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To Understand Nihilism is to Know of the  
Experience of Nothingness

[This theme will be used in the course of analysis of Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment, and for all our explorations in existential literature of the imagination.]

Hardly anyone can become a sensitive, intelligent adult in the modern world without experiencing those feelings of strangeness, emptiness, and dread to which the words "nihilism" and "nothingness" point. Some men have made out of these feelings an argument for concentration camps, sadism, and moral heedlessness. Others have made out of them an argument for man's total responsibility for himself and for others. Some men have heard in these feelings the silence of the true God; others the silence of an unattended universe. One way or another these experiences must be interpreted. Even to ignore them, to turn away from encounter, to repress them, pretend they simply are not a part of life, is still to foist an interpretation on them: that they are unreal, unimportant, misleading, frightening.

Why, we may ask, is it that the modern world has become the chosen arena of such feelings? The word "nihilism" was first used at the beginning of the nineteenth century; later its use became widespread through the novels of Turgenev and Dostoyevsky and through the unsparing analysis of Nietzsche. The contemporary world in the years of post World Wars I and II learned to interpret the experience of nothingness at first hand through real conditions of life. But what about America? For a long time optimistic, busy mastering a continent and then the world and outer space, emphasizing unlimited horizons of achievement, ever upbeat, the American psyche seemed impervious to the experience of nothingness. The power of positive thinking produced a society that could embrace an optimistic, comfortable pragmatism that embodied a metaphysics of gradual progress, democratic soundness and middle-class contentment. Progress was the most important value.

From the point of view of the experience of nothingness, however, claims to human progress are as illusory as any others. History may be going nowhere in particular. The individual human being, as well as the entire social organism, meets to-day exactly the same fate as formerly: death, alienation, estrangement. Democratic forms of life do not prevent a nation from becoming militarist, counter-revolutionary, and racist. Technological advancement is morally neutral. Technical mastery over his environment makes man his own foremost enemy, rather than nature. Is that prospect benevolent? The contemporary world puts the scientific method to use through the myth that knowledge is power. The power created by this method may be used to predict, to control and to annihilate human behavior, rather than enlighten it. Is this a benevolent prospect?

A kind of giddiness, dizziness, arises from one's attempts to define the experience of nothingness. One's former goals, aims, purposes now seem suspended in air. The structure one had put into existence one pulls out. The unity of one's life slips from the grasp and dissolves. Raw tumultuous experience is overwhelming: how can one shape it, manage it, reduce it to form? Action is problematical because no goal seems more valuable, more useful, or more attractive than any other. It is as though at the heart of the human animal there were a love of dissolution, a longing to split into a million measureless particles and fly apart in scattered mist. The experience of nothingness is an experience of the formlessness at the heart of human consciousness. We exist only through form; the experience of our formlessness is terrifying. We know our kinship to nothingness. We dread being reminded of it.

A middle-class life is stable because its forms have the power of myth. Those forms silently shape perceptions and expectations. Securely kept outside the trimmed hedges of modern suburbia is the personal awareness of such realities as hunger,

disease, ignorance, confusion, violence exploitation and risk, all that which is the very stuff of existence for most beings in human history. It is no wonder that young people of the middle class can hardly understand the philosophy and literature of the humanities since all of their experience is geared to the acquisition of money and success which guarantees the "apple-pie and mom" myth. What is remarkable is that SOME young people in our nuclear age, within recent years, have seen through the illusions of scientific, technical and democratic stability. They have tasted nothingness. Their refusal to accept the most powerful fantasy of security ever attained by human beings is one of the great spiritual triumphs of history. Their lack of spiritual discipline and of a tradition which could deal with nothingness, makes their triumph fragile and dangerous.

A middle class life promises the safe attainment of individuality. The truth is, however, that the more of an individual one becomes, the less tractable, affable, docile, group-centered, and other-centered one becomes. Life in a capitalist technical society (or indeed in a socialist technical society) is a contradiction between the demands of teamwork and the demands of the impulsive self. "If everyone does what he pleases," the capitalist worries, "imagine the resulting chaos." "Not chaos", the anarchist smilingly replies. "Rugged individualism". And so we might carry the debate to the very seat of learning itself-to the philosopher.

Question: "Professor, help me to understand, explain to me what is this nothingness?"

Answer: "Be more objective, do not regard your feelings. Discipline yourself to measurement. Be clear, formulate a testable proposition."

Question: "What does it mean to feel nothingness."

Answer: "Ah, a specific feeling, isn't it? So it isn't 'nothingness', then, literally is it?"

The professor speaks as the mouthpiece of an eminent profession, not as a person, he turns aside from the question and answers objectively, deaf to the plaintive response. "But professor, I hear you speaking. Where is that objective world that your clarity rests upon? Why must I acquire the proper discipline in order to perceive objectively? So that I may be numbered among the reasonable? And if I refuse?

The experience of nothingness arises when one perceives the questionableness of every form whatsoever. Even facts may be questioned, since they may have been incorrectly perceived, ordered or transmitted. Nothing is perceived except from a point of view. And from whose point of view are correct points of view to be selected? The root of the experience of nothingness is man's capacity to question everything whatsoever, including his own capacity to question. This savage questioning lies at the heart of Dostoyevsky's novels and in the work of those writers whom we label existentialists. Nietzsche, following Dostoyevsky, analyzed the experience of nothingness from many different perspectives in the first part of The Will to Power. Kafka's novels The Trial and The Castle, and his short stories "The Metamorphosis" and "The Bucket Rider" allow us to enter into a feeling of loss, horror, and dreadful helplessness. Jean-Paul Sartre's No Exit and Nausea explore the alienation of the Cartesian consciousness from its own body, from its physical environment and from other people. ("I think, therefore I am" - as if I were merely an isolated consciousness.) Albert Camus saw his work as an effort to begin within the experience of nothingness - to accept it as given in modern civilization - and to construct out of it an "ethic of happiness". The hero of his novel The Stranger achieves joy by making a decision to keep both his imminent execution and his longing for love and understanding fused. This triumph of human spirit over futility was tutored by the malignancy of Hitler's version of nihilism. Camus in all his work struggles to find a social ground on which men who cannot deny the experience of nothingness can, nevertheless, united in their suffering and mutual vulnerability, struggle to diminish the number of those who suffer. This existential experience was never more viable than in the concentration camps of World War II.

For a long time Western consciousness rested upon three fundamental images: 1) that each man is equally precious in God's sight; 2) that God holds each man accountable for his historical actions which should produce the "New Jerusalem" ("Thy Kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven"); 3) that all phenomena of human experience, no matter how random or trivial, are comprehended and united in the mind of God. Men, therefore, could feel that everything they might experience was related, had a place, offered an ultimate meaning--nothing was wasted, nothing was random, nothing was unconnected--there was purpose even in suffering.

The experience of nothingness arose when men glimpsed the possibility that human life may not be structured either by a personal God or by an impersonal reason--that neither religion nor its popularized replacement, science, gives adequate shape to man's experiences and above all his questions. The forms inherited from religion and scientific progress are comforting--but what if they do not apply? Dostoyevsky's "underground man" and expressly his character Raskolnikov, (Crime and Punishment.) thought thoughts that neither religion nor science sanctioned. We witness Raskolnikov's dizziness and vertigo springing up from a fundamental formlessness: nothing shapes his experience adequately, every form to him becomes a mythical projection. Reason itself is not a foundation but an instrument; not a guarantor of progress but a fertile source of illusion and false security. Science does not tell Raskolnikov what the world is like; it gives back to him as it does to us mirror images of our own symbols, answering only those questions we happen to frame.

These issues lie at the heart of Dostoyevsky's work. We see the darkling world of the apostate rebel, the "young nihilist" who is alienated from himself, divided into two, the observer and the observed; subjugating emotion; permitting reason and efficiency to determine his activity, and finally we see him alienated from all others. At this stage of complete estrangement and in the ensuing formlessness Raskolnikov tastes the experience of nothingness. But the experience of nothingness is not an ending point, Dostoyevsky reveals to us; it is a starting point. What is to be done with the character from this point is a matter for shaping as the true artistic creator wills. Dostoyevsky chooses to give a Christian answer to his character's nihilism. He re-connects Raskolnikov with the earth, with community, honesty, courage and love--all those things without which the experience of nothingness would never have arisen. For we would not have such a fruitful and precious experience, arming us against the pretensions of structures and institutions, were it not for those who went before us teaching us how to question who we are and whence we came; teaching us to love equally the dark journey of the night as well as the brightness of the day.

-----We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time-----

(T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets".)

C.V.Z.

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None may usurp those heights that made sense for whom. The miseries of the world are theirs and shall be theirs.

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Will be to arrive where we started  
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1864 -- The only goal on earth toward which mankind is striving lies in the process of attaining, in other words, in life itself, and not in the thing to be attained.