

Rendezvous

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Disbelief, Poetry and Religion

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Carlos Fuentes came to Cornell a few years ago, to teach a wonderful course on Mexican culture, its Hispanic and Indian roots. We became friends, and one day he confided to me that he was having difficulty finishing a novel he was working on. It was to become *Christopher Unborn* (*Cristobal Nonato*), a phantasmagoric account of a Mexico hell-bound in 1992, told through the voice of a child in the womb.¹ The child knows all, the history of its ancestors, the thoughts of its parents. And then, 400 pages along, it is time to be born. How could this child, with all its wisdom, be born?

I listened to Fuentes, and immediately there came to mind a story I had read in Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*,² of a question asked of Rabbi Baruch of Mezibich, who lived near where I was born in Southeast Poland, near the Ukraine. Let me retell the story in a poem I've written:

STRETCH MARKS

1

It is said in the Talmud that the child in the womb,
flexing her floating sac of the world, knows all, knows
the name of the angel who wrestled with Jacob, knows

and dreams, dreams all molecules her hands will make,
bowties of atoms centered by platinum, carboxypeptidase.
She remembers the constellations' pause as Abraham

held the knife over Isaac, and later, Dachau trains.
Reaching, through her mother's eyes, she blows life
into weeds and carbon chains from comets' tails;

and marks the lust, just that, of her father in her
conception. In volutes of gene threads and shells,
what a time to know! And then ... a time to be born.

As she is pushed into the colder world, an angel

strikes her on the head, and makes her forget all
she knew inside. The mark of the angel is on our lip.

2

Rabbi Baruch of Mezbizh explained it thus: If
the child were not made to forget, she would brood
on her death, the count of years and seconds left

audible like a repeater of death in her mind.
Contemplating her death she would not light candles,
or build a house. So the angel makes her forget.

3

But I think God, who knows, doubts (which is to know)
his design works. His winged observer marks the
onset of contractions, hydraulics of the amniotic

fluid. The angel is drawn into timing, hears
breathing, hoarser, instructed. He touches, an angel's
touch, the dilating neck of the womb. The child's

head is pushed against her own breast, the occiput
leads, rotates into the pelvic floor until bones
won't give, forcing the head to turn, shaping

a conformation that angles up; all this takes time
even if it is not a first birth. As the head emerges,
a thin shoulder slides into the place of resistance;

more pain, a push turning the face into the mother's
thigh. Confronted with this congruence of form and motion,
the angel is the one struck dumb, forgets, must attend

every birth. The mother stirs, unprompted, to the after-
birth; the daughter, like a seal coming up from its deep
dive, depressurizes, gasps for this unforgettable air.³

Sylvia Fuentes remembered at this point that in the Mexican countryside,

children with a cleft palate are called "the children of the angel." So Fuentes took the Hasidic story (with a credit to me) and ended his novel with it.

Now what am I doing telling Carlos Fuentes a Hasidic tale? Or retelling it in my turgid poem? I, a typical non-observant, assimilated Jew, an atheist (the word sounds strong, let's say a nonbeliever), and I'm telling a writer a patently religious story?

Let's fit another piece into the puzzle, again via a poem. This one tells you a little of my childhood:

BELIEVING

When I was eight I was a Catholic
for a while. 1946, Krakow, it was
time to start school, and only

the parochial ones were working.
So my parents said we had converted
during the war. That got me in.

My best grades were in Catechism.
I wasn't Catholic, but I wasn't
sure what I was. In church I

carried a censer and had my first
communion in white shorts. The priest
taught us to swallow the Host. You

weren't supposed to chew it, even
if it felt as if you would gag.
The sisters gave us colored pictures

of saints if we did well in class.
I remember confession, boys shoving
to get the soft priest. Sometimes

you didn't know who was in the
confessional. You had to sift your
sins; the priest wanted not just

a lie, but something like stealing

a soccer ball or looking at your
mother in the bath. He would ask:

How many times? Then you could get
away with a scolding and three quickly
said Hail Mary's. You wouldn't want

to confess really dark things, like
looking with the janitor's son at
his younger sister's sex, poking

her with a fork. The priest would be
angry, and who knows what the gilded
black woman on the altar, the one

I didn't believe in, but who looked
at me as I walked in my white robe behind
the priest, who knows what she might do.

If the poem really works, it does so only in capturing the ambiguity the child
feels; he knows he shouldn't believe, but ritual and the Black Madonna of
Czestochowa have their claims. Even for a Jew.

The disbeliever in me then fights back. If he writes about the concentration
camps after years of avoiding doing so, he will not play the believer:

FREE

On the day the guards ran, and
the shelling grew louder, the man
from Cernauti emptied the barrack
slop pail and went looking for blood.

He found men clumsy at butchering
a cow. They pushed him off, but
when he said it was only blood
he wanted, they let him catch it
spurting from the neck. The man

lifted a board, took out his clay
figures. He set them in a circle

in the dirt, a woman and child
in the middle, then walked around,
his hand dipping to the elbow
in the bucket, throwing blood
at the feet of the clay people.

And when they didn't move, the man
from Cernauti called their names,
one by one, and sang the Shma
backwards, and desperate, smeared

more blood on their poorly formed
faces, knocking them over, and
in the end, cursed God hoarsely
in both Yiddish and Romanian.

And he even tries to do a credible devil, not an easy act to pull off in intellectual circles:

THE DEVIL TEACHES THERMODYNAMICS

My second law, your second law, ordains
that local order, structures in space
and time, be crafted in ever-so-losing
contention with proximal disorder in
this neat but getting messier universe.
And we, in the intricate machinery of our
healthy bodies and life-support systems,
in the written and televised word do declare
the majesty of the zoning ordinances
of this Law. But oh so smart, we think
that we are not things, like weeds,
or rust, or plain boulders, and so
invent a reason for an eternal subsidy
of our perfection, or at least perfectibility,
give it the names of God or the immortal
soul. And while we allow the dissipations
that cannot be hid, like death, and – in literary
stances – even the end of love, we make
the others just plain evil: anger, lust,

pride – the whole lot of pimples of the spirit.
Diseases need vectors, so the old call
goes out for me. But the kicker is that the struts
of God's stave church, those nice seven,
they're such a tense and compressed support
group that when they get through you're really
ready to let off some magma. Faith serves up
passing certitude to weak minds, recruits for
the cults, and too much of her is going to play
hell with that other grand invention
of yours, the social contract. Boring
Prudence hangs around with conservatives,
and Love, love you say! Love one, leave
out the others. Love them all, none will love
you. I tell you, friends, love is the greatest
entropy-increasing device invented by God.
Love is my law's sweet man. And for God
himself, well, his oneness seems too
much for natural man to love, so he comes up
with Northern Irelands and Lebanons ...

The argument to be made is not
for your run-of-the-mill degeneracy, my
stereotype. No, I want us to awake,
join the imperfect universe at peace with
the disorder that orders. For the cold
death sets in slowly, and there is time,
so much time, for the stars' light to scatter
off the eddies of chance, into our minds,
there to build ever more perfect loves,
invisible cities, our own constellations.⁴

But then he spoils it all by writing an essay like this:

TIKKUN

In this century science and technology have transformed the world. What we have added, mostly for the best of reasons, is in danger of modifying qualitatively the great cycles of the planet. We see the effects of our intervention

in the change in the ozone layer, the pollution and acidity of our waters, in why we wash an apple, in the crumbling statuary, our heritage, dissolving.

The effect of science and technology was surely felt before. But not till this century did the man- and woman-made, the synthetic, the unnatural, truly contend with nature. Is this a time to praise, a time to fear?

The world that men and women entered before there ever was such a thing as chemistry was not a romantic paradise but a brutish, inimical environment in which men and women hardly lived past forty. That natural world was transformed by our social institutions, our art, our science. Certainly not by science alone. We do not kill female children, nor keep slaves, nor let the sick die, all practices some societies, I'm sorry to say some religions, once thought natural. Even though we have such a long way to go, we have changed our nature. Our lives are improved by detergents and synthetic fibers, and by a social web of human, constructed support. Our lives are enriched by Mozart and Bob Marley and the Wailers, bringing to us a world of synthesized, transformed beauty and satisfaction.

Yet we also use our transforming capacity destructively – to annihilate a quarter of the species in this world, to hurt our brothers and sisters. It is we who do this; there is no hiding behind a “they.” This seems to be our dark side. We have a problem in finding a balance, with not letting our transforming nature run amok; we seem to have difficulty in cooperating with our own world.

In the tradition I come from, the Jewish tradition, there is a concept that is relevant to this theme of natural/unnatural. It is *tikkun*. The word literally means “repair” – of a shoe, but also of a soul, of the world. The sense is of change by human intervention. So the word's meaning shades over to transformation. *Tikkun olam* – the transformation of the world, by human beings, more than a salvaging, a making of our future consistent with what we are given.

Friends, it is not given to us not to make new things -- be they molecules, a sculpture, or a civil rights bill that a president vetoes. We are sentenced by our nature to create. But we do have a choice, to fashion this world in consonance with the best in us, or the worst. One can doubt about whether our transformations are of human value. But there can be no doubt as to what they should be.⁵

I think you get by now the picture, a thoroughly mixed-up modern man, claiming to be a non-believer, but reaching out after religion. In my case that reaching out has still other elements; I'm writing a series of essays on issues of science, art and Jewish tradition, together with a remarkable Israeli scholar, Shira

