

The Desert

Boundlessness and emptiness—these are the two most expressive symbols of that attributeless Godhead, of whom all that can be said is St. Bernard’s *Nescio nescio* or the Vedantist’s “not this, not this.” The Godhead, says Meister Eckhart, must be loved “as not-God, not-Spirit, not-person, not-image, must be loved as He is, a sheer pure absolute One, sundered from all twoness, and in whom we must eternally sink from nothingness to nothingness.” In the scriptures of Northern and Far Eastern Buddhism the spatial metaphors recur again and again. At the moment of death, writes the author of *Bardo Thodol*, “all things are like the cloudless sky; and the naked immaculate Intellect is like unto a translucent void without circumference or center.” “The great Way,” in Sosan’s words, “is perfect, like unto vast space, with nothing wanting, nothing superfluous.” “Mind,” says Hui-neng (and he is speaking of that universal ground of consciousness, from which all beings, the unenlightened no less than the enlightened, take their source), “mind is like emptiness of space. . . Space contains sun, moon, stars, the great earth, with its mountains and rivers. . . Good men and bad men, good things and bad things, heaven and hell—they are all in empty space. The emptiness of Self-nature is in all people just like this.” The theologians argue, the dogmatists declaim their credos; but their propositions “stand in no intrinsic relation to my inner light. This Inner Light” (I quote from Yoka Dashi’s “Song of Enlightenment”) “can be likened to space; it knows no boundaries; yet it is always here, is always with us, always retains its serenity and fullness. . . You cannot take hold of it, and you cannot get rid of it; it goes on its own way. You speak and it is silent; you remain silent, and it speaks.”

Silence is the cloudless heaven perceived by another sense. Like space and emptiness, it is a natural symbol of the divine. In the Mithraic mysteries, the candidate for initiation was told to lay a finger to his lips and whisper: “Silence! Silence! Silence—symbol of the living imperishable God!” And long before the coming of Christianity to the Thebaid, there had been Egyptian mystery religions, for whose followers God was a well of life, “closed to him who speaks, but open to the silent.” The Hebrew scriptures are eloquent almost to excess; but even here, among the splendid rumblings of prophetic praise and impetration and anathema, there are occasional references to the spiritual meaning and the therapeutic virtues of silence. “Be still, and know that I am God.” “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the world keep silence before him.” “Keep thou silence at the presence of the Lord God.” The desert, after all, began within a few miles of the gates of Jerusalem.

The facts of silence and emptiness are traditionally the symbols of divine immanence—but not, of course, for everyone, and not in all circumstances. “Until one has crossed a barren desert, without food or water, under a burning tropical sun,

at three miles an hour, one can form no conception of what misery is.” These are the words of a gold-seeker, who took the southern route to California in 1849. Even when one is crossing it at seventy miles an hour on a four-lane highway, the desert can seem formidable enough. To the forty-niners it was unmitigated hell. Men and women who are at her mercy find it hard to see in Nature and her works any symbols but those of brute power at the best and, at the worst, of an obscure and mindless malice. The desert’s emptiness and the desert’s silence reveal what we may call their spiritual meanings only to those who enjoy some measure of physiological security. The security may amount to no more than St. Anthony’s hut and daily ration of bread and vegetables, no more than Milarepa’s cave and barley meal and boiled nettles—less than what any sane economist would regard as the indispensable minimum, but still security, still a guarantee of organic life and, along with life, of the possibility of spiritual liberty and transcendental happiness.

But even for those who enjoy security against the assaults of the environment, the desert does not always or inevitably reveal its spiritual meanings. The early Christian hermits retired to the Thebaid because its air was purer, because there were fewer distractions, because God seemed nearer there than in the world of men. But, alas, dry places are notoriously the abode of unclean spirits, seeking rest and finding it not. If the immanence of God was sometimes more easily discoverable in the desert, so also, and all too frequently, was the immanence of the devil. St. Anthony’s temptations have become a legend, and Cassian speaks of “the tempests of imagination” through which every newcomer to the eremitic life had to pass. Solitude, he writes, makes men feel “the many-winged folly of their souls. . . ; they find the perpetual silence intolerable, and those whom no labor on the land could weary, are vanquished by doing nothing and worn out by the long duration of their peace.” Be still, and know that I am God; be still, and know that you are the delinquent imbecile who snarls and gibbers in the basement of every human mind. The desert can drive men mad, but it can also help them to become supremely sane.

The enormous drafts of emptiness and silence prescribed by the eremites are safe medicine only for a few exceptional souls. By the majority the desert should be taken either dilute or, if at full strength, in small doses. Used in this way, it acts as a spiritual restorative, as an anti-hallucinant, as a de-tensioner and alterative.

In his book, *The Next Million Years*, Sir Charles Darwin looks forward to thirty thousand generations of ever more humans pressing ever more heavily on ever dwindling resources and being killed off in ever increasing numbers by famine, pestilence and war. He may be right. Alternatively, human ingenuity may somehow falsify his predictions. But even human ingenuity will find it hard to circumvent arithmetic.

On a planet of limited area, the more people there are, the less vacant space there is bound to be. Over and above the material and sociological problems of increasing population, there is a serious psychological problem. In a completely home-made environment, such as is provided by any great metropolis, it is as hard to remain sane as it is in a completely natural environment such as the desert or the forest. O Solitude, where are thy charms? But, O Multitude, where are thine! The most wonderful thing about America is that, even in these middle years of the twentieth century, there are so few Americans. By taking a certain amount of trouble you might still be able to get yourself eaten by a bear in the state of New York. And without any trouble at all you can get bitten by a rattler in the Hollywood hills, or die of thirst, while wandering through an uninhabited desert, within a hundred and fifty miles of Los Angeles. A short generation ago you might have wandered and died within only a hundred miles of Los Angeles. Today the mounting tide of humanity has oozed through the intervening canyons and spilled out into the wide Mojave. Solitude is receding at the rate of four and a half kilometers per annum.

And yet, in spite of it all, the silence persists. For this silence of the desert is such that casual sounds, and even the systematic noise of civilization, cannot abolish it. They coexist with it—as small irrelevances at right angles to an enormous meaning, as veins of something analogous to darkness within an enduring transparency. From the irrigated land come the dark gross sounds of lowing cattle, and above them the plovers trail their vanishing threads of shrillness. Suddenly, startlingly, out of the sleeping sagebrush there bursts the shrieking of coyotes—Trio for Ghoul and Two Damned Souls. On the trunks of cottonwood trees, on the wooden walls of barns and houses, the woodpeckers rattle away like pneumatic drills. Picking one's way between the cactuses and the creosote bushes one hears, like some tiny whirring clockwork, the soliloquies of invisible wrens, the calling, at dusk, of the nightjays and even occasionally the voice of *Homo sapiens*—six of the species in a parked Chevrolet, listening to the broadcast of a prize fight, or else in pairs necking to the delicious accompaniment of Crosby. But the light forgives, the distances forget, and this great crystal of silence, whose base is as large as Europe and whose height, for all practical purposes, is infinite, can coexist with things of a far higher order of discrepancy than canned sentiment or vicarious sport. Jet planes, for example—the stillness is so massive that it can absorb even jet planes. The screaming crash mounts to its intolerable climax and fades again, mounts as another of the monsters rips through the air, and once more diminishes and is gone. But even at the height of the outrage the mind can still remain aware of that which surrounds it, that which preceded and will outlast it.

Progress, however, is on the march. Jet planes are already as characteristic of the desert as are Joshua trees or burrowing owls; they will soon be almost as numerous. The wilderness has entered the armament race, and will be in it to the end. In its multi-million-acred emptiness there is room enough to explode atomic bombs and experiment with guided missiles. The weather, so far as flying is concerned, is uniformly excellent, and in the plains lie the flat beds of many lakes, dry since the last Ice Age, and manifestly intended by Providence for hot-rod racing and jets. Huge airfields have already been constructed. Factories are going up. Oases are turning into industrial towns. In brand-new Reservations, surrounded by barbed wire and the FBI, not Indians but tribes of physicists, chemists, metallurgists, communication engineers and mechanics are working with the co-ordinated frenzy of termites. From their air-conditioned laboratories and machine shops there flows a steady stream of marvels, each one more expensive and each more fiendish than the last. The desert silence is still there; but so, ever more noisily, are the scientific irrelevancies. Give the boys in the reservations a few more years and another hundred billion dollars, and they will succeed (for with technology all things are possible) in abolishing the silence, in transforming what are now irrelevancies into the desert's fundamental meaning. Meanwhile, and luckily for us, it is noise which is exceptional; the rule is still this crystalline symbol of universal Mind.

The bulldozers roar, the concrete is mixed and poured, the jet planes go crashing through the air, the rockets soar aloft with their cargoes of white mice and electronic instruments. And yet for all this, "nature is never spent; there lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

And not merely the dearest, but the strangest, the most wonderfully unlikely. I remember, for example, a recent visit to one of the new Reservations. It was in the spring of 1952 and, after seven years of drought, the rains of the preceding winter had been copious. From end to end the Mojave was carpeted with flowers—sunflowers, and the dwarf phlox, chicory and coreopsis, wild hollyhock and all the tribe of garlics and lilies. And then, as we neared the Reservation, the flower carpet began to move. We stopped the car, we walked into the desert to take a closer look. On the bare ground, on every plant and bush innumerable caterpillars were crawling. They were of two kinds—one smooth, with green and white markings, and a horn, like that of a miniature rhinoceros, growing out of its hinder end. The caterpillar, evidently, of one of the hawk moths. Mingled with these, in millions no less uncountable, were the brown hairy offspring of (I think) the Painted Lady butterfly. They were everywhere—over hundreds of square miles of the desert. And yet, a year before, when the eggs from which these larvae had emerged were laid, California had been

as dry as a bone. On what, then, had the parent insects lived? And what had been the food of their innumerable offspring? In the days when I collected butterflies and kept their young in glass jars on the window sill of my cubicle at school, no self-respecting caterpillar would feed on anything but the leaves to which its species had been predestined. Puss moths laid their eggs on poplars, spurge hawks on spurges; mulleins were frequented by the gaily piebald caterpillars of one rather rare and rigidly fastidious moth. Offered an alternative diet, my caterpillars would turn away in horror. They were like orthodox Jews confronted by pork or lobsters; they were like Brahmins at a feast of beef prepared by Untouchables. Eat? Never. They would rather die. And if the right food were not forthcoming, die they did. But these caterpillars of the desert were apparently different. Crawling into irrigated regions, they had devoured the young leaves of entire vineyards and vegetable gardens. They had broken with tradition, they had flouted the immemorial taboos. Here, near the Reservation, there was no cultivated land. These hawk moth and Painted Lady caterpillars, which were all full grown, must have fed on indigenous growths—but which, I could never discover; for when I saw them the creatures were all crawling at random, in search either of something juicier to eat or else of some place to spin their cocoons. Entering the Reservation, we found them all over the parking lot and even on the steps of the enormous building which housed the laboratories and the administrative offices. The men on guard only laughed or swore. But could they be absolutely sure? Biology has always been the Russians' strongest point. These innumerable crawlers—perhaps they were Soviet agents? Parachuted from the stratosphere, impenetrably disguised, and so thoroughly indoctrinated, so completely conditioned by means of post-hypnotic suggestions that even under torture it would be impossible for them to confess, even under DDT...

Our party showed its pass and entered. The strangeness was no longer Nature's; it was strictly human. Nine and a half acres of floor space, nine and a half acres of the most extravagant improbability. Sagebrush and wild flowers beyond the windows; but here, within, machine tools capable of turning out anything from a tank to an electron microscope; million-volt X-ray cameras; electric furnaces; wind tunnels; refrigerated vacuum tanks; and on either side of endless passages closed doors bearing inscriptions which had obviously been taken from last year's science fiction magazines. (This year's space ships, of course, have harnessed gravitation and magnetism.) ROCKET DEPARTMENT, we read on door after door. ROCKET AND EXPLOSIVES DEPARTMENT, ROCKET PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT. And what lay behind the unmarked doors? Rockets and Canned Tularemia? Rockets and Nuclear Fission? Rockets and Space Cadets? Rockets and Elementary

Courses in Martian Language and Literature?

It was a relief to get back to the caterpillars. Ninety-nine point nine recurring per cent of the poor things were going to die—but not for an ideology, not while doing their best to bring death to other caterpillars, not to the accompaniment of *Te Deums*, of *Dulce et decorums*, of “We shall not sheathe the sword, which we have not lightly drawn, until. . .” Until what? The only completely unconditional surrender will come when everybody—but everybody—is a corpse.

For modern man, the really blessed thing about Nature is its otherness. In their anxiety to find a cosmic basis for human values, our ancestors invented an emblematic botany, a natural history composed of allegories and fables, an astronomy that told fortunes and illustrated the dogmas of revealed religion. “In the Middle Ages,” writes Emile Male, “the idea of a thing which a man formed for himself, was always more real than the thing itself. . . The study of things for their own sake held no meaning for the thoughtful man. . . The task for the student of nature was to discover the eternal truth which God would have each thing express.” These eternal truths expressed by things were not the laws of physical and organic being—laws discoverable only by patient observation and the sacrifice of preconceived ideas and autistic urges; they were the notions and fantasies engendered in the minds of logicians, whose major premises, for the most part, were other fantasies and notions bequeathed to them by earlier writers. Against the belief that such purely verbal constructions were eternal truths, only the mystics protested; and the mystics were concerned only with that “obscure knowledge,” as it was called, which comes when a man “sees all in all.” But between the real but obscure knowledge of the mystic and the clear but unreal knowledge of the verbalist, lies the clearish and realish knowledge of the naturalist and the man of science. It was knowledge of a kind which most of our ancestors found completely uninteresting.

Reading the older descriptions of God’s creatures, the older speculations about the ways and workings of Nature, we start by being amused. But the amusement soon turns to the most intense boredom and a kind of mental suffocation. We find ourselves gasping for breath in a world where all the windows are shut and everything “wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell.” Words are the greatest, the most momentous of all our inventions, and the specifically human realm is the realm of language. In the stifling universe of medieval thought, the given facts of Nature were treated as the symbols of familiar notions. Words did not stand for things; things stood for pre-existent words. This is a pitfall which, in the natural sciences, we have learned to avoid. But in other contexts than the scientific—in the context, for example, of politics—we continue to take our verbal symbols with

the same disastrous seriousness as was displayed by our crusading and persecuting ancestors. For both parties, the people on the other side of the Iron Curtain are not human beings, but merely the embodiments of the pejorative phrases coined by propagandists.

Nature is blessedly non-human; and insofar as we belong to the natural order, we too are blessedly non-human. The otherness of caterpillars, as of our own bodies, is an otherness underlain by a principal identity. The non-humanity of wild flowers, as of the deepest levels of our own minds, exists within a system which includes and transcends the human. In the given realm of the inner and outer not-self, we are all one. In the home-made realm of symbols we are separate and mutually hostile partisans. Thanks to words, we have been able to rise above the brutes; and thanks to words, we have often sunk to the level of the demons. Our statesmen have tried to come to an international agreement on the use of atomic power. They have not been successful. And even if they had, what then? No agreement on atomic power can do any lasting good, unless it be preceded by an agreement on language. If we make a wrong use of nuclear fission, it will be because we have made a wrong use of the symbols, in terms of which we think about ourselves and other people. Individually and collectively, men have always been the victims of their own words; but, except in the emotionally neutral field of science, they have never been willing to admit their linguistic ineptitude, and correct their mistakes. Taken too seriously, symbols have motivated and justified all the horrors of recorded history. On every level from the personal to the international, the letter kills. Theoretically we know this very well. In practice, nevertheless, we continue to commit the suicidal blunders to which we have become accustomed.

The caterpillars were still on the march when we left the Reservation, and it was half an hour or more, at a mile a minute, before we were clear of them. Among the phloxes and the sunflowers, millions in the midst of hundreds of millions, they proclaimed (along with the dangers of over-population) the strength, the fecundity, the endless resourcefulness of life. We were in the desert, and the desert was blossoming, the desert was crawling. I had not seen anything like it since that spring day, in 1948, when we had been walking at the other end of the Mojave, near the great earthquake fault, down which the highway descends to San Bernardino and the orange groves. The elevation here is around four thousand feet and the desert is dotted with dark clumps of juniper. Suddenly, as we moved through the enormous emptiness, we became aware of an entirely unfamiliar interruption to the silence. Before, behind, to right and to left, the sound seemed to come from all directions. It was a small sharp crackling, like the ubiquitous frying of bacon, like the first

flames in the kindling of innumerable bonfires. There seemed to be no explanation. And then, as we looked more closely, the riddle gave up its answer. Anchored to a stem of sagebrush, we saw the horny pupa of cicada. It had begun to split and the full-grown insect was in process of pushing its way out. Each time it struggled, its case of amber-colored chitin opened a little more widely. The continuous crackling that we heard was caused by the simultaneous emergence of thousands upon thousands of individuals. How long they had spent underground I could never discover. Dr. Edmund Jaeger, who knows as much about the fauna and flora of the Western deserts as anyone now living, tells me that the habits of this particular cicada have never been closely studied. He himself had never witnessed the mass resurrection upon which we had had the good fortune to stumble. All one can be sure of is that these creatures had spent anything from two to seventeen years in the soil, and that they had all chosen this particular May morning to climb out of the grave, burst their coffins, dry their moist wings and embark upon their life of sex and song.

Three weeks later we heard and saw another detachment of the buried army coming out into the sun among the pines and the flowering fremontias of the San Gabriel Mountains. The chill of two thousand additional feet of elevation had postponed the resurrection; but when it came, it conformed exactly to the pattern set by the insects of the desert: the risen pupa, the crackle of splitting horn, the helpless imago waiting for the sun to bake it into perfection, and then the flight, the tireless singing, so unremitting that it becomes a part of the silence. The boys in the Reservations are doing their best; and perhaps, if they are given the necessary time and money, they may really succeed in making the planet uninhabitable. Applied Science is a conjuror, whose bottomless hat yields impartially the softest of Angora rabbits and the most petrifying of Medusas. But I am still optimist enough to credit life with invincibility, I am still ready to bet that the non-human otherness at the root of man's being will ultimately triumph over the all too human selves who frame the ideologies and engineer the collective suicides. For our survival, if we do survive, we shall be less beholden to our common sense (the name we give to what happens when we try to think of the world in terms of the unanalyzed symbols supplied by language and the local customs) than to our caterpillar- and cicada-sense, to intelligence, in other words, as it operates on the organic level. That intelligence is at once a will to persistence and an inherited knowledge of the physiological and psychological means by which, despite all the follies of the loquacious self, persistence can be achieved. And beyond survival is transfiguration; beyond and including animal grace is the grace of that other not-self, of which the desert silence and the desert emptiness are the most expressive symbols.