

Rendezvous

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Disbelief, Poetry and Religion

Roald Hoffmann

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

Leibowitz.⁶

What can he say, this supposedly rational scientist, in rationalizing self-defense?

First something specific, about being Jewish. The ambiguities you see in me are awfully typical, as much as I would like to be different, of assimilated Jews of this century. My, our, problem derives from the fact that Jewish ethnicity and religion were inexorably connected to each other throughout the exile. They were kept so by internal forces (the will and desire to believe) and external ones (often inimical surroundings). There are the interesting periods of Hellenistic and Islamic tolerance and consequent assimilation, but the Jewish people really remained Jewish because they were religious. And here we are, I and others, we break our religious bond, yet still want an association with a people. So we devise a Jewish ethnicity, separate from religion, an ethnicity which may or may not have been there, and often is reduced to such trivia as eating bagels, cream cheese, and lox

There is no doubt – the evidence was displayed to you – that I feel a tug to the religious and ethical, and specifically to my Jewish heritage. Actually I feel that tug to other ritual-filled religions as well; I have no trouble giving an offering to Shiva in a Hindu temple, and when I listen to a Mass sung in English, I translate it into Latin. I like saying those words in the Mass, singing those psalms, even if I don't believe the words.

Clearly I am drawn to Jewish religious learning because I want to know my roots. And the roots of my ancestors are indeed religious. I have a photograph of my great-grandfather, and he wore a caftan and black hat. Only my father, good socialist that he was, threw away his yarmulka. To understand my people I need to know how they interpreted the story of Rachel and Leah, as one of two competing or cooperating sisters, or how the Talmud decides whether a side of beef found in the street is kosher or not. I want to know how they thought. And they thought and acted within the observant, religious framework.

Where does the tug come from? Not from a doubt as to the nonexistence of a deity (a double negative – I mean I still do not believe). It comes from a recognition of the moral and ethical base of most world religions. I believe strongly in a spiritual base of our existence, that man or woman does not live by bread alone. The spiritual manifests itself in so many guises – the physical phenomenon well-described by a mathematical equation, Kathleen Battle and Wynton Marsalis singing and playing Handel's "Let the Bright Seraphim," the hug given to a crying child. Religion serves well the spiritual side; science has little to do with it.

Just when I feel like giving into the tug, I find plenty to push me away. It's not the role of this or that church in inciting people to kill my ancestors – the Nazis

didn't need a church – it's the continuing spectacle of people killing each other because of just this differentiation – in Bombay, Beirut, Belfast, or Baku. And the B's are just the beginning. Am I to be blamed if I view the social, human face of the churches, mosques, synagogues as a veneer hiding something else? A chill travels down my spine as I think of this.

With all the desire to understand my origins, even within my own tradition there were things that turned me against religion. All quite typical. First, my parents, unreligious as they were, put me into a Jewish religious school to prepare for the Bar Mitzvah. I was not mature enough to take in the tradition then, but who would expect a 12-year old to be so? I didn't react well to the school – suffice it to say that this was the only time in the life of an overachiever where he tried to get low grades. A second instance, later in life, but cutting deeper, was when my parents and relatives tried to stop me from marrying my wife, who is not Jewish. They were desperate and struck out in ways untypical of them. I reciprocated. I don't tell you these stories with pride. They sound as if I'm blaming my parents (so what else is new?) for my lack of belief. But in fact the origins of doubt are deeper, entirely within me.

My profession, that of a chemist, has little to do with my skepticism. The days of battle between religion and science (the title of an influential book by one of Cornell's founders⁷), in my view, are past. If a conflict is joined, it is when either religion or science oversteps its bounds – religion trying to dictate how the material world is to be perceived, science claiming dominion over the spirit. I see around me a substantial number of creative, intelligent scientists who are religious. One interesting example is that of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – there are many very good Mormon scientists.

How to find a resolution? I want to accept the imperfection of religious belief, in the same way that I accept the imperfection of human beings in general, and of myself in particular. We should be good, but we are not, at least some of the time. Within myself, I do not believe in a deity, but I believe in things of the spirit. I like what religious systems do. I hate what they do. I accept my ambivalence.

Let me put it in another way. That science and religion only contend, or that they occupy separate rooms in our souls, one not relevant to the other, these are both impoverishing views. Knowledge, aesthetics and faith cohabit. They speak to each other in our minds, sometimes easily, sometimes with difficulty, and their merged or intertwined voices shape human understanding.

Here are three poems that perhaps do not clarify my confusion. But they do point to some resolution, at least for me:

JUAN DE PRADO IN AMSTERDAM, 1656

Juan de Prado, a contemporary of Spinoza, was a Marrano who returned to Judaism while still in Spain. He escaped to Amsterdam and tried to adapt to Jewish life there, with difficulty. His friend, Baltasar Orabio, wrote to him: "It is only to you that it so happened to be a fake Christian and a true Jew where you could not be a Jew, and to be a fake Jew where you could be truly Jewish."

– Y. Yovel in "Spinoza and Other Heretics" ⁸

On this day the rabbis will have you
repent, in the city of East Indian smells,
foul canals, hawkers of eels and sweets

crowding the alley to the Spanish synagogue.
A smell, of cracked almonds, takes you back
to Alcala de Henares, the boy sent to secure

the shuttered house before mother lit candles
in a cellar. You remember Diego de Oropesa
summoned before the Holy Office for changing

his shirt on the Sabbath, a sign clear enough
to damn a lapsed Marrano. There you learned
the gift of word-husks hiding the spark

of the true word. In the cool North, none
seems to care, Jews are almost as good
as Christians, and you chafe against old

Law to be learned. But there is another,
the lens-grinder with long black hair; gently
he tells you that Augustine, who wrote

"unless you believe you will not understand,"
had it wrong way around. On his ring,
the motto "Be Careful," and so you are,

more than he, you are, out of habit, till
the rabbi sets a student to spy on his teacher,

and you, lulled by the free Dutch wind, tell him

the world was not forged in a week, tell him
the dead are just dead, and the only truth
was taught to you by Torquemada -- doubt.

ISAAC'S FALL

There's a Jewish tradition of magic, interrelated with the kabbalah. In it Abraham was seen as possessing special knowledge. Here is what Abraham Yagel (1553-1623), a Northern Italian physician and kabbalist, writes: "Abraham our father ... observed the ways of judgment of the orders of creation and the categories and types. Then he united them by their essences according to the levels of the worlds ... for their sound is the sound of falling water in a waterfall whose end is in its beginning and cleaves one to the other."⁹

1

Abraham our father named
the falls for the boy, who
on their way up the mountain
first heard their hidden waters.
But there was no time to stop,
holy things to be done. Then
Isaac fled into the desert and
Abraham came on them alone.

2

Isaac's fall sets out with a stock-
still green sheet, a hint wavering
its low edge, where jutting rock
astonishingly dry on end, cleaves
the curtain, and then, which is now,
chaos and gravity brawl in hissing
plunge of water breaking up ledge
to obstacle ledge. Abraham's eyes
follow a stream down, then slip
free of that flux, up to where
choice made itself available,

in a notch of white foam, to be
pulled again, in spurts braiding
inexorably down, to the severed
waters' into dear water reunion.
Downstream, in quiet green pools,
over flat rocks, the water rests.

3

Abraham followed a goat track
to the top of the falls, watched
an olive branch float to the rim.
He found it, silver leaves unbroken,
in the pool below. Abraham dreamt
of waters rising in the desert,
turned by God's breath to clouds
and rain, he woke to Isaac's fall's
hiss, heard the song of first things,
of the waterfall whose end is in its
beginning. The orders of creation
denominated, in his power, Abraham
the Magician unhitched his donkey
to ride down the mountain, to tell
Sara their son would be back, soon.

REWRIT

When God made the sun
he lay back on his white
sand beach, and reaching
out, with both pale hands,
into his space, he shaped
there a sphere of hydrogen,
God did, set it alight
with his nuclear fire. He
felt, God felt, its warmth
on his soft hand. And
it was good, it was his sun.

When God set about next
to make the moon, he put
his feet on the ice cap
of Mars, and reached out
again, seizing a piece
of an old sun, and God
threw it, like a snowball,
at his earth. The earth
rocked, and so the moon,
God's moon, came to be. He
felt its reflecting light,
and it was good, his moon.

When the time came for God
to people this blue earth,
he stood knee-deep in paddy
and sea, and, dear God, he
didn't make people in his
image, but just reached out
his now sunburnt hands
to plant a mitochondrion,
here a squid's eye, a seed
of rice. Hazard he gave them,
rules, God's time, and soon
enough, the creatures came,
spoke. It was good, the word
between God and his people.

Endnotes

¹ Carlos Fuentes. *Cristobal Nonato*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1987. Translated by Alfred MacAdam and Carlos Fuentes as Christopher Unborn. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990.

² Martin Buber. *Tales of the Hasidim. Vol. I: The Early Masters*. New York: Schocken Books, 1947. 95-96.

³ "Stretch Marks" was published, in modified form, in *Negative Capablity VIII (III)*, 37 (1988), and in *Gaps and Verges*. Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1990.

⁴ "The Devil Teaches Thermodynamics," *Webster Review*, XI (2), 41 (1986). Also, *The Metamict State*. Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1987.

⁵ Roald Hoffmann and Vivian Torrance. *Chemistry Imagined*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

⁶ Roald Hoffmann and Shira Leibowitz. "Molecular Mimicry, Rachel and Leah, the Israeli Male, and the Inescapable Metaphor in Science." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 30 (3), 382 (1991). Shira Leibowitz and Roald Hoffmann. "Can You Build a Succa from an Elephant?" *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, Oct. 13, 1989, p. 4. Shira Leibowitz and Roald Hoffmann. "Signs and Portents: No Parking in the Courtroom." *Diacritics*, 21 (1), 2, 1991.

⁷ Andrew Dickson White. *The Warfare of Science and Religion*. New York: Appleton, 1877.

⁸ Yirmiyahu Yovel. *Spinoza and Other Heretics. Volume I: The Marrano of Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

⁹ David B. Ruderman. *Kabbalah, Magic and Science: the Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.