From Niagara to Aporia

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One might argue that contrary to a recent theoretical project of Jürgen Habermas, 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 Habermas. 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 Plato.”

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 Augustinean 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 infinitum and thus the triad became a “spherical space” (the eye of power).
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 indétermination 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 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 inces­
tant 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 sprung 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 dispel the myth
of God as nature’s overseer and proved most effective
in underlining the abundant conundrum associated
with theological/metaphysical dialogue. On the inter­
national 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 one. 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
interests 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 autonomous 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 tri­ny was lost. If, today, we fail to recognize referential allusion to God already, it might well be that we have
failed to consider fully the implications of the original
trinity. 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 simu­lacrums”, 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
cortex” or “black hole”.

The testing of this hypothesis requires a meas-
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 Paisages (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 firey, 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 Graucholz, 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?

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NOTES

2. See Charles Norris Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1940)
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.