there are *ways of looking at the world* that are the result of grace, others that are the result of sin."⁵² But is this enough to evoke either the numinous or cosmos in numinous terms? Have we slipped back into the territory of religious attitudes and identifications, or is something else going on? Both men have after all differentiated very carefully between "feeling" and "emotion", indeed, used the term "feeling" rather than that of "emotion" to symbolise an exact, and exacting, methodology linked to immediacy of perception. Not only do these men know what they're talking about, they also know the route back into the experience they're attempting to describe. There is just one problem, the clues they've left for us are obscure and couched in the language and sensibilities of their time further clouded by a well-intentioned academic overlay of explanations and categories. Another route into the transcendent thinking of Otto and Schleiermacher is needed, and that requires not only a resetting of their language and intentions in modern parlance, it also requires a Steiner-type hermeneutic capable of evoking the spirit of their text.

References and Notes:

- 1) Steiner, George, *Real Presences*, Faber and Faber, London 1989, p 132. Michael Polanyi observes in *Meaning*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 7, that religious authority was the first to be attacked by philosophers of the eighteenth century, a more extreme position being taken against the Catholic church on the continent than in England. Second-stage "modernism" is of course "postmodernism" described for what it actually is, not some unnamed realm beyond modernism. In this sense postmodernism is a term that hides, or conceals, what modernism has inadvertently turned into as its advocates pushed for "absolute" categories of thought and belief.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid, pp. 3-4.
- 4) Ibid, p. 7.
- 5) *Penguin English Dictionary* (2002) p. 412.
- 6) Steiner, George, *Real Presences*, (as above) p. 7.
- 7) Ibid.

- 8) Ibid, p. 8.
- 9) Ibid.
- 10) Ibid.
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Ibid, p. 9.
- 14) Ibid, p. 12.
- 15) Ibid.
- 16) Ibid, p. 13.
- 17) Ibid, p. 14.
- 18) Ibid, p. 17.
- 19) Ibid, p. 19.
- 20) Ibid.
- 21) Ibid.
- 22) Ibid, p. 133.
- 23) Ibid, p. 133-4.
- 24) Ibid, p. 133.
- 25) Ibid, p. 134.
- 26) Ibid.
- 27) Ibid.
- 28) Ibid. See also *The Poetics of Reverie* by Gaston Bachelard (Beacon Press, Boston, 1969) where he speaks of "a reverie of solitude which increases the solitude of the dreamer", and refers to time being suspended and "engulfed in the double depth of the dreamer and the world." (p.173) This is of course not directly related to what Gadamer means by the "ungraspable immediacy" of our own natures, but it does poetically describe the timelessness of our nature, and in its own way posits a way into the deeper aspects of *psyche* beyond the gropings of intellect.
- 29) Ibid, p. 144-4.
- 30) Ibid, p. 133.
- 31) Ibid.
- 32) Ibid, p. 132.
- 33) Ibid, p. 229. In direct contrast to Steiner's linking of aesthetics to transcendent experience (as did D.H. Lawrence, Yeats, Homer and Sophocles) Pepita Haezrahi argues in *The Contemplative State*, George Allen & Unwin London 1954, that aesthetic experience is composed of hard facts alone. The senses and the mind certainly co-operate, but the outstanding feature of aesthetic experience is fundamentally non-emotional, which is to say that the experiencer retains the role of contemplative spectator to the last. But who is this disembodied "experiencer/spectator"? And what does "non-emotional" mean in this context? Does aesthetic experience by necessity lack all human feeling, or is that to mistake what Dr. Haezrahi means by non-emotional? For Steiner all good art and literature start in immanence, but it does not stop there. "[I]t is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity." (*Real Presences*, (see above) p. 227) It all depends on your starting point, your premise and your attitude as to how you will end up interpreting artistry, or lack of artistry.
- 34) Ibid, p. 228.
- 35) Ibid, p. 229.
- 36) Ibid.
- 37) Ibid.
- 38) Ibid, p. 230.
- 39) Ibid.
- 40) Ibid, p. 228.

- 41) Marina, Jacqueline, 'Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto', *The Oxford Book Of Religion and Emotion*, 2008, p. 1.
- 42) Ibid.
- 43) Ibid, p. 2.
- 44) Otto, Rudolf, *Speeches*, p. 43.
- 45) Marina, Jacqueline, 'Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto', (as above) p. 4.
- 46) Ibid, p. 5.
- 47) Ibid, p. 6.
- 48) Ibid, p. 7.
- 49) Ibid.
- 50) Ibid, p. 8.
- 51) Ibid.
- 52) Ibid, p. 11.