

THE SHOCK OF THE REAL

George Santayana once said that the experience of shock establishes realism.¹ That is a simple and profound observation. What it means is this: When you are shocked—when, say, you drop a bowling ball on your foot—it is not up to you whether to believe that the bowling ball and the foot are real. In the experience of shock, you are *called* into the reality of the world by your radical vulnerability to it. Like it or not, unless you are comatose or psychotic, at such moments you experience, accede to, and howl at the real. At such moments, and in virtue of such moments, you know the reality of the real, and know yourself to be real within it. Pleasure is forgetful; it lulls one toward sleep and toward self-congratulation. One can “forget oneself” in pleasure and even forget the source of the pleasure; one can enjoy the immersion and forget its origin. But pain and surprise bring with them a preternatural alertness, and alertness is an openness to what is.

Reality is impertinent, indefatigable, and inescapable. But reality is a source of pain, pain that sometimes cannot be tolerated. The history of Western thought and culture could be written as the history of attempts to deny, escape from, negate, control, or destroy reality and, in fitful oscillation, to affirm, accept, embrace, or love it. The first is cowardice, though perhaps absolutely necessary cowardice. It encompasses the profound, paltry, and pathological history of idealism, and inhabits like a parasite the philosophies of Plato and Hegel, Buddha and Shankara, Augustine and Descartes. As do many forms of cowardice, it issues in

prodigies of pride and arrogance—for example, the claim that human beings construct the world, as formulated by Kant. Space and time are merely the forms of human perception: That assertion is a monstrosity of hubris.

On the other hand, the affirmation of the real is unutterably difficult. Allowing what is real to be is much harder for us than avoidance, denial, destruction, re-creation. For each of us, there are events, people, institutions we would like to reform or revise or expunge. But there is hope in affirmation, because reality, after all, is real. One may be able to evade this or that fact for a time; one may be able to alter this or that circumstance. But to take up the annihilation or revision of reality as a whole, to take up the annihilation or revision of reality as one's fundamental posture within the real, is pitiable and hopeless. It is pitiable because it is a display of weakness; it is the expression of the fact that one has been crushed by the real, brought to one's knees. And it is hopeless because evasion, finally, is impossible; each of us is situated wholly within the real; each of us is, in fact, the real under one of its permutations, at one of its locations. Evasion of the real would entail, among other absurdities, evasion of ourselves. Every attempt to evade reality that does not issue in self-annihilation increases the pain and anger one feels at one's total immersion in what one finds intolerable.

I.

Descartes notoriously got modern philosophy going by doubting the existence of the external world. He wanted it proved that he was not dreaming, that an evil demon was not deceiving him, and so forth. Like Descartes, Santayana descends into scepticism, and he descends even more deeply than did Descartes: into the abyss of absolute ignorance about concepts, the world, and himself. For both thinkers, there is then a turning back into knowledge. The ascent begins for Descartes with the identification of a sin-

gle certainty: Whether or not he is dreaming, Descartes knows that he himself exists. He then proceeds to demonstrate the existence of God, from which he demonstrates, finally, the existence of the world he perceives.

Descartes, then, mounts a demonstration of the falsity of scepticism about the external world. Santayana mounts no such demonstration—or rather, he mounts a demonstration in the sense of a gesture, a pointing, rather than in the sense of an argument. For Santayana, *shock* is the destruction of scepticism about oneself and the world. If you need to be convinced of the reality of the things you experience, don't read an argument; drop a bowling ball on your foot. Santayana writes:

In brute experience, or shock, I have not only a clear indication, for my ulterior reflection, that I exist, but a most imperious summons at that very moment to *believe* in my existence. . . . Experience, even conceived most critically as a series of shocks overtaking one another and retained in memory, involves a world of independent existences deployed in an existing medium. Belief in experience is belief in nature. (*Scepticism and Animal Faith*, 142, 143)

The experiences, as Santayana puts it, of “utter blankness, intolerable strain, shrieking despair,” (140) call us to and out of ourselves as and into what is real. They establish the existence of nature for us in the most compelling way such a thing could be established for beings such as we: animals rather than pure minds. The world denier almost always starts on himself, and what he says of himself is, first of all, that he is no animal or is an anomalous animal, that he is spirit, mind, and so forth; that he resides properly in heaven, or surveys evolution from the heights, as its crowning achievement.

Thus does world negation comport perfectly well with the “scientific” consciousness, as it does in other ways as

well. Consciousness, it may be said, distinguishes us from or even in the order of nature. Our reason distinguishes us from the apes. The difficulty of believing such things as one actually goes through the day eating, shitting, sleeping, and fucking is a tribute to the power of the need for evasion that informs such views. Cowardice in the face of reality runs so deep that it leads one to ignore the most obvious facts about oneself.

I have heard it said that science “establishes,” for example, that physical objects such as a table are not solid but consist mostly of empty space. Science tells us “the way things really are,” and “the way things really are” is more or less completely distinct from the way things appear. This is a permutation of the old “spiritual” impulse to escape the real (this table, for instance) by recourse to the Real. The Real used to be thought of as the realm of Forms, Brahman, the Absolute, the Mind of God, and so forth. Now it is conceived as the “scientific image” behind the “manifest image.” In either case, the experienced world is left behind. Thus, the things we experience every day are reduced to the status of “images,” “pictures,” as they are, also, for idealism and, for that matter, classical empiricism, logical positivism, and so on.

Now, it is worth asking why people *need* to reduce things to images. And there is an obvious answer: Images are *safe*. In my fantasy, in the world of images, I can commit horrific crimes and remain innocent. I can plunge off cliffs and awaken before I hit bottom. No one has ever been blown to bits by a picture of an explosion. So if the world as I experience it were an image, I would be perfectly safe. And the degree to which I *need* to treat the world as an image is the degree to which I feel *endangered* by the world and the degree to which I find all danger intolerable. But to treat the world I live in as a picture: that means there must be something of which it is a picture, a realm of the Really Real underlying the appearances. Nevertheless, this realm of the Really Real must be kept at arm’s length, fended

off, lest it, too, endanger us—thus Kant's "thing in itself" which underlies appearances but about which we can know absolutely nothing. The system is brilliant. But it reeks of fear and pain. That no one has ever been attacked by a quark is a good reason to use quarks in a fundamental ontology. But if I pick up this chair and slam it over your head, I wonder whether you can maintain your belief that it's not solid.

Corresponding to the notion that the world is a bunch of images or pictures is the notion that the human agent is a sort of moviegoer, beholding the world from the safety of her seat, or perhaps someone leafing through photo albums, embarrassed or pleased by the memories evoked by the photographs but beholding the represented experiences in safety. Representation, as it is conceptualized in the Western tradition, places the represented object at a distance, and this fact has been used, for example, to construct entire aesthetic systems (for example, Kant's, in which my pleasure before works of art is "disinterested," i.e., safe). To survey the world in representation is to feel an influx of security and power, as when one comprehends the world in an atlas. If we could conceptualize the world in its totality, *understand* it all, remove every suspicion of excess, shock, boundlessness, obscurity, we would have made ourselves safe. We can do this imaginatively by constructing fictions, or we can try to do it in fact by giving a "theory of everything" or by technologically controlling the environment. Science as a whole is an attempt to make us safe by comprehension.

It is an embarrassment for this view that the person enjoying the picture show can be punctured or crushed by her own pictures. But the view is maintained as a compensation for that vulnerability. The compensation is purely imaginary, but is nevertheless a compensation for all that. We read romance fiction, say, to "escape" for a bit, but we can also escape all day, every day, by turning our lives into romance fiction and our world into a fictional world where

nothing bad ever happens and where, since bad things happen all the time, they happen only to fictional characters. Science, in that sense, can be used as romance fiction, just as can philosophy and religion and art.

“Science” could not possibly inform us that this table is not solid; we all know that the table is solid. “Science,” in telling us that the table consists mostly of empty space, may be speaking the truth. But all this shows is that *what we mean by ‘solidity’* has to be explained, finally, in a (somewhat, temporarily) surprising way. That is, solid objects consist mostly of empty space. This is an elucidation of what the world is like, as is, for example, the discovery that water is H₂O. That does not show water is not really wet, transparent, and so forth, just as showing that tables consist mostly of empty space does not show that they are not solid. Again: Nothing could possibly show this table not to be solid; we all know it to be solid. When science is used to elucidate the world as it appears, it is innocent enough. When it is used systematically to distinguish appearances from reality, it is a system of metaphysics and, in that sense, as false and as world-hating as any other system of metaphysics. And notice that science, just like aesthetics, “distances,” that we are deimplicated in what we “study.” Nietzsche puts it like this:

No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense that is presupposed by the faith in science *thus affirm another world* than the world of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this “other world”—look, must they not by the same token negate its counterpart, this world, *our world?*—But you will have gathered what I am driving at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests.²

The particular version of world-hatred typical of our century retreats into language: All experience, it says, is

linguistically mediated or linguistically articulated. There are no “uninterpreted” facts, and interpretation is a linguistic activity, a sort of literary criticism (this is roughly the view, for example, of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Nelson Goodman, and Stanley Fish). The notion of narrative or, more widely, of text is central to recent philosophy. Figures such as Derrida, Rorty, and Richard Bernstein centralize text and story as “that in which we live and move.”³ (Here, Rorty is stating what he takes to be Derrida’s view.) In particular, much recent work on race and gender describes narrative as the fundamental mode of social and personal constructions of self and world (Carolyn Heilbrun: “We are stories.”) The hegemony of language in recent philosophy is in some ways subversive to the Western philosophical tradition. But in other ways it participates in and intensifies the most problematic aspects of that tradition. For example, in some of its overweening moments it elides the physical; it deemphasizes or textualizes the body.

It also makes scholarship of a certain sort a model for all human experience, and one of the things that drives the view is the same yearning for safety that drives idealism; I retreat from thing to interpretation in an attempt to gain control over things or to operate in a realm where I (or we) have some comfort (and, in the case of actual literary critics, some technique) and in which the poignancy and arbitrariness of things is attenuated.

The centralization of text and narrative challenges certain aspects of the political implications of Western metaphysics. When we perform a pseudoreduction of human experience or “the human world” to text, we may appear to be entangled precisely in a metaphysical system, a sort of parody of idealism. But notice that narratives are plural, equivocal, creative. “Textualism” can resist the “totalizing” or “master” narrative of Western metaphysics and rest content simply with the indefinite multiplication of texts. In this sense, textualism is more open, corrigible, and egalitarian than the metaphysical tradition. But it is also a view

that reflects the centrality of texts to certain lives: the lives of the scholars who put forward the centrality of texts. It is not a view that would attract assembly-line workers, for instance. It is a projection of lives that *are* lived largely in and through texts onto human experience in general.

And let me issue a brief whine: The twentieth century in Western philosophy has been the era of language; we're hypnotized by language, trapped in language, obsessed by language, whether we're doing analytic theory of reference or ordinary language philosophy or deconstruction. Russell, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida—all of them participate in and intensify this obsession. The obsession had its uses, had its moments of exhilaration; it helped some. At this point, though, it's boring. If the next century is also a century obsessed by language, then I am going to catch up on some much-needed sleep. Let's see whether we cannot write about something other than writing, for a change. Reading this century's philosophy is like reading a tortured novel about a tortured novelist writing a tortured novel about a tortured novelist; it's self-indulgent, and it bloats the author's little sphere of activity into a world.

Nevertheless, and as advocates of the view are concerned to emphasize, people *can* be endangered by narratives and in narratives. One point of "textualism" is that texts have real effects; for example, people are *oppressed* by master narratives (or by those who formulate and impose them) associated with power. Narratives of race and gender seek to destroy the ability of African-Americans and women to tell their own stories or to possess their own language. Notice, however, that, if we were to make narrative central to power relations, we would be, to some extent, releasing power from its concrete physical manifestations. A policeman beating a suspect is endangering the suspect with his hands, not with his story. So, though narrative may have physical inscriptions and physical effects, the privileging of narrative performs an abstraction from material conditions.

At a minimum, narrative organizes or reconstructs human experience: There cannot be a narrative of everything, though what is omitted from a given narrative can, perhaps, in principle be taken up into *some* narrative. But narrative implies coherence. Though there can be diffuse and ambiguous narratives, there cannot be wholly random narratives; a collection of sentences does not count as a narrative unless it moves in a certain direction, displays a certain consistency and continuity. We need such things. The problem arises when we use the narrative to efface or expunge the random and the incoherent, which, in fact, explode moment by moment into our lives. To locate narrative as the central mode of human experience is to seek evasion of these intolerable aspects of the real. A letting-go into the incoherence that surrounds us would be a letting-go of narrative. That moment is as necessary as the construction of the narrative itself.

Considered as the stuff of narrative, my life sucks. I'm pretty good at constructing narratives, and perhaps I would like to convert my life into a story. But as a story, my life is boring and incoherent, an accumulation of details that, in five minutes, would beggar Proust. My life is long, excruciatingly long, and, finally, quite senseless. Every attempt I make to narrativize my life is radically impoverished in the face of the evident facts. If there is one thing that novels teach me, it is that my life is no novel and cannot even be described. If I am trying to construct a narrative of my life, I am trying to be something and somewhere other than I am. This confusion of the world with the description of the world, or rather, this attempt to replace the world with a description, lies at the heart of scientism as a metaphysics. Scientism, in this sense, seeks to replace what is elucidated with its elucidation, seeks a retreat to the safe realm of "knowledge," where knowledge is conceived linguistically. To describe something accurately is a beautiful and necessary activity. But to reduce things to descriptions is just a stupid mistake. And though "textualism" is multivo-

cal where scientism is univocal, both detach us from the world behind a screen of descriptions.

We need meaning. But we (or, at any rate, I) need also to let go of meaning. It is possible to suffer from a lack of meaning but possible also to suffer from its surfeit. I will return to this theme at length, but, for now, let me just note that the drive for meaning can grow pathological, that meaning forecloses experience in certain ways. Narrative attenuates shock.

If I take the experience of shock seriously, and I *must*, when I experience it, then, as Santayana says, I will be led to “posit” not only a self but a certain sort of self, a self that is no spectator:

Now that I am consenting to build further dogmas on the sentiment of shock, and to treat it, not as an essence groundlessly revealed to me, but as signifying something pertinent to the alarm or surprise with which it fills me, I must thicken and substantialise the self I believe in, recognising in it a nature that accepts or rejects events, a nature having a movement of its own, far deeper, more continuous and more biased than a discoursing mind: the self posited by the sense of shock is a living psyche. (*Scepticism and Animal Faith*, 147)

In short, the self posited in shock is not a story but an animal. What Santayana asks us to do is simply to acknowledge what we really do believe, to embrace an experience the reality of which we cannot deny except as an abstracted hypocrisy. For the interesting thing about narrative fiction is that it is flimsy, implausible; finally, a long-term immersion in it begins to soften the brain. But shock calls us forth from the romance we have so busily constructed around our lives. Shock shows us to be vulnerable to the world. To drop a bowling ball on one’s foot is to know, to know beyond the possibility of doubt, that one is

a physical body in contact with other physical bodies. Shock thus “wakes” us into the real, drags us out of our pictures, our narratives, in short, our reverie.

The reason that the experience of shock is more compelling than any argument is that it *demand*s recognition that something is happening. From scholars, people who spend lives in a flight from what is really there, a flight to concepts and books and studies, acknowledgment of the reality of the real must be extorted. To drop a bowling ball on your foot is to realize what you knew quite well all along: that reality is opaque, dangerous, and out of your control. That is, to experience the real as real is to experience one’s powerlessness before the real. This feeling of powerlessness is intolerable, or is often experienced as intolerable, and for that reason people would like to believe that the world is a fantasy, an image, a text, something that, finally, can be put under our control. I awaken from dreams; if I find one fantasy dissatisfying, I may be able to shift to another. I can put the book down, or reconstruct the narrative. But I cannot awaken from the world nor shift to another by an act of will or through social cooperation. To acknowledge the world’s reality is to acknowledge my own limitations and to experience them. “Think how many rebuffs every man experiences in his day,” writes Thoreau; “perhaps he has fallen into a horse-pond, eaten fresh-water clams or worn one shirt for a week without washing. Indeed, you cannot receive a shock unless you have an electric affinity to that which shocks you.”⁴ This “electric affinity” is what, in shock, shows us to be situated in the world, to be of the order of the real.

Physical pain, bereavement, sickness, a slow decline toward death—these are experiences we *need* in order to bring us back to reality and thus to ourselves. Not surprisingly, it is these very experiences which we seek to evade, vitiate, or disperse by the construction of, say, a philosophical system. To slap Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for instance, would be to do him a signal service; it

would be to call him out of the "world" as the Unfolding of the Absolute and into the world as the Attack of the Contingent. It would be to call him out of the general into the particular, out of the illusion of safety into the reality of danger, out of two-bit grandiose hypocrisy and into life. Of course, slapping someone is no argument. But I think all arguments here are perfectly trivial, whereas real openness to life is correspondingly profound.

II.

Much of the world's religious history is a pathological attempt to escape the world and to be other than human. But there are several conspicuous exceptions. The one I will discuss here is Zen. Zen Buddhism constitutes a discipline that forgoes every movement into the beyond, every movement outside the real. Zen monks perform the most menial tasks precisely as religious exercises, for in Zen there is no transcendence of the real, only deeper and deeper immersion. The Zen patriarch I-Hsuan (who lived in the ninth century and was also known as Lin-chi, which was the name of his monastery; he is called Rinzai by the Japanese) told his disciples, "All one has to do is move one's bowels, urinate, put on clothing, eat meals, and lie down when tired."⁵ Enlightenment is to be found precisely where one already is, in the performance of one's animal functions. For an animal, allowing oneself to be an animal is enlightenment; it is an affirmation of reality.

The tenth-century Master Yun-men Wen-yen, when asked "What is the Buddha?" replied, "An arse scraper."⁶ This emphasis on excrement, which might appear gratuitous, is, in fact, a key to understanding Zen and, more widely, a key to understanding what an affirmation of the reality of oneself and one's world might be like. For we devote great efforts to disguising or forgetting the fact that we piss and shit. To remember that is to remember that we are animals, not minds, and that the world stinks in a way

that texts do not, except if the latter are employed as arse-scrapers. Zen emerged in China from a synthesis of Buddhism and Taoism, and there is a similar affirmation of the real, couched in similar terms, in the works of the great early Taoists. The *Chuang Tzu*, for instance, contains this key passage:

Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, "This thing called the Way [Tao]—where does it exist?"

Chuang Tzu said, "There's no place it doesn't exist."

"Come," said Master Tung-kuo, "you must be more specific!"

"It is in the ant."

"As low a thing as that?"

"It is in the panic grass."

"But that's lower still!"

"It is in the tiles and shards."

"How can it be so low?"

"It is in the piss and shit!"

Master Tung-kuo made no reply.⁷

The point is that the Tao, which is "highest," is in the lowest. Now it will be immediately evident that if one took this seriously, there would *be* no high or low any more, that such a passage has the potential to shatter one's values. The *Tao Te Ching* says, "When the Tao is lost, there is goodness."⁸ Where there is goodness, there the world has been left behind, judged, found wanting. Where there is goodness, there are programs for making things good; goodness improves the world. But, as Lao Tzu also says, "The world is sacred; it can't be improved" (chap. 29). That goes for the piss and shit as well as virtue and beauty.

Indeed, Zen might be called the art of immanence, the art of being within and staying within the world. The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh puts it like this:

While washing the dishes, you might be thinking about the tea afterwards, and so try to get them out of the way as quickly as possible in order to sit and drink tea. But that means that you are incapable of living during the time you are washing the dishes. When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life. Just as when you're drinking tea, drinking tea must be the most important thing in your life. When you're using the toilet, let that be the most important thing in your life. And so on. Chopping wood is meditation. Carrying water is meditation.⁹

What Thich Nhat Hanh calls "mindfulness" is the attempt to experience what is really happening at each moment; it is a call back into ourselves and into what is really here now. It is a defense of the real against the assaults of the past and the future, the reverie and the fantasy, the moral judgment and the scientific description, the evasion and the denial. "Meditation" in this sense results from a resolution to experience the real precisely as it is, to open oneself to it and to proceed into it.

That is why the typical Zen device is meditation on a *koan* (a paradox or non sequitur). To "learn" Zen is to learn how to forget concepts and live in the contingent and particular—in short, to live in the world. Every concept threatens the human connection to the real; every generalization threatens our experience of particularity. We retreat from the realm of things into the realm of concepts because no one has ever been bitten by a concept, because living in the mind is safer than living in the world, or so it appears to be. Indeed, human beings invented language, conception, generalization, mathematics, not as an adaptation to the world; the world always appears in particulars. Rather, *Homo sapiens* must develop consciousness because it is the most *sensitive* animal, the most *vulnerable* animal. Thinking is not a real protection from the world in this

vulnerability but an attempt to ward it off. Indeed, consciousness might be the sickness of which we all perish, by which, finally, we detach ourselves from reality in the only way we can ever become detached from reality: by dying. All consciousness is a premonition of extinction; every concept smells of death.

One often hears that it is our capacity for generalization, induction, abduction, and so forth that accounts for our “success” as a species. That is, we can “learn the lesson” of experience by generalizing it to similar situations. Watching Og get eaten teaches us all not to tease bears. But each generalization is also an abandonment of the particular, and an insufficient awareness of the particular is fatal as well. Retreating into laws, concepts, principles, and so forth is all very well; meanwhile, the particular and contingent explodes moment by moment into one’s life. “Abstraction” is not only a particular mental capacity; it is a particular state of mind: the one that pitched Thales into the well. At the least, there is something rather sad about missing one’s life as one rummages around in general principles.

Zen seeks to bring us back to ourselves and our world out of our abstraction. In the Zen classic *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, it is said that “From the outset Dharma [the real law] has been in the world. . . . Hence, do not seek the transcendental world outside, by discarding the present world itself.”¹⁰

If Zen teaches us to get beyond, or before, concepts, it is not surprising that one device it uses is shock. D. T. Suzuki relates the following typical tale. When Rinzai was a student, he asked his master Obaku, “What is the fundamental principle of Buddhism?” Obaku replied by striking Rinzai three times.¹¹ That constitutes a reply to Rinzai’s question on several levels. First, it is an enactment of the first of Buddha’s Fourfold Noble Truths, that life is suffering. If you would like to *know* that life is suffering, one approach would be to read the sutras, or perhaps you could turn to historical

accounts of war, famine, and so forth. You might come, by such a technique, to be able to defend the claim that life is suffering. But in order to *know* it, to know exactly what that really means, it is better to be struck, actually to be in pain. Second, striking Rinzai was a way of telling him that his problem was concepts, that he suffered from an excess of thinking. If you want to achieve enlightenment, you cannot do it by “figuring it out.” (“The Tao that can be spoken is not the real Tao.”) You cannot think your way to enlightenment, because even if you actually found out what enlightenment was, you would have prohibited yourself from enacting it precisely by conceptualizing it. Enlightenment consists of letting go of concepts into an ecstatic identification with what is; you cannot be further from enlightenment than when you have figured out enlightenment. And lastly, striking someone is a way of “waking them up.” Shock has the effect of recalling us to immediacy and rendering us alert to what comes next. To strike someone is to “bring them back to themselves,” as we sometimes slap people who are in a tizzy in order to call them back to presence.

That story is typical: Zen masters induce shocks with sticks, hands, projectiles, or anything that’s convenient. Here’s a particularly extreme case, also related by Suzuki:

Ummon (Yun-men) was another great master of Zen at the end of the T’ang dynasty. He had to lose one of his legs to get an insight into the life-principle from which the whole universe takes rise, including his own humble existence. He had to visit his teacher Bokuju (Mu-chou) three times before he was admitted to see him. The master asked, “Who are you?” “I am Bun-yen (Wen-yen),” answered the monk. . . . When the truth-seeking monk was allowed to go inside the gate, the master took hold of him by the chest and demanded: “Speak! Speak!” Ummon hesitated, whereupon the master pushed him out of the gate, saying “Oh you good-for-nothing fellow!” While the gate was hastily

shut, one of Ummon's legs was caught and broken. The intense pain resulting from this apparently awakened the poor fellow to the greatest fact of life. (*The Sense of Zen*, 12)

Ummon hesitated because, fearful of saying the wrong thing, he was thinking about what to say. Bokuju makes him pay for his hesitation, because he could not simply speak, or act, spontaneously, as one thing among other things in a world of things. Rather, Ummon separated himself from things in thought, and so debilitated himself in the world.

Now it must be said that what the Zen monk seeks, what Ummon sought when he wanted to see Bokuju, is something we all already possess. We are all, already, utterly absorbed in and by the real. It is the impression, the feeling of distance from the real, that must be dealt with and which the Zen master deals with in the most compelling way by inducing shock. The shock of having his leg broken calls Ummon into reality. But every shock is such a call: everything that is experienced as a shock is, in that sense, the occasion of an enlightenment. Thus, we find joy and reality at the site of great pain:

When [Jo] was passing over a bridge, he happened to meet a cart of three Buddhist scholars one of whom asked Jo: "The river of Zen is deep, and its bottom must be sounded. What does this mean?" Jo, disciple of Rinzai, at once seized the questioner and was at the point of throwing him over the bridge, when his two friends interceded and asked Jo's merciful treatment of the offender. Jo released the scholar, saying, "if not for the intercession of his friends I would at once let him sound the bottom of the river himself."¹²

What this passage says is that the deepest wisdom is found not inside one's own skull but out there, in the real.

The depth of Zen is not a conceptual profundity but a depth in the world. The deepest wisdom is to turn out of one's impoverished imagination and one's impoverished conceptualization and into reality. That is the source of all our real fears but also the source of all our real pleasures. Wisdom is found, if anywhere, right where we already are: crossing a bridge, washing the dishes.

When a disciple asked the Zen master Chao-chou, "What is the one ultimate word of truth?", Chao-chou replied, "Yes."¹³ The realism I have been setting out here is a way of saying yes to the world. "Realism" in this sense does not refer to a doctrine or a system. Rather, it is a "position" in the sense of a posture, a physical posture of openness to the world in experience. It is a resolution to experience whatever comes, an acknowledgment of vulnerability. The odd thing about shock is that it shows that we are all already realists. We are always, while we live, open to what is. As Santayana puts it:

The first thing experience reports is the existence of something, merely as existence, the weight, strain, danger, and lapse of being. If any one should tell me that this is an abstraction, I should reply that it would seem and abstraction to a parrot, who used human words without having human experience, but it is no abstraction to a man, whose language utters imperfectly, and by a superadded articulation, the life within him. (*Scepticism and Animal Faith*, 190)

All fantasies, finally, are over; in the long run, delusions break down before the onslaught of the real. That life calls forth language rather than the other way around is an insight to which we shall return in a discussion of the thought of the Lakota.

And if there is pain in vulnerability, there is also joy. To acknowledge one's powerlessness before the real is to bring oneself into authenticity, to bring oneself into a real

relation with the real. For notice: Fantasies may be comparatively harmless, but delusions exact a hideous price. There is, first, the incredible cognitive cost of maintaining them in the face of one's experience. Second, there are, in them, the very limitations one finds in oneself: Delusions and fantasies are impoverished, because the human imagination is small, and is parasitic on the real. To acknowledge reality and one's vulnerability to it, then, brings with it the sort of relief that is characteristic of all expressions of personal authenticity; the cost of lies is high.

And second, the world not only crushes, it caresses, and its beauty, though terrible, is real and absolutely compelling. I cannot fantasize, say, a huge bank of clouds: I cannot produce a mental image, or, for that matter, a text, of the required elaborateness. But I can *see* a bank of clouds, a forest, Times Square, with a robustness and an elaboration that shame any image or text I could ever make. The world destroys us, but compensates us in our destruction by real, rather than imaginary, experiences.

III.

The clearest statement of the sort of realism I am putting forward here is found in Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence, a doctrine that Nietzsche himself regarded, with good reason, as his greatest and also his most abysmal thought. Here is the statement of it that appears in *The Gay Science*:

The greatest weight—What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: this life as you now live and have lived, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succes-

sion and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. . . . [H]ow well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate confirmation and seal?¹⁴

If you came to desire nothing more fervently than the eternal return of the same life, you would have learned to affirm your life and the world with a total affirmation. But Nietzsche, quite rightly, describes this thought as "crushing." It is even hard to become aware of just how far we are, at any given moment, from this particular sort of joy, from this perfect declaration of love for what is. What if I were now given a second chance at life, and given also the ability to make a different decision at each fork in the road? I would not—indeed, could not—make the same choices again.

Here's an example. My brother Bob was murdered after he drove away from me in a truck with his murderer. Knowing what was going to happen, could I have let him drive away? Could I reach the state in which I would make such a choice—choose, in other words, to live my life again as I have lived it? Would I want to become a person who is capable of making such a choice? How well-disposed would I have to be to life to allow myself to experience my brother's death over and over and over in eternity?

This is a way of asking, with the greatest possible intensity, whether I can bring myself to affirm the world, whether I can drag myself back, kicking and screaming, from the fantasy, the narrative, into things as they are precisely as they are. Notice that Nietzsche does not give us an ontology or a narrative here; notice that he does not tell us *what* will be repeated, except that it will be whatever is actual. Nietzsche could have paused here and constructed a little metaphysics, could have *instructed* us in the nature of reality. Instead, he makes a demon *confront* us with what *we know* to be real. This conceptual exercise has a way of making all the dross and gloss fall away, so that if you take it seriously and live with it over a period of time, it *teaches* you what is real: namely, what would be repeated, if your life as a whole were to be repeated.

The movement toward an affirmation of the recurrence, then, is simply a movement of opening to the real. This movement, in a way that is rare or perhaps unique among philosophical thought-experiments, refuses any replacement of the real with a conceptualization. On the contrary, it is designed to compromise all concepts and, finally, to compromise every movement outside or beyond the actual. It is as if at every moment at which one seeks to transcend or even forget the world, the eternal return pulls one back into the world, and embeds one there utterly. The eternal return replaces the afterlife with this life: It condemns you to live *this very life* again and again eternally, and thus shows you how hostile you are to the life you are living and to the world in which you are living it. What it asks, finally, is whether you could reach a moment at which you look at this condemnation as a reward, a moment at which the prospect of living the same thing again and again in eternity can be met with total joy, total commitment, a moment at which love of the world ceases to be a vague fuzzy feeling and attains a perfect specificity.

The eternal return perfectly encapsulates Nietzsche's philosophy, as Nietzsche insisted. Everything that is lovely

and joyful in Nietzsche flows from the possibility of that moment in which the return can be affirmed. Notice, to begin with, that the eternal return immediately carries us into a realm in which good and evil no longer make any sense. To say of everything that has been that we welcome it again and again in eternity is absolutely to eschew moral judgments. Nietzsche does not ask us to affirm our lives *for the sake of some epiphanic moment*, or *as a means of transcending those very lives*; rather, he asks us to affirm our lives *in toto* and to love them enough to welcome their return. Thus, our moral judgments will be, in one sense, destroyed utterly. If I could *welcome* my brother's murder, I certainly would have arrived at a place beyond good and evil.

Notice, however, that I did not welcome my brother's murder when it actually took place. I was so full of rage at the time, I think I proposed to myself that if I had the strength I would destroy the world. For that is what happens in extreme cases of moral indignation or moral rage: The object of rage always gets generalized into the real as a whole, so that an anathema is pronounced over the world in its entirety and not simply over the actual occasion. This in itself is a symptom of our "adaptive" capacity for generalization, and it brings us very quickly from a few untoward incidents to a total hatred of the world. That, of course, is the story of various religious interpretations of reality, various philosophies, and so forth. But now notice that this rage at the whole world, for being a world in which my brother was murdered, was, in fact, part of my life. So, were I now to affirm the eternal return, I would have to affirm *those feelings* as well, that total moral outrage, that total negation of all that is in one ecstatic consignment of everything to an imaginary perdition.

So that becomes as deep a challenge as anything in the life of someone, such as Nietzsche, who wants more than anything else to learn to affirm the world precisely as it is: To affirm that, he must also, simultaneously, affirm

his own denial of the world. Not only that, but he must affirm the hatred of the world that he finds in Christianity, Buddhism, and so forth: He must affirm precisely that which he most hates. The eternal return confronts us each with precisely that challenge: the challenge to affirm what we hate, which is, then, the challenge to affirm that we cannot affirm, to affirm ourselves as haters. Thus, the eternal return confronts not only all moral judgments; it confronts *itself* as an affirmation of what is; it takes us straight into the heart of the maelstrom in human beings in which values are made and in which values are violated. We must learn, that is, to affirm our hatreds and to affirm, at the same time, the existence of what we hate; it is necessary that we hate, and our hatred will be repeated times without number. But it is also necessary for that which we hate to exist and to be hateful to us.

Thus, we are called into a sort of hatred that refuses to imaginatively destroy the hated object. This is a hatred beyond good and evil, a hatred that refuses to say of the object of hatred, "That ought not to be." For thus is hatred made moral; morality is hatred that says of what it hates, "That ought not to be," and says of what it values, "That ought to be," even when it is not. Now, as I affirm my life in eternity, I will affirm the imaginative annihilations I have performed in the past, *but I will make myself incapable of such annihilations in the future*. If I could reach the moment where I could say "Yes," then I would be saying "Yes" to every moral judgment I or anyone else had ever made. But I would have rendered myself beyond ethics by affirming utterly the existence of what I hate, and the nonexistence of much that I (would) value.

This is what Nietzsche means when he begs us to "remain faithful to the earth."¹⁵ Nietzsche was not a hater of faith; he was a hater of illusion. Truth is found in keeping faith with the world, in not allowing oneself to commit oneself to other worlds. This, of course, entails rejection of the "human spirit," of God as spiritual, of the afterlife for spirit,

and so forth. But it entails, as well, a shattering of morals, a suspicion of science, a total affirmation of the world and of life as something in which I am inextricably implicated. The eternal return shows us what it would be like to live in accordance with Zarathustra's deepest teaching:

Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth. Thus I beg and beseech you. Do not let them fly away from earthly things and beat their wings against eternal walls. Alas, there has been so much virtue that has flown away. Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do—back to the body, back to life, that it may give earth a meaning, a human meaning. (76)

For Nietzsche, virtue is an expression of love and of hatred, of resentment and the strength to make resentment over into value. But a virtue that is "moralized" is a virtue that has turned against the earth and against the body (which is the human being as earth), a virtue that wants, above all, to be elsewhere and that learns to hate all the real as that which imposes this constraint.

Nietzsche teaches us to allow our hatred and our love to return us continually to the world and to situate us in the world ever more inextricably. For, as I will discuss later, hatred and love are both, primordially, acknowledgments of the real in the sense that what is hated or what is loved, like what shocks us, must be experienced as real. But great hatred moves us to avoidance; in hatred, we slowly or quickly become intolerable to ourselves as hateful. And love faces the opposite problem; the defects of the beloved are intolerable to a certain sort of love; love "idealizes" and hence floats free of reality. But at their centers, hatred and love are merely illustrations of our responsiveness to reality: They show us as people who are profoundly moved by what is, who live deeply in this world. Thus, hatred and love, vice and virtue, call us back continually into the

world. Nietzsche asks us to use our hatred and our love this way: to allow them to call us back to the earth and back into our bodies.

Nietzsche, hence, does not teach that the earth is good, or beautiful, he simply teaches that it is. And if he teaches us that we will come to be situated on this earth in precisely the way we are now, again and again in eternity, he does so in order to show us that we, too, are. That is Nietzsche's "discovery," which, of course, is something we already know. But the hardest thing for a human being to be is something that *allows* himself to be. Every program of self-transformation involves oneself saying to oneself: I ought not to be what I am; I, who am this, ought not to be. Every program of world transformation involves saying to the world: You ought not to be what you are; you, who are this, ought not to be. Nietzsche, like the Zen master who hits you with a stick, calls you to that shattering moment when you can say: I am, and the world is. This is to allow oneself to experience the greatest pain and, thereby, to arrive at the greatest joy. But one does not experience the pain for the sake of joy, else the joy never arrives. One learns to live in pain, and then joy arrives in the body, from the earth.