

Rebecca BLOCKSOME

*What's the Matter with Matter?**A Literary Investigation into the Nature of the Cosmos*

Deep in the thickets of Umberto ECO's novel *Baudolino*, a beautiful half-woman, half-goat reveals the secret nature of the world to the eponymous hero:

"Then the Unique, because of his perfection, through generosity of himself, tends to expand, to widen in ever broader spheres of his own fullness; he is, like a candle, victim of the spreading light, the brighter it grows the more it melts. Yes, God liquefies in the shadows of himself, becomes a throng of divine messengers, Eons that have much of his power, but in a form already weaker. There are many gods, demons, Archons, Tyrants, Forces, Sparks, Stars, and what the Christians call angels or archangels. ... But they are not created by the Unique, they are an emanation of him. ... The Unique could not wish to emanate so far from himself, but he cannot resist this dissolving of himself into multiplicity and disorder."

"And this God of yours cannot dissolve the evil that ... that forms around him?"

"Oh, yes, he could. The Unique constantly tries to reabsorb this sort of breath that can become poison, and for seventy times seven thousand years he has succeeded continually to make his residue return into nothingness. ... One day, however, he was unable to control one of his intermediary powers, which we call the Demiurge, and which is perhaps Sabaoth or Ildabaoth, the false God of the Christians. This imitation of God, through a mistake, or through pride, or through ignorance, created time, where before there had been only eternity. Time is an eternity that stammers. You understand? And with time, he created fire, which gives heat but also drowns; earth, which nourishes the grasses but can become avalanche and suffocate them; air, which lets us breathe but can become hurricane. ... The Demiurge was like a child, who messes in the mud to imitate the beauty of a unicorn, and what comes out looks more like a mouse!"

"So the world is a sickness of God?"

SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

Baudolino was a man on a quest—an Italian peasant with an adventurous streak, he sets off with five friends in search of the Earthly Paradise, the Kingdom of Prester John. His way, how-

ever, is beset with all the usual hazards of life in the XIIth century betwixt the Crusades; and by the time he finally reaches the magical kingdom where the above conversation takes place, he has had ample time to take in all the suffering and oppression of the world.

It's not surprising, then, that despite his Christian faith, this fantastic myth holds a seductive appeal for Baudolino—as it can for many other Christians as well. Heresies aside, it provides an at-least-superficially reasonable answer to that most basic of questions: How could a good God create such a bad world?

It doesn't take too much to see the world as a "sickness of God," a monumental flaw in God's divine plan. Any short catalogue of human miseries will serve to prove our point: Israeli border strikes kill 28; Civilians flee Sri Lanka fighting; Belarus jails Lukashenko's foes; AIDS hits Africa's health staff; Southern China typhoon death toll rises; jobless rise as U.S. economy slows; Colombia car bomb kills five.

And those are just the BBC headlines for right now, this instant, 3:04 p.m. on August 4, 2006. Compound that inventory exponentially over the past several thousand years of human existence, and you come up with a—literally—staggering amount of pain, suffering, and ultimately—death.

It's relatively easy to accept the precept that if someone is hungry, you should give her or him something to eat. It's more difficult to understand why anyone should be hungry at all. The dilemma here is how to make sense of the root causes of poverty and injustice: not the political sense nor the economic sense, but the *existential* sense.

Humans have been struggling to resolve this dilemma since the beginning of time. Their answers have frequently been recorded in myths, stories which attempt to explain how the world was created or why it is the way it is. In this sense the Christian Genesis narrative is also a myth, albeit one which we happen to think really happened.

From the anthropological perspective, however, all the various myths conceived across all the various epochs and cultures can claim equal validity. Thus

by examining a parallel myth, in this case from the Gnostic faith, we might be able to shed some light on our existential dilemma.

ORIGIN OF SPECIES

According to Gnostic mythology, the universe began with a single, unique and unknowable God, who spontaneously emanated lesser beings, known as *Æons*, in successive pairs. These emanations, while still dependent on the Ultimate Source for their existence, grow progressively more distant from and more unlike him—much as the ripples from a stone thrown into a puddle grow progressively weaker the farther they are from the center.

Naturally, the most distant emanations have the greatest instability and potential for aberration. In the Syrian and Egyptian tradition the final and lowest pair of *Æons*, on the furthest fringes of the Divine Nature, were Sophia and Christ. Sophia, however, was not content with her place, and so she broke away from her pair and set out to create something totally apart from the One, without his knowledge or consent.

Thus, in an abortive act of rebellion, she came to give birth to the Demiurge. He was a monstrous creature, and in shame she hid him away in a cloud. Cut off from his mother and all other creaturely contact, the Demiurge came to believe he himself was the only thing in existence; so he took it upon himself to create the physical universe and the physical aspect of humanity.

Accounts differ as to whether the Demiurge created in unconscious imitation of the divine model, or with the deliberate and malevolent intent to entrap particles of the Divine in material form. But whether malicious or merely inept, he succeeded only in creating a macabre parody of the higher consciousness. A spark of Sophia's power, however, was retained and woven into the fabric of his creation.

This, therefore, is the Gnostic explanation for the state of the world we find ourselves in: whether by accident or design, it is the inferior product of an inferior being; matter is intrinsically corrupt. But nonetheless, even as suc-



ceeding generations diverge farther and further from the origins, a trace, a memory, of the Ultimate Source remains.

EITHER/OR

In comparing this myth to the Christian account narrated in Genesis 1–3, three significant differences emerge. First and foremost is the fact that, in the Christian version, the physical world is created by God Godself, rather than by a sub- or non- or anti-divine being. Thus the advent of matter is not the result of some cosmic accident, but rather the unfolding of a divinely ordained plan.

The second key difference, then, goes hand-in-hand with the first: according to Christianity the physical universe is inherently good, being the handiwork of God (Genesis 1,31). Although the goodness of the world was corrupted during the Fall, this does not alter its substantive nature; evil is an accidental, not an essential, element of the universe.

Finally, the Christian version maintains that all beings, both celestial and terrestrial, are *creations*—rather than emanations—of God. This simultaneously makes them both more and less powerful than the Gnostic pantheon: more, because they are independent from the Divine and thus can act contradictorily to the Divine will; and less, because they are not divine in and of themselves and thus are ultimately subordinate to the Divine will.

This three tenets together outline the crux of our difficulties in understanding or accepting the Christian version of events. We understand God to be both infinitely good and infinitely powerful; therefore God's handiwork should also be infinitely good. Finding this not to be the case, the Gnostics hypothesized a being not subject to divine sovereignty, a bit which somehow managed to "escape" from the Divine and take up his own initiatives. But alas, we have no Demiurge to blame for the ugliness of the world.

THE DIVINE COMEDY

Setting all heresies aside, if we could somehow find a role for the Demiurge in the Christian myth, it would go a long way toward resolving our existential dilemma. Let us, therefore, undertake

a small theatrical experiment: let us recast the characters from the Gnostic myth into the Christian drama—unmask them, so to speak. In this way we can reread the Gnostic creation myth as a kind of allegory for the Fall.

As we have already mentioned, our experiment might be stymied at the outset by the necessity of finding a role for the Demiurge. At first glance, there does not appear to be room for him in the Christian scheme of things: Creation was an act of God, period. No one helped God in this process, and certainly no one had the power to carry it out independently of God.

We must remember, however, that for the Gnostics the Demiurge was not the creator of matter, but rather the architect of the universe, shaping it from pre-existing material. Wholly separated from the Divine but bearing a superficial resemblance to him, the Demiurge struggled to imitate the Divine nature while working with a material intrinsically corrupt.

Now a lightning flash of recognition strikes! The Demiurge is none other than man and woman themselves—ourselves—created in the image of God but hopelessly separated from God in the Fall. Impelled to create by our likeness to the Creator, we nonetheless find our efforts to restore the world to wholeness inadequate at best and counter-productive at worst. Like the Demiurge, we are merely messing in the mud.

Once this casting difficulty is resolved, the other characters fall into place. Sophia—"wisdom"—can easily be located by her name; her role, however, is more passive than active in the Christian version of events. As the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, she was holy as long as she remained rooted in her source; once separated from the Divine, however, her fruit proves too strong for mere mortals to nourish themselves with.

Finally we come to a bit character in the Gnostic play, who will also be immediately recognizable in our staging—the Christ-Æon. As Sophia's rightful pair, Christ is understood by the Gnostics as an intermediary with whose help humanity can recover its lost knowledge of its own divine origin. By seeking knowledge creatures can tran-

scend the physical world and return to the divine Source of all being.

And now we see where the Christian drama diverges from the Gnostic play: in the Christian version, it is not with Christ's help but rather *through* Him that the many can be reconciled with the One. It is not a question of transcending, but rather of transfiguring: matter must be redeemed, not renounced. The Demiurge's "mess" is not consigned to an endless, echoing decay; there is hope for the restoration of the world.

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

If only, then, we can conceive of "creation" as an on-going process rather than a one-time event, we might take up our role in the play. The Russian Orthodox philosopher Nikolai BERDYAEV, himself quite conversant with Gnostic thought, proposed just such a model of divine-human cooperation in the process of creation.

In his writings BERDYAEV expounds a breathtaking theory of a new Christian revelation, which he names the Third Epoch. First there was the Old Testament epoch of law, ordained by the Father; then came the New Testament epoch of redemption, embodied in the Son; and the Third Epoch, which we are on the verge of entering, will be the epoch of creation, manifested in the Holy Spirit.

"The new revelation is not at all a new religion, distinct from Christianity, but rather the fulfilment and completion of the Christian revelation, bringing it to a true universality. This we do not have as yet. But we cannot simply wait for the revelation of the spirit. It depends upon man's creative activity as well. It is not to be understood as only a new revelation of God to man: it is also the revelation of man to God. This means that it will be a divine-human revelation. In the Spirit, the divisions and contradictions of the divine and the human will be overcome, while the distinction between them will be maintained. This will be the crowning of the mystical dialectic of the divine and the human."

Heresy or prophecy? Sometimes it's hard to tell. Although unorthodox, BERDYAEV's "myth" is useful in bridg-

Suggested Reading

BERDYAEV Nikolai, *The Divine and the Human*. London, 1949.

ECO Umberto, *Baudolino*. New York, 2000.

LEWIS Clive Staples, *Mere Christianity*. New York, 1943.

SAYERS Dorothy, *The Mind of the Maker*. San Francisco, 1941.

Rebecca BLOCKSOME is pursuing her master's degree in philosophy and theory of visual culture at the University of Primorska Faculty of Humanities in Koper, Slovenia. A native of Ransom, Kansas, U.S.A., she is American Baptist. Her e-mail address is rblocksom@yahoo.com.

ing the gap between experienced reality and Christian doctrine: he readily acknowledges the progressive de-spiritualization and devastation of nature and the cosmos, the vanishing humanity of humankind.

Borrowing KIERKEGAARD's term, he speaks of God as being "incognito"—as if we were still in the seventh day of creation, when God is resting and the cosmos is temporarily being sustained by human efforts. As we are hopelessly

inadequate for the task, this period is marked by war and poverty, hatred and despair.

But in the coming spiritual epoch there is hope: "The religion of the Spirit is the expectation that a new human and humane sociality will be revealed, radiating love and charity. It is also the expectation of the revelation of a new relationship between man and the cosmos, of cosmic transfiguration. The pro-

cess of the decomposition of the cosmos ... is nearing its end."

The Eighth Day of Creation, BERDY-AEV's creative epoch, is imminently upon us. The end of the epic has not yet been written; there is still time for a dramatic reversal. We as human beings, created in the likeness of God, must join together with God in writing the final act—the Demiurge must redeem himself along with his creation.

Roman KRÁLIK

The Social Dimension of KIERKEGAARD'S Ethics:

KIERKEGAARD'S Understanding of the Term "Neighbour"

The Danish philosopher Søren KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855) often dwelled on diverse aspects of the relation between human and human in his writings. It is because of this emphasis that he is regarded as one of the greatest Christian psychologists.

GREATNESS IN SMALLNESS

For the self-identification of small countries, KIERKEGAARD's way of thinking is of invaluable importance, e.g. from the perspective of the historical experiences or current position of the "small nations" small due to their territory and total number of inhabitants. To understand the psyche and life activities of "small nations," their philosophy and culture is one of the indispensable preconditions of spiritual greatness of these nations. It is precisely in this that the greatness in smallness and smallness in greatness lies.

In the historical mission of small nations, mutual respect and understanding of one another boosts their spiritual greatness and leads them towards a specific understanding of the historical mission of big nations, especially by giving birth to exceptional personalities who become important world-wide precisely because of their originality, creative thinking and perception of the world. They can create universal values of timeless validity and they abolish the unnatural differentiation between the "small" and the "great" pointing out the absurdity of the opposition great vs. small.

One of the basic teachings of Christianity is that one shall love all her or his neighbours. KIERKEGAARD interprets this teaching radically. A human in relation to any other human is her or his neighbour. With this conception he wants to demonstrate that man should, or even *must*, regard all other humans as her or his neighbours: hence not only her or his own family, acquaintances, friends, or nation, but all people.

It is certainly interesting that some of KIERKEGAARD's researchers have been trying to interpret this concept of his and connect it (incorrectly) with radical leftist, almost Marxist ideas. These ideas were, however, adopted by KIERKEGAARD neither from Marx nor the Communist Manifesto, but from literature that originated well before the XIXth century.

THE DUTY TO LOVE

It is the duty of a human being to love people neighbours, all of those one sees and meets at work or in private life. The one who loved all of humanity is KIERKEGAARD's model of the love for a neighbour. That *ideal* is Jesus Christ the "reward" of humanity was his crucifixion and death. In KIERKEGAARD's conception of relation to a neighbor, it is a *conditio sine qua non* to imitate Christ in his love for the world.

To love one's neighbour means to love her or him unconditionally, without expecting to have our requests met in return. He who sets up conditions does not love and does not meet the Christian commandment: you shall love. If

love (Jesus Christ) asks us and demands from us to love our neighbour, this love is to be boundless and unchangeable. If one's love towards her or his neighbour shall be perfect, it means one must love the concrete person the way one sees her or him, i.e. with all her or his imperfections and weaknesses.

But KIERKEGAARD goes even further. One's neighbour remains her or his neighbour even if she or he has cheated, betrayed or hated one. Thus KIERKEGAARD presents himself to us as a man who goes beyond his limits the limits of his own self, beyond his ego.

THE INFINITE DEBT OF LOVE

Our duty is not only that we shall love our neighbour, but that we even shall remain in a debt of love towards one another. The love towards one's neighbour is always and ultimately an infinite debt. A person stricken by love recognizes the fact that she or he is thus brought into an endless debt within the relationship to her or his neighbour. If we want to (and we have to) cultivate the love of our neighbour, we have to be awake, constantly, determinedly, so that our love does not *compare* and is not satisfied with the deeds we have performed.

Love is eternal, inexhaustible and limitless. Love is the base, a cornerstone, a building. Love builds up and educates and there is nothing that could shake or destroy her. Destruction is, however, the fate of a sensuous person, whose

