

The Radical Otherness of God

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GIVEN with language is nothing other than man's capacity for speech, that is, for God. Nothing other than speech—which is speech only when it points to the otherness of God—is given with the fact human existence. To language belongs priority: primacy belongs to speech. And speaking calls for our words, a word is spoken only to the extent that language not only evokes but anticipates speech. Speech is the way in which our words anticipate a language; it is the way in which language is already ahead of itself. In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh: indeed, that Word alone is in the beginning which can become flesh, which is borne by the flesh and born to it. Even our words' alienation from the Word, the alienation of language from speech, discloses that words themselves cease to be at home in language unless theirs is the irreducible privilege of being constantly emancipated from it, unless theirs is the privilege of anticipating the Word. Language is already ahead of itself by being words. If thus language comprises what is said, what is unsaid carries language to ever newer horizons of meaning. What Hopper does not say is whether what is left unsaid is *other* than what is said. It seems at times that for Hopper the unsaid is merely what words *cannot* say, like blank spaces between them. Absolute immanentism and absolute supernaturalism meet. And it could be that Hopper's withdrawal from the supernatural and his concomitant retreat into immanence have misled him to overlook such a *coincidence*.

In fact I would say that all soteriologies based on a *coincidentia oppositorum* mistake the *eschaton* for the historicization of salvation and cannot conceive of that which is unsaid, which is radically other, except by first opposing it and then reducing it to that which is said and is thus the only thing of which one can be "radically aware." For there is a way in which the collective Unconscious is a surrogate for that kind of coincidence of opposites behind which lurks the twin seductive and idolatrous temptation which leads to Absolutism and supernatural Dualism and

their respective powers of alienation. For just as a flower is not only more but also other than its petals, there is between God and man a difference which, eliminated by Monism and distorted by Dualism, is not done justice by either. "As butterflies come to the newly planted flowers, Bodhidharma says, 'I know not'." Or, to paraphrase Buber, the Wholly Other is the Wholly Present only to the extent that he is experienced not merely as human reality but as radically other than the human reality with which his presence is precisely given. Indeed, to contend that God is nearer to me than I am to myself is, to say the least, slightly different from: "I am Thou, and Thou art I." And in this respect Buber is to be preferred to Hopper, although surely Hopper would agree that the Eternal Thou can never be expressed, but can only be addressed. The radical integrity of man, which was jeopardized by the dualistic Absolutism of a supernatural entity identified as God, is no less undermined by the mere truncation of Transcendence and its conflation with Immanence. And that is exactly the charge to which any conception of man's wholeness that would eliminate rather than anticipate the *otherness* of God remains open. At which point the complaint I have just made must be diverted from Hopper to Buber.

Indeed it is wholeheartedly that in this respect I opt for Hopper against Buber, when the latter contends that the experience of the human reality is experience of the God who is the wholly Same, the Wholly Present, in contrast to the former who argues that such an experience—so long as it must be a human experience—cannot quite, by virtue of some implicit revelational positivism, dispose of the absence of God. To be sure, Heidegger's own notion of the absence of God is, as Hopper himself points out, akin to Buber's idea of the eclipse of God. And I am all the more surprised, therefore, that in rejecting Buber's eclipse of God, Hopper is not led to question the metaphor of God's absence put forth by his own mentor Heidegger. Accordingly, I am forced at this point to opt neither for Buber nor for Hopper: the former's residual dualism is, to my mind, as objectionable as the latter's case in favor of a covert *coincidentia oppositorum*. Either way, it seems to me that we are still held captive by the older picture of things, by the traditional view of the world, even though—and this must not be minimized—both Buber and Hopper are very conscious of the cultural as well as religious mutation taking place in the texture of the human reality. And, indeed, for either one this mutation, which affects not only our metaphysics but also our theology and language, is symbolized by the Death of God or a variant expression for the same pheno-

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menon: the eclipse of God (Buber) and the existential or cultural mistrust (Hopper).

But, leaving Buber aside now, what exactly is this cultural or existential mistrust? In the following statement, Hopper gives us a clue: "... the God of whom I am *not* going to think anymore because he is dead continues to be very much alive in my thought of his deadness. In this sense the death of God theology runs the risk of remaining caught in the same language games with the theology that precedes it. Both belong to the same conceptual system. That is to say, neither the presence of God, in the one case, nor his 'death' in the other, has been thought infinitely." Whereupon Hopper adds, without contradicting himself, that the problem at bottom "is not a problem of thought at all, but rather, in terms of the enigma *a priori* it is a question of being open to that which is prior to all thinking", to the "symbol without meaning", to the *logos* of things—to the logic of a new faith, a new mode of being, in which one sees as God sees, in which one cannot see except insofar as God sees, in which God is the *verbal* articulation of one's being. There, however, one finds oneself located as though between two thoughts in a land of silence for which both the world and its God, because they are at once edifying and imprisoning, become a symbol signifying nothing: a symbol without meaning (Joseph Campbell). Land of silence, ours is the place where, *post mortem Dei*, between two thoughts, one may await the new name of God, the *logos* of things. And it follows that "*logos*, within this vision, becomes a metaphor for the speech of things, for expressiveness, and for the conception of ontology as utterance." This brings us back to our point of departure, namely to the linguistic nature of the human existence.

I agree with Hopper when he contends that each language draws a circle around us. I would depart from him by adding that each language is also iconoclastic of a previous one, lest it would content itself with being the mere adjuvant of some anamnestic process. Language is no mere reclaiming of a polder-like *primordial* nature; it is also proleptic convocation of man's *eschatic* reality. Hopper himself would not, I think, disagree with this last point, since he too would object to the historicization of language concomitant with the objectifications of substantialist metaphysics.

Indeed, speaking is a naming of God. But what language can ever name God and be reduced to silence, to speechlessness? For to seek refuge in silence is to seek God beyond God, namely where he is not to be found. As Saint Augustine

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points out, what does one say when one speaks about God? But then, he adds, woe to those who pass him over into silence, especially if those that speak about him should be mute. Here, again, the question has nothing to do with either the *presence* or the *absence* of God; above all, it deals with the *radical otherness* of God, so that God is an iconoclastic word about man and man is an iconoclastic word about God. Otherwise God becomes the possession of one's creed or of one's dogma, an item of one's dictionary, an object. and, if God must not be possessed, there is no naming of God other than speaking. Where the Word becomes flesh, there is the eschatic point of convergence between the radical integrity of man and the radical otherness of God.