

NIHILISM AND ANXIETY*

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LET me begin with the banal remark that nihilism comes from *nihil*, nothing, and also with the even more banal remark that the word ends with -ism. To both these facts the word nihilism obviously owes its questionable fame. Both facts explain why this word is thought to be modern, up-to-date, and representative of our *Zeitgeist*!

As a rule, any author and any movement succeeding in forming a word ending with -ism will surely get the attention of all the ism-addicts. And in a certain sense all of us are searching for an Ism.

For an Ism is always a sign of the fact that one has absolutized a principle, or to be more precise, that one thinks that it is possible to form a co-ordinated system, in which one can more or less provide a place for and bring into a certain order all phenomena of life.

He who speaks of Bolshevism thereby expresses his opinion that the whole of human existence, including its spiritual and psychic realms, can be fully understood from the standpoint of one particular principle, namely the principle of the material-economic structure of society.

He who talks about surrealism uses this word to say that human existence does not allow itself to be comprehended from the standpoint of statically conceived objectivity and therefore not by the fact that I receive this or that monthly salary, that I am healthy or sickly, that I am constitutionally phlegmatic or volcanic. On the contrary, surrealism means that I am surrounded by incomprehensible and quite often very weird powers, which intrude upon my existence again and again. There is a knocking at the gate as in Kafka's *Schlag ans Hoftor*, and out of this utterly insignificant knocking, which perhaps did not at all take place, arise weird fates. Or I am surrounded by the anonymous apparatus of bureaucracy, of which I am a part—Kafka describes this in his novel, *Der Prozess*. Or I am encircled by the rule of the manager; I am the bearer of a public opinion suggested to me and therefore the bearer of a "managed" opinion. And

* Translated from the German by John Holden.

I do not at all know how I came to the opinion. Or I am infected by an epidemic of an invisible anxiety which compels me to seek a world of miracle and of occult twilight. (One thinks of the fact that once again this is a great time for miracle-doctors, for astrology and its lucrative magazines.)

Thus surrealism in all its varieties always means the same thing; it allows itself to be defined best of all negatively; it means namely: man understands himself not from his own center, as though the stars of his destiny were really to be found in his own breast, as though one could therefore interpret man psychologically by penetrating the kernel of his personality. This penetration of the kernel of human personality is considered possible in the classical development-novel: Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and Keller's *Grüner Heinrich* understood themselves, so to speak, from the standpoint of their entelechy. Surrealism, however, asserts that man is to be explained only from outside himself, namely from that which surrounds and besieges him. Here in the *extra me* is concealed the principle which surrealism absolutizes.

Of course, it would be possible to present many more examples of principles which have become idols. We could say exactly the same about natural science's materialism or about Cauxism or about the vegetarianism of those who desire to eat greens. (For he who is a real vegetarian also has a philosophy of history inspired by this passionate desire. According to this philosophy of history he sees the fall of man and the rise of the beast as due to meat-eating.) Nevertheless I do not want to bore my readers with a long, drawn-out list of isms. I only want to show briefly that the inexhaustible amount of isms is eloquent testimony of the fact that there is no idea so small that out of it people have not been able to fabricate an ism and a *Weltanschauung*.

I

At this point we can make three observations. First, a linguistic one. For the most part the adjectives pertaining to the isms end with -istic, showing how strong the tendency is to set up absolutes. It would never occur to even the most peaceable communist to say that he is "bolshevish" or "communish." And likewise one can only imagine with difficulty an art historian who would say that Picasso sincerely means to be surreal. How would one imagine a "bolshevish" man? Perhaps a man who "also" sees something in not being

too capitalistic and liberal, who "also" would not care to give up completely the idea of a planned economy?

The adjectives which have been robbed of their -istic ending are at once philosophically castrated; they have lost their power and capacity for productivity. For Bolshevism would never want to be regarded as just having something in it. Above all, it would never want its thesis about the materialistic basis of history or about a socialistic economy to be classed as one point of view alongside many others. It would regard such an idea as a Titoistic or bourgeois or some other kind of falsification. On the contrary, Bolshevism insists that its thesis is the principle which absolutely lies at the basis of the world.

One cannot understand the thesis of the economic-materialistic structure of history as simply one element of a synthesis but only as an alternative, for which a decision without any compromise is demanded. One cannot be "bolshevish." For that would mean that one could also be a little capitalistic, somewhat Western—and with the reasoning that life as it is cannot be interpreted by a single absolutized principle but that life, viewed ideologically, is a fabric of ideas which cancel one another out and team up with one another. One can be only bolshevistic or non-bolshevistic. The same may be said about surrealism and other isms.

The adjectives ending with -istic are, as it were, watchmen over this totalitarian tendency of a principle. They are exclusive and unthinkable without a simultaneous anathema. They are so intolerant that compared with them the stakes of the Middle Ages seem like the torch of peace. Intolerance goes with an Ism. Isms refuse to be domesticated. They want to be the lords of the world-steppe.

The second observation. The occasional entity which one thus absolutizes belongs to the creation. When a definite area of creation is severed from the total unit of everything created, it is singled out and then placed in an absolute position. Consider the created entities "nation," "spirit," or "economy," all of which have been made into absolute ideas and therefore bearers of a *Weltanschauung*.

Connected with this is the fact that from the standpoint of an absolutized part of creation vast areas of the rest of creation cannot be comprehended. To be specific: if one understands the collective as the exclusive characteristic of human nature, then man as an indi-

vidual is left out. Then large realms of his selfhood—e.g., the loneliness of his guilt, of his suffering, of his dying—are not taken into account by the guiding principle; they become aimless vagabonds or wither away. If one on the other hand absolutizes man as an individual, then the personality-cult which arises allows the powers of the community to lie fallow and will some day provoke reactions in the opposite direction: Goethe's Werther is, as it were, by profession in love and is therefore a person whose love causes him to suffer. This isolated world of the ego—which naturally is not without its grandeur—must unwillingly help to make the world ripe for the collective which will surely dawn later. In any case, setting up absolutes gives rise to spheres, which are not subsumed and are therefore unbound. They form the zones of revolt and remain restless herds.

The third observation. All of this is connected with the fact that philosophies are subject to a lot of wear and tear. An absolute can hold out only for a short time before it succumbs to the opposing powers which it has provoked. In this sense, modern intellectual history with its changing of Isms resembles a gigantic parade of idols. What was only recently the basic principle of the world is in the next moment blown away like foam. And how comical the marching idols look from behind.

In all events we hold firmly to the following: The usurpation of the throne of the Creator by the creature is revenged. Large zones cannot be comprehended by the emerging creaturely parvenu, and this parvenu sees itself excluded by the forces of these other zones of human existence and consequently stripped of its pretended absoluteness.

II

This weird and always more delirious use of absolutes raises the question: Are not all those supposed fundamentals of life just mere pseudo-absolutes? And this question in its turn releases—in the form of a chain-reaction—the further question: What then is really substantial in human life if the supposed foundation continually gives way and draws us into the quicksand of the ever opening abyss? Has not almost every sexagenarian during the course of his life changed his Ism three times and thereby the essential fundamentals of his life? And have not the twenty-year-olds watched this process carefully and so acquired a skepticism which casts a gloom over their

young brows and lends to their faces something not to be found among the portraits of the youth of earlier generations and sometimes not even in the physiognomy of the youth of neutral and more fortunate countries? In associating with the younger generation, I believe, one cannot help but see that it approaches with skepticism every proclamation of an absolute whether proclaimed by political parties or by forces of tradition such as—let us say—Christianity. With this skepticism the younger generation filters doubly every absolute claim before it is willing to consider the claim more closely.

One filter is contained in the question: Does the man himself believe what he says? For the younger generation knows that the word in its modern degeneration into propaganda is robbed of its specific weight as the bearer of conviction. In the age of the manager most words are only repetitious. And there are few men who are more than mere functionaries of the *on dit*. Heidegger has neatly described this fact with his phrase *Verfallensein an das Man*. Therefore, into the place of the word, which is "confession" and thus contains a personal element, has stepped "ventriloquism," in view of which one is forced to ask: What is speaking through him? Often it is his party which speaks through him. This is betrayed by the kind of talk which one can frequently hear accompanying the wine and cigars after a political campaign speech: "As a private individual my opinion is You will understand that as an official I took the stand which I represented *before* the cigars." In this sense it can even happen that a Minister of Education opens his speech with the words: "If I were not an official of the government but had my own opinion"

Being myself in danger of provoking displeasure, I would like to say that ventriloquism is often times the lord and master of the university. Perhaps, however, the danger of making oneself unpopular by this remark is not so great, since everybody generally thinks it is the other fellow who is the dummy.

In any event, the word is not simply the bearer of a conviction but is frequently only the spume from the sea of the *Man*. Even the apparatus of word structure gives expression to this fact. For not only political parties but also many scientific schools, not only religious but also philosophical movements, develop their own definite vocabulary, which he who masters is able to handle, so to speak, mechanically and use without becoming personally a part of it. The more drastically the depersonalization progresses, the more autono-

mous the language becomes. The journalist of an outspoken party-newspaper and especially of a totalitarian party-newspaper need only roll off his phraseology without the least bit of worry; he need only allow himself to be carried along by the rolling operations of his mechanized nomenclature. For *he* does not speak, rather it speaks. To be more exact: the *ism* speaks.

The consequence of this amputation of the word from the person is that one questions the *credibility* of the person who speaks in this way, that one questions the presence of "existence" in his words. That is one of the two filters, which the skeptically inclined man of the younger generation uses.

The other filter is contained in the question: How am I being influenced? The young man who nowadays takes a trip and along the way buys a newspaper would never at all think of naively becoming absorbed in the editorial and of allowing himself to be instructed by its truths. He will, first of all, by a careful study of the masthead or by any other information—perhaps by a skeptical and suspicious analysis of the editorial itself—discover the powers which support it financially or dictate to it ideologically!

He knows quite well that only very few men and likewise very few printed opinions of these men are concerned with the truth. He knows that interest has taken the place of truth with them. The expansion of power takes place in no case by brute force alone or by the mere hypnosis of the slogan or by an appeal to blind instincts. Rather the most important fulcrum of power lies in the reason of others. One can be sure of another person if one can succeed in persuading the other's reason to such a degree that he finally thinks that he has his own opinion. Therefore one has to provide himself with an intellectual alibi. One rents editors with whose help this fulcrum in the reason can be conquered and held.

In this sense Luther described reason as a whore. Luther meant that reason is a woman who loves you for your money but who in this case entices you not so much by her sex appeal as by her rational arguments.

Not only can one say: what one desires one likes to believe; one can go still further: one also believes he sees a reason for what he desires.

In any event, as soon as truth has ceased to be an authority which binds and stands over man, it becomes a servile function which simply gives sanction to interests. Therefore a skeptical attitude while

reading an unfamiliar newspaper is well justified. One has to ask how he is being influenced by the editorial which sounds so plausible, clear, and convincing. Truth has become just a piece of paper, sometimes a sheepskin, behind which entirely different and often wolfish powers hide themselves.

All this leads us to one essential conclusion. We saw that the skeptical question whether or no we are here concerned with pseudo-absolutes arises from the fact that the Isms, for the reasons which we enumerated, are frantically switched and wear themselves out.

III

The next question is necessarily: Is there anything at all besides the pseudo? Are not all philosophies, including the Christian one, in the final analysis no more than mere poetry invented for the purpose of dominating man ideologically, thought up in order to control him by specious convictions? Since the interests, which are always determined by the concrete situation, change, the isms and philosophies which give legitimacy and support to them also have to change—in total contrast to truth, which is constant and timeless and which does not exist (so the skeptic assumes) because nowhere in the phenomena and the flux of the idols can a steady and permanent factor be seen.

In other words, in a utilitarian, pragmatic contaminated world we cannot avoid the question whether all pseudos, whether all things—even in the best cases!—are productive lies and whether therefore even behind that parade of idols there is nothing, a nothing, of course, camouflaged by ever new ideologies but still nevertheless nothing.

One understands therefore that the final ism is by necessity nihilism. This is no swear word, rather it is a sign, a discovery. It can, as all discoveries can when they are formidable, incite an orgy and frenzy of passion. One understands only too well that the saying, "That's all bluff," cannot be said with the nonchalance of the snob. The coffee-house nihilist with his disdainful smile is no nihilist but a babbling gossip. The nihilist of existence has suffered. He has eaten from the dish of pseudo-absolutes. Conscious suffering, however, can make one mature and can teach one to love illness as the mother of wisdom.

Therefore the nihilist of existence is frequently a man who

scratches his wounds in self-tormenting masochism. He does not keep his dreadful mystery a secret but talks about it and indeed talks about it with exclamation points and with a smile which can make one fear. He is filled with the passion of the seducer. He looks into the abyss so that the abyss may look into him; he is intoxicated by the fascination of dizziness. He searches for the mountains with their echoing walls from which he hears the painful scorn of his laughter resounded.

This desperate situation is connected with the fact that the basic feeling of the man who is threatened by nihilism is anxiety. It seems to be very characteristic that this basic feeling, or better that this basic emotion of anxiety, has become to an extraordinary extent a topic of discussion for philosophers and for the man on the street.

In order to understand this we must first of all clarify the concept of anxiety. Anxiety comes from the Latin word *angustiae*. That means something like a shortening of the breath, a constriction. It is found, for example, in the most extreme form of anxiety accompanying *angina pectoris*. Anxiety points, so to speak, to a bottlenecked existence. Another explanation of anxiety is that it arises when one has been placed out in a limitless field, when one is lost in infinity where there are no contours and no goals which one may attain. The Russian landscape sometimes gives this effect. In both cases there is the same characteristic: anxiety is a situation in which the question as to what concretely makes me anxious recedes into the background or does not even appear.

Anxiety, therefore, has something to do with "indefiniteness." In this sense, Heidegger distinguishes fundamentally between anxiety and fear: "Fear refers to something which may be in the world; that about which one is anxious is, however, being-in-the-world as such." The object of anxiety cannot therefore be concretely fixed because it includes all the situations in which I find myself in this world.

It is therefore characteristic that the verbs, to be anxious and to bore, are readily used with the pronoun "it." "It" makes me anxious; "it" bores me. Boredom in the strict sense does not therefore allow itself to be defined so that a definite book, a definite person, or a definite movie bores me. Rather it is truer that I have a definite supply of boredom stored up, that I have a definite wasteland within me. This is related to all things, men, and situations with which I come into contact. Things and situations are only objects which manifest the wasteland within me. Therefore they are not

actually the causes of boredom but only the subsequent symptoms by which the causes manifest themselves.

It is similar with the use of "it" in connection with anxiety. What I call concrete are only the occasions when the supply of anxiety emerges. That which is concretely feared by me is never identical with that which makes me anxious; I do not point to the origin of anxiety but only to the ways in which it manifests itself, to the projections of anxiety. For anxiety always seeks to free itself from its tormenting non-concreteness by naming the objects of fear, by seeking therefore to become "definite." But this explanation of itself is false. For the objects are not causes but contents of subsequent projections; the objects are objectifications which merely present themselves to us disguised in the form of causes.

This situation is well known in medical psychology. Sigmund Freud recognized a form of anxiety—e.g., the persecution complex—which has no basis in the outer world and which he designated as neurotic, that is, as a pathological alteration of the ego, as "projection." Oscar Liebeck in his book, *Das Unbekannte und die Angst* (1928), quite correctly speaks about "anxiety's quality of unknown-ness."

However, one would not have profoundly understood the mystery of anxiety if he were to understand it only as an individual affliction. What is at stake is not only my personal breathing-space whereby I feel myself constricted by that mysterious "it" but also the supra-personal breathing-space of the world. This kind of anxious distress and constriction the Germanic myth expresses by means of its symbol the serpent Midgard. The great serpent encircles the horizon of our world. And everything which we experience with solemn enthusiasm or in trials and tribulations is inextricably enclosed by this serpent. Not only the negative but also the positive powers and events of our human existence are characterized by the fact that they take place within this encircled universe. The Greeks have a parallel idea in so far as Oceanus is the boundary of the human world, in so far as he surrounds the horizon. Mythologically Oceanus is one of the Titans overthrown by the Olympians. That means therefore that the Olympian gods have been able to push back to the horizon the threatening primeval powers. Within this horizon one finds the rule of the Olympians, the "cosmos": there one finds houses and cultivated fields. There one finds the realm of the measurable, even where there are uncultivated forests and

deserts; for even there one travels through them since they are within this order. Beyond Oceanus, however, is the measureless, the limitless, and the incomprehensible. Yet there "is" no incomprehensible; no Greek mind is capable of thinking of it as that which is. In other words, beyond Oceanus is nothing. But we would not do justice to the understanding of the world at that time if we were to designate this nothing as a zero in the arithmetical sense. Pushed out of the cosmos and forced to the edge of the world, the Titan encircles all being and becomes the boundary of non-being. Being does not simply cease but has a limit which banishes it. This fact should show us that the "nothing of measurelessness" does not rest upon a radical subtraction but that it is the world opposite the cosmos, that it is the enemy, that it is the representative of the "Weird." "Oceanus is one of the figurative condensations of that measureless world beyond the limits where there is no form and for which there is no concept. He who desires to penetrate it undertakes not only the impossible but also the sacrilegious" (C. F. von Weizsäcker). For he seeks to do more than the gods themselves can do, and he strives to do more and other things than to respect the limits which the gods have imposed and by which even they are bound.

If we would therefore clarify for ourselves how measureless nothing is the "opposing world," then we have to see that even here the fact of being surrounded by the terrible, by a strange and unimaginable sovereignty which could suddenly become a flood, is known. For there may come a time when the dykes collapse and when the Olympians, the creators and guardians of these dykes, would have to abdicate, when even *their* sovereignty would enter into the twilight. Here only do we experience completely what anxiety is capable of being.

As long as I am only afraid, that is, as long as I fear some definite thing, I still have hopes. For example, I am afraid that I have cancer; but "perhaps" it is only a harmless growth. I am afraid that my missing son was long ago killed in action; but "perhaps" he is only in some camp where he cannot write to me but will one day return home. As a soldier I am afraid of the fatal bullet; but "*Jede Kugel trifft ja nicht!*"

All this is different in the myth of the serpent Midgard. Here the world in its entirety with all its hopes and fears is questioned. The Greek and Germanic man could implore the gods, and being able to do that was for him a symbol of hope in the midst of all those

things which he feared. But even here there is a *Götterdämmerung* when the Olympus and the Valhalla are engulfed, when the serpent, destiny, strangles the gods and with them the symbols of all hope.

In times of great catastrophe the serpent tightens its hold. The constriction of *Lebensraum* (as we in Germany experienced it after the last War) and the uncertainty of the future (we do not know when the famous button will be pushed that will set off new catastrophes)—all of this gives us the feeling of something closing in on us.

IV

All of this makes it clear that one cannot do away with the anxiety which threatens the nihilistic man by talking the fear-producing objects out of existence. For the source of anxiety does not lie in the objective world but within man. And this which is within man is forced to set off even new chain-reactions of anxiety. Therefore the Bible expresses a profound insight when it says that the opposite of fear and anxiety (the two concepts are not separated in the Bible!) is love.

In this sense, the First Epistle of John says: "There is no fear in love." This is surprising that the author does not call upon self-confidence, bravery, and heroism to fight anxiety—all that cannot conquer but only repress anxiety. Here one does not dismiss the question of meaning and recommend submersion into the vegetative—that would mean only capitulation. This is so surprising because the positive power of love is said to be deliverance from anxiety.

What the author of the First Epistle of John states we experience only when we have understood the deepest root of anxiety, as we have sought to work it out, namely, that anxiety is a disturbed bond and that love is a regained bond. In Wilhelm Raabe's *Schüdderump* the child Antoinette Häussler puts it quite simply to the old woman from the hospital for incurables: "I love you very much; therefore I am not afraid; for I know where I may run if somebody should chase me."

Anxiety subsides in him who recognizes the fact of Jesus Christ, the fact that the world has a Father, and the fact that he is loved. Not as though the vexatious and anguishing powers would disappear from the orbit of his life; they attack the *Ritter trotz Tod und Teufel* in the shape of horrible beasts. But they no longer have any power over him. They can no longer compel him to look into the fearful abyss of meaninglessness and to despair of the peace which has been

promised him. And because they no longer have any power over him he in his turn need not any longer look at the beasts and become petrified by the sight of them. To use a parable—and the more one deals with the ultimate, the more simple it all becomes—one may think of a child walking through the dark woods holding on to the hand of its father. The moonlight shines mysteriously through the branches, and in its shadow trees and bushes take on bizarre and ghostly forms. Roots and holes cause it to stumble, and terrifying noises—the crackling of branches and the cawing call of nightbirds—draw near. All that is present tends to frighten the child. But the child strides calmly and bravely on, holding the strong and knowing hand of its father and is mysteriously unaffected by all these sounds.

What we thus said about the conquest of anxiety cannot be taken, of course, as a prescription of medicine to counteract anxiety. Here there is no such thing as soothing propaganda. Even the attempt to alter the conditions of the world politically, to pacify the nations, to raise the standard of living, does not do away with anxiety about life because its sources are not within the scope of human influence, not even within the scope of things comprehensible by the senses. In neutral countries which remained intact during the Second World War and are to a certain extent well-off, anxiety about life is present just as intensely (and perhaps even more intensely) than it is among the debris of Germany. Here we are not concerned with the famous constructive solutions.

We are concerned with only one thing: that a number of men are ready to receive anew that final, missing bond, and that they then live vicariously and consciously in the midst of panic as those who have received grace. Just as somebody during an air-raid kept up the morale of a whole bunker in which anxiety began to rumble because he himself had peace and therefore was able to radiate peace and because he knew of Him who was present in the midst of the host of the anxious, who slept in the small boat and who stands at the end of all roads and detours which may wind through ravines and dark valleys.

We do not know what will come; but we know Who will come. That means to lose anxiety about the possibilities because one knows the last reality.