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From Niagara to Aporia

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[See table of contents](#)

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From Niagara to Aporia



Kevin Kelly, *A Reconstructed Landscape*, 1989.
Diorama, oil on linen; 2,7 x 9,1 x 9,1 m.
Photo : Courtesy the artist

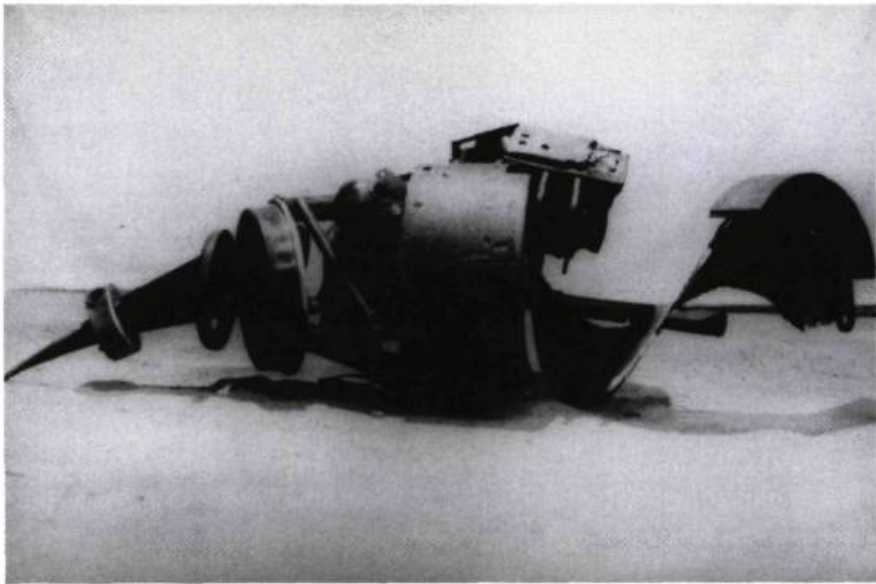
"Nihilism stands at the door :
whence comes this uncanniest of all guests."
Nietzsche

One might argue that contrary to a recent theoretical project of Jürgen Habermas¹, God has not died and left "a decomposing corpse that emits an insidious effluvium", one penetrating the very psychic core of contemporary society. Granted, a certain unsparing pessimism, a tendency towards negative abstraction and a vacuous lack of direction permeate the essence of our current ethicotheological orb (and spill over into most fields of endeavour), but this need not necessarily imply demise. It may well be that Habermas, like a number of other depreciators, has created a philosophical blindspot, due, in part, to a penchant for privileging poetic imagination (the employ of writing as a predominantly artistic strategy) and a failure to acknowledge early Christian thought as symbolically associated with the central themes (social, political, aesthetic, etc.) of (post)modernity and its (impending) aftermath.

The pre-WWII writings of Charles Norris Cochrane, a philosopher/theoretician whose works have remained largely unassimilated into the mainstream of

international discourse, do provide an incisive counterpoint to the lament of Habermas². Through an analysis of Augustine's fourth century doctrine of the "mirror" of the trinity (*De Trinitate*), Cochrane has located the first stirrings of the emergence of nihilism at the "trembling mid-point between the birth of Christian metaphysics and the death of the disembodied *logos* of Plato³."

From the instant of his conversion in the garden at Cassiacium, Augustine struggled with the inversion of order of Western experience, from one founded on a belief in Platonic rationalism and embodied will, to another calling for absolute faith in the abstract power of a God "who was not there". In Augustinian terms, this abstract power was manifest in the trinity : the father ("immutable", in Augustine's words, and therefore indestructible), the son (resurrected and consequently perceived to be self-perpetuating), and the *voluntas*/holy ghost (an absence). These trinitarian aspects "mirrored" each other *in finitum* and thus the triad became a "spherical space" (the eye of power)



John Francis, *Torsion Cone no 2*, 1988-1989.
Welded steel; 60 x 60 x 106 cm. Photo : Courtesy the artist

74 which, like a circle, dissimulated circularity as it lost the difference between beginning and end. Any concept of God came to be fathomed only in negating properly the indetermination which constituted that timeless circle. God was that which "was not"; he was subjugated to no subjectivity, no exteriority; he was truly that which Heidegger would later describe as "the plenitude of the void" — a pure form of sensibility, a profound bearing of metaphysical fidelity.

Despite the perfection of the circle (ie. its closure) and the metaphoric profundity of the void, artists and authors, in the centuries that followed Augustine's divine revelation, strove zealously to give God an enhanced phenomenal or noumenal 'presence'. In North America this practice hinged upon the concept that the supreme being communed directly with man through the immensity and magnificence of nature. It was a practice initiated in word and image by Father Louis Hennepin in his popular 1697 guide book entitled *Nouvelle découverte d'un très grand pays situé dans l'Amérique*, a publication which featured the earliest known illustration of Niagara (Falls). So compelling was that image and so convincing Hennepin's equation, that Niagara was catapulted to the status of icon — this continent's grandest symbol of divine omnipotence. For almost two hundred years Niagara's incessant fluid motion (its "writing, twisting, concentric zones", its "foam globes darting like falling stars" [Ruskin]) was synonymous with the infinitude of God; the plight of the water at the lip of the precipice (a half circle) was equated with the awesome Sublime, and the rainbow (the other half of the circle) that sprang from the mist in the gorge below was interpreted as a sign of covenant established between man and deity after the Flood.

By the end of the nineteenth century however, the inevitable harnessing of Niagara's might by dam and hydro-electric turbine did much to dispell the myth of God as nature's overseer and proved most effective in underlining the abundant conundrum associated with theological/metaphysical dialogue. On the international scene, the concept of an omnipotent God

collapsed into Nietzsche's scathing condemnation of Christian dogma and widespread acknowledgement that the seeds of nihilism had been sown around a God-created flame. Nietzsche dismissed social distress, physiological degeneration and corruption as possible causes of modernism's emerging bitter apathy and instead pinpointed the source of human malaise as a Christian moral one⁴. In 1943, when Sartre (drinking heavily of Nietzsche's theological pessimism) published his landmark *Being and Nothingness*, a modern age in the throws of war was fully upon us. For all intents and purposes, God as the grand referent in Western art and literature had disappeared. The supreme being, that absolute power, was pronounced dead.

Little has occurred in post-war years to revitalize faith in a failed God. We have fractured ideology, consecrated the autonomus *objet d'art*, granted apotheosis of means over end result, and made fetish our sacred calf. We have simultaneously adopted a dominant psychological mood of mourning and loss. To cite Victor Frankl, a celebrated Viennese psychotherapist, "the central neurosis of our modern epoch is meaninglessness".

Somewhere between the creation of the Christian myth and the evident apathy of our current Western culture, Augustine's concept of the MIRRORED trinity was lost. If, today, we fail to recognize referential allusion to God almighty, it might well be that we have failed to consider fully the implications of the original triad. Could it be that we have experienced the flight of power from one denotative sign of the trinity to another? Could it be that God is now, more than ever, perfectly reflected in the *voluntas* as Augustine proposed? If, as reported by Charles Levin, "we live in a world of afterimages, of ghosts, signifiers, and simulacra"⁵, is it not possible that these manifestations are realizations of the third and final element of the triad? The perplexity of the concept of the spirit may have been transposed in (post/ultra) modern jargon to "cosmic vortex" or "black hole".

The testing of this hypothesis requires a meas-



Liliana Berezowsky, *Baldor II*, 1989. Welded steel;
128 x 128 x 125 cm. Photo : Courtesy The Saidye Bronfman Centre

ure of faith, not necessarily in the theistic sense, but more with regard to a belief that any prevalent human act must have untold underlying signification or reason. Such a testing would also require a wider latitude for discussion than that which is permitted within the scope of this essay. Let it suffice then to cite a few of the numerous examples of the 'third state' phenomenon at hand. Leave the discovery of the rationale or the debate of inherent aporia to the diehard theoreticians :

Holly King presented "a willing suspension of disbelief" [the artist] and introduced images of vulcanian blasts in an exhibition entitled *Paysages* (YYZ, Toronto, June 1988); Ilana Isehayek has painted swirling maelstroms and the paths of atomic particles circling sacred flames (galerie J. Yahouda Meir, Montréal, February 1988); Howard Simkins dropped a colour wheel through an ominous black loop on a field of red pigment (galerie Graff, Montréal, May 1989); Carol Sutton's fascination for "light eating away at the edges of darkness" [the artist] resulted in the *Silhouette — Grill Balcony* series focussing on the spiralling effect of the vortex (Gallery One, Toronto, April 1989); Giuseppe Di Leo continued an exploration of fiery, smoke-filled passages in his *Via Erebus* suite destined for the Art Gallery of Hamilton (December 1989); terrestrial cavities recurred in Paul Béliveau's *Les Demeures* show (galerie Trois Points, Montréal, February 1989); Karen Bernier peered over the edge of an escarpment into murky depths in *Présences sur le Niagara* (galerie Skol, Montréal, April 1989); in another image of Niagara by Angela Grauerholz, representational space dissolved into the detritus of the photographer's signature "Fuzzy" set (Art 45, Montréal, May 1989); Annie Paquette's female figures seized the spirit of freefall or hovered helplessly in voided space (*Les Femmeuses*, Pratt & Whitney, Montréal, April 1989); Liliana Berezowsky's *Baldor II*

confronted the viewer with a cylinder whose tunnel entrance was composed of concentric rings "receding into secret darkness" [George Bogardi] (Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montréal, May 1989); Kevin Kelly's ambitious "reconstructed landscape" diorama similarly employed circular recessional space but in this instance that of a mammoth open pit mine — in essence, the mind-numbing sublimity of Niagara less the roar, "the human earth... its chest caved in" [Nietzsche] (studio visit, Montréal, March 1989); John Francis' recent scrap metal constructions continued a longstanding interest in the implication of 'Passage' and 'Destination', the drill-bit profile of the *Torsion Cone* series, in particular, providing a powerful metaphor not only for 'implement of destruction' but for penetration of post-Cartesian consciousness (Université de Sherbrooke, April 1989); etc., etc., etc.

Everywhere visions of the circle and the void. More than just formal elements? What task *voluntas*?

Allan Pringle

NOTES

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge : MIT Press, 1987)
2. See Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture : A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1940)
3. Arthur Kroker, *The Postmodern Scene* (Montréal : New World Perspectives, 1986) p. 293, note 9. In a chapter entitled "Sign Crimes", Kroker provides an overview of Cochrane's writings as they pertain to Augustinian theory.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. (New York : Vintage Books, 1968) It is a coincidence that *The Will to Power* was first published in 1901, the same year that Niagara's hydroelectric station was opened.
5. Charles Levin, "Carnal Knowledge of Aesthetic States", in *Body Invaders*, edited by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Montréal, New World Perspectives, 1987)