

In the Spirit

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Continuing the tradition of works such as Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourses* and Jean-Louis Chrétien's *Under the Gaze of the Bible and Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, this book will provide spiritual meditations on both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament letters, exploring the meaning of life through perennial matters of basic human concern as love, hope, suffering, and death. In doing so, constant reference to works of art will be made.

The book consists of ten chapters. In it, I advance a deconstruction of modern subjectivity through a phenomenological interpretation of biblical texts and works of art, with particular emphasis on painting. Thus, the work takes its methodological orientation from a thesis we owe most notably to Jean-Louis Chrétien's treatment of the modern novel in *Conscience et Roman, I: la conscience au grand jour* and *Conscience et Roman II: la conscience à mi-voix*: for us today, the most intimate mode of self-existence is thought to be epitomized by the interior monologue of the self with itself, a relationship which in principle veils nothing from the intruding gaze of the author or reader. Nothing is hidden, for all is laid bare. Against this view that removes any hidden dimension from the searching gaze of others, the book highlights an interiority whose intimacy is due to our always already being exposed, not to a human gaze that knows the secrets of the heart, but to a word prior to any human observation: the Word of God. In accounting for this dimension of vulnerability, I shall call upon, among others, the paintings of Bellini, Rembrandt, Osbert, Ossawa Tanner, Pissarro, Caravaggio, Kandinsky, Poussin, Rodin, and Hopper.

As I see it, anyone writing a book does well to think quite a lot on the subject he wants to write about [...] Having done that, in all privacy, and with the fervor of love that always seeks out solitude, nothing more is needed. He should then write the book straight off as the bird sings its song.
—Kierkegaard

Chapter One

A Drunkard's Sleep

Why is drunkenness rampant today? Why is it being increasingly normalized by our culture, and better yet, why does it leave those given over to it unsatisfied? This essay examines the connection between drunkenness and restlessness, showing why drunkenness itself is associated with sleep, where sleep is understood as an archetype of faithlessness. Drawing on Genesis, Proverbs, the Book of Mathew, the Book of John, and Paul's Epistles, I examine the sense in which drunkenness signals spiritlessness. Paintings of Bellini, Brouwer, and Osbert serve as illustrations.

Chapter Two

The Strong Wind and a Still Small Voice

In the first chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul declares that unbelievers are excuseless (Romans 1:20). For, though the Gentiles live without the Mosaic Law, they have received a law written in their hearts. God has not spoken only to the Israelites through the Torah and the prophets, but to the Gentiles through the voice and power of conscience: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" (Romans 2:14-15). This raises a question. If God has revealed himself to everyone (through the Mosaic Law or else the law of the human heart), why then do many go so far as to pretend that there is no God? They are silencing the claim God is making on their lives by ignoring his call, by silencing their conscience: "as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge" (Romans 1:28). It is not so much that God is silent as it is that the unbelieving will not hear. The unbelieving heart is the hardened heart. Stephen makes clear to the mockers who murder him for having reminded them of it: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51). This raises a further question. What can be said about this subtle play between call and response? Four degrees of revelation detailed in the first Book of Kings provide a key. First, wind: "And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord," next "an earthquake," third "a fire," and finally "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-13). The voice that remains, we see, is the voice of conscience Paul references in Romans, a voice that reveals God to everyone, even those who ignore all of the other ways in which God claim on us has been revealed.

Chapter Three

The Golden Calf

Everyone has heard of the golden calf. But what exactly is it? Is it not still with us today? The first remarkable thing about the Old Testament's account of the golden calf is that we are told it drew a crowd. The crowd amasses in direct contravention to God's words that Moses had been dispatched to retrieve from Mount Sinai. Far then from relating a singular historical episode, the biblical narrative of the golden calf denotes a perennial temptation of transcendental significance: the stubborn slippage of idolatry. Today, do we not see the same consciousness in the virtual reality of mass media? Today, owing to the advent of social media and the cult of celebrity that has prepared it, we ourselves have become the golden calf—today is the age of narcissism. In seeking the attention and validation of others, we seek out a crowd to adulate us. We like to think we are our own gods. A look at Poussin, Fragonard, March, de Wit, Caravaggio, and Rosa illustrates that the adoration of the golden calf is that of self-adoration.

Chapter Four

Through the Veil of the Word Made Flesh

Just as historical phenomenology understands us as beings who open up and dwell within a world, so modern systematic theology sees us as beings whose salvation is worked out through the practices and sacraments of the visible church. This phenomenology and theology, by relegating the self to the horizon opened in intentionality neglects our original mode of being-before-God. It eliminates subjectivity. For, in ignoring the flesh's mode of phenomenality, it misses the way God is genuinely revealed to us. Job, for instance, spoke of this interiority: "And though after my skin worms destroy this *body*, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:26). It is this same flesh of which Job speaks that is brought to further clarity in the prologue to John: "And the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). Is this not why, in a verse immediately preceding, we read that the world knew not God? (John 1:10). If the world did not recognize the incarnate Word, is it not simply because the flesh in which the incarnation occurs is itself unworldly? Prior to any worldly mediation (prior to any liturgical practice or creedal doctrine of men), and thus prior even to all discursive thought (and hence "the problem of intentionality" that classical phenomenology was obsessed with), God is revealed in the depths of subjectivity, our unworldly flesh. Christ himself reminds us of this. Faith unfurls within the depths: "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught" (Luke 5:4). In the depths resides the Word that was made flesh to meet and thereby rescue us, to open "a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh" (Hebrews 10:20). The following work investigates this Arch-Revelation of the flesh, detailing why so many today choose to try to forget it, and the transfiguration reserved to those who return into it. Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas* and *The Conversion of St Paul* are key to the analysis.

Chapter Five

The Purple Robe

In the Passion, Jesus is mocked by Roman soldiers who “platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on a purple robe, and Said, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ and they smote him a purple robe” (John 19:2-3). This episode, like the series of events in which it figures, suggests to some that Christ is a pathetic and powerless figure. That is certainly how Nietzsche interpreted it. However, in answer to Pilate’s admonition (“knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?”), Christ’s reply suggests a paradoxical power: “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee has the greater sin” (John 19:11). Our habit of equating power with the violence of self-assertion, coercion, and intimidation is challenged. What, we must ask, does power involve if Christ, in relinquishing any pretension of assertion, exemplifies true power? Following Jean-Yves Lacoste’s analysis of a kenotic existence, this essay shows that real power lies in a humility through the Spirit, not the pride that parades itself on the world’s stage projected by transcendental egoism. Rembrandt’s *Christ Before Pilate and the People*, Pieter Frasz de Grebber’s *Christ at the Column*, and Titian’s *Ecce Homo* serve as illustrations.

Chapter Six

Apparitions of the Kingdom

Matthew’s gospel is replete with analogies likening the kingdom of heaven to teachable events and familiar happenings—an old maid searching for a lost penny, a humble mustard seed that grows beyond all expectations, a house built on a foundation of rock, etc. This essay examines the paradoxical phenomenality they describe: in revealing the kingdom of God, there is, as Pascal remarked, just enough evidence to confirm its reality for those who want to believe, and always just enough reason to deny its presence for those who wish to disbelieve. The parables therefore instruct us that the kingdom of God manifests itself only to those who want to see. It lies there ready to be seen, but one must be willing to seize it if one is to see it: “the kingdom of Heaven will be taken by force” (Matthew 11:12). The idea that desiring the kingdom of Heaven is a precondition for encountering it is reiterated also in the Gospel according to John, where we read that the Light shined in the darkness but the darkness comprehended it not (John 1:5). The apparent inability to see the kingdom of God is therefore what, following Merleau-Ponty, we may call a motivated failure to see. Though what is there to be seen lies at the ready, choosing not to look on it, those who do not see it fail to see because they do not want to see. They love darkness: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). This essay accordingly investigates a law of perception rife for phenomenological analysis: the invisible is light, whereas the world’s visibility constitutes darkness. Henry Ossawa Turner’s *Christ and His Disciples on the Road to Bethany* and Pissarro’s triptych of *Boulevard Montmartre* paintings prove exemplary.

Chapter Seven

On the Broad Way

One of Christ's most startling teachings is recorded in the seventh chapter of Matthew. There we are told that in life we must choose between one of two—and only two—paths. The first way the Lord names the broad way, one we are cautioned never to take: “Enter in ye at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat” (Matthew 7:13). The second way, which we are to pursue, is the right one, yet one that few take: “Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:14). That the path of life is narrow, whereas the path of death is wide, is due to the fact that there is one absolute truth: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except by me” (John 14:6). What does it mean to walk the way of life? If every other way leads to destruction, why do most people take it when, strictly speaking, it is against anyone's interest to do so? Are those who travel it confused, deceived, or just ignorant? In this essay, I examine these respective paths in light of the distinction we owe to Michel Henry's phenomenology. The broad way consists in a life that takes one's own understanding and preferences as the law—lawlessness becomes the only absolute. Rodin's *The Three Shades* and *The Thinker at the Gates of Hell* are central to the analysis.

Chapter Eight

Paul and the Philosophers

If the gravest act of disobedience against God recounted in the Old Testament is the prohibition against idolatry, to “have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3), is idolatry any less a fact of everyday life now than it was then? The Apostle Paul was struck by the power with which it unfurled unchecked in the streets of Athens: “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry” (Acts 17:16). Paul not only disputed with the Jews in the synagogue; he also took to the streets, contending for the faith with anyone he encountered in the market. As ancient Athens was a place of learning, so Paul found himself arguing with the philosophers: “Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered And some said, What will this babbler say? him. others some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). The stoics taught, as Paul did, that carnal desires are empty, but what separates their teachings? For in point of fact, it is the world that silences the truth, ensnaring those who live in darkness according to the transcendental egoism of its lusts. In the face of life's ephemerality and incompleteness, Paul highlights the hope of the resurrection as what can deliver us from the clutches of despair. It frees us from having to live under the shadow of the grave. Neither a life-denying capitulation or a world-weary weakness, nor a perverse escapism that denies genuine reality, nor any of the other dismissive things that are often said of it, hope in the resurrection lays the only basis for a life infused with genuine meaning. In an age when we are taught to place our hopes for satisfaction in the things of the time that leads to death—an education, hobbies, a career, a family, a comfortable retirement—the hope of resurrection suffuses the immediacy of existence with an unparalleled exigency. Paul himself is plain about that: “And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:25). Higher than the restlessness and hopelessness of a life

of leisure, confidence in the resurrection empowers. To be truly human, thus, is to enflame rather than stifle our deepest yearning, our need for true meaning—to live for eternal life, not only this one. Dutch *vanitas*, particularly those of van Steenwyck and van Utrecht, give food for thought.

Chapter Nine

The World

If the truth sets us free, is it not precisely because it transforms us from slaves of sin to sons of righteousness? If each of us is called to overcome the world, does not such overcoming indicate, no matter how much the popular opinion of unbelief or even much of today's false theology wishes to deny it, that perdition or salvation is in fact decided within, and only within, the transcendental life of the singular individual who bears the dizzying anxiety of being free to choose between good and evil? It goes without saying that we do not save ourselves (Christ alone provides the Way), but we must receive the gift of salvation if it is to be ours. And how else are we to accept it but by bidding our former life adieu? The Scriptures repeatedly exhort those who have been born again to be holy, and not to return to the world, for the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes only opens up onto a field of darkness and death: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2:15-17); "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). It would be a strange thing if God, desiring to save us from our sins and to purge us of our iniquities, should tolerate us languishing in the world after having supposedly been redeemed. Yet this is how systematic theology speaks, as if the world is inescapable, and as if separating oneself from it were equivalent to "Gnosticism" or "escapism." There is no basis in the word of God for these criticisms of holiness. If the world were in fact a good place, why then was the Word made flesh to reveal its wickedness so that those who are born again can be of God instead? The relevant scriptures about this are as numerous as they are unambiguous: "He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8); "To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" (Acts 26:18); "Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:1); "we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness (1 John 5:19); and thus, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Chapter Ten

"Go, and sin no more": Perfection as Commandment

Did Christ aim to cleanse us from all sin only to have us persist in them? Was Paul mistaken when he said that all things are possible in Christ? The Scriptures never draw an opposition between faith and

obedience; to the contrary, they repeatedly emphasize that obedience is proof of one's faith, and that those who proclaim to have faith but continue in sin are liars: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). I turn to Rembrandt's *The Woman taken in Adultery*, which depicts the events of chapter eight of John, to illustrate this. While everyone knows that the Pharisees are convicted of hypocrisy for being with sin as much as the adulteress, there is more. The fact remains that if they required a weekly sacrifice or the annual Passover as a sin offering, it is only because they kept sinning! Yet it is this slavery to sin from which the adulteress, by placing her faith in Christ, is freed. Sin is thus not an inevitable consequence of some putatively inescapably broken nature; it is an inexcusable sickness that Christ has come to cleanse us of, and can, so long as we live in faithful obedience to the Spirit. Finally, why any supposed prohibition against judgment per se (here invocations of Matthew 7:1 are as unconvincing as they are predictable) is really pure misnomer comes into view when we see that there is only a prohibition against *hypocritical* judgment, a hypocrisy that we are in turn perfectly capable of escaping (Matthew 7:5), so long as one puts on the new man and lives in righteousness, rather than continuing on as a slave to sin like the Pharisee.

A Drunkard's Sleep

Drunkness, whatever else might be said of it, remains the notable exploit it does if for no other fact than that, in promising rest, it on the contrary leads instead to the opposite, and hence, as those who follow its path to the bitter end know, disappointment. In staging the allure of rest, it delivers only restlessness. Does it not, in ensnaring those it does with the tantalizing promise of a peace perpetually deferred, lure the swindled into restless sleep? The snores of a drunken somnolence evince a characteristic fragility that can only reinforce the impression, for those awake in the room listening, that the rest the sleeper so coveted still only eludes him. Indeed, that sometimes we cannot wake the drunken from their sleep, far from contradicting it, in fact simply underscores the fact of the sleep's fitfulness. Even an unresponsiveness can conceal a fury. It is this fitfulness that in part explains why no one, not even the one who becomes accustomed to a life of overindulgence's subtle charms, has ever awoken from a night of inebriated slumber really refreshed.

Is it then sheer coincidence that here, in reflecting on what drunkenness signifies, we should find ourselves led to a consideration of sleep? What might this curious affinity between sleep and drunkenness, first appearing in the guise of an apparent antagonism, exactly reveal? Could it be that drunkenness, or more precisely the restlessness of the fitful sleep it brings, maintains a secret? In short, in recognizing the conspiracy between drunkenness and sleep, are we not perhaps groping toward, no matter how absurd a suggestion it initially seems, what must ultimately amount to an issue of faith? Or better, as the case may be here, its very absence?

The first noteworthy thing about this immediate connection between drunkenness and fitful sleep is that, while evident to all, so many nonetheless disregard it, a fact which only makes it all the stranger that they should plunge themselves as they do into the former knowing full well the futility of the latter. If we are willing to take every necessary precaution against a bad night's sleep, exercising every ritual we have been taught does so, why then is avoiding drunkenness the stark exception to the evening's preparations? Why are there so many who, ready to do everything else within their power to avoid a bad night's sleep, go out of their way to finally get drunk just before nodding off? That a stupor leads to a poor night's rest hardly deters their contradictory resolve. Here thus once again, the intriguing connection between sleep and drunkenness is unmistakable even if, or rather exactly because, a night's heavy drinking eventually impedes the function of the same sleep it induces.

That sleep and drunkenness bear an unmistakable kinship to one another is again apparent, this time all the more, when one additionally notes that drunkenness is capable of ushering in a kind of insensibility totally unrivalled by everything else save dreamless sleep. This is why the sober melancholic, for instance, is as prone to drowning his sorrows in too much sleep as the drunkard is drowning his in the bottle. Sometimes, in the cry for help of a despair that has been brought to orchestral perfection, one achieves an almost continual condition of insensibility, drinking by day, then sleeping at night, the one form of escape allowing for a seamless transition to the next. If the escape of an ordinary night's sleep is insufficient to dull the ache of living, the drunkard knows the consolation of always being able to turn to the supplementary comfort of the bottle. The bottle becomes a wayward panacea, quelling the tremors and soothing the burdens of day that a dark slumber, however satisfying, never will. Drinking, in short, becomes a way of sleep walking through one's day.

For this reason, drunkenness itself becomes a kind of dreaming. And many times, as we know owing to familiar experiences that have taught us so, the dream is collective. No less than the drink itself, essential to sustaining the illusion of the drunkard's happiness is some presence that consoles by confirming, without ever challenging, its pretence. This is why nothing can be more beguiling than the drinking buddies who form a permanent fixture at the local watering hole.

The scene, one as dejecting as it is universal, of Osbert's *Drunkards in a tavern* (1640) captures the profound sadness lying beneath the revellers' protestations to the contrary. Is not the fact that none of them can stand to be alone with themselves itself sufficient evidence to confirm it? No one will deny that misery indeed loves company, but it often goes overlooked that this is especially true of the misery that dedicates itself to convincing anyone who will listen to it that it is in fact happy. Such drinkers become actors, hoping their rehearsed merriment will pass for an uninhibited joy they wish they really knew.



Thus, when one looks closely, a crack in the veneer will always appear. For despite their best efforts (the varieties of which Osbert here shows beautifully), the boisterousness of their laughs and wisecracks in no way conceals the secret of its inner sorrow. In point of fact, do the very faces of these free-spirits not unabashedly confess it? If it remains possible for one to perhaps rehearse just about anything, even for drunkards there is nevertheless no controlling, much less faking, the depths revealed in the glassy sheen of a distant stare. Far from concealing it, the eyes only accentuate the presence of the overpowering halo of sadness there to be seen. The man at the foreground's far right, for example, sitting momentarily disconnected from the drama of the room's surroundings, attests to the reality of a despondence his two friends are still busy silencing. In an unguarded moment of honesty that reveals its listlessness, he cannot even muster a smile.

If the fact of the man on the right's dejectedness is so easily detectable in part because of a posture that underscores its solitude (elbow on knee, the gaze fixed on nowhere), the manner in which his two friends choose to carry themselves appears all the more striking. Take the man on the far left's gestures which produce, in virtue of their strict reversal, the opposite image of those his solitary companion's do. Rather than staring into oblivion, he's devised a strategy, directing his gaze on a distraction, one all the more effective since, in this case, the object of amusement is the gaze of a friend whose own eyes are searching to do the same. In swapping the glance they do, they forget what an inventory of the room around them would impress. That only constant distraction will do to conceal from view

the sadness of the situation is underscored by the man's outstretched arm. In clutching the hem of the center figure's shirt, is he not just clutching for anything, but in particular something that will keep him from falling into the clutches of the despair that has already overtaken the man on the right? Sometimes, when in dire straits such as these, something as unremarkable as a friend's shirt can serve the role of a life line.

But if a diversion is to remain effective, it will only inasmuch as it proves capable of sustaining itself. It is a production that requires constant direction, which is why there must always be someone who is willing to stage things. And who else is the conductor of our little scene but the man fittingly positioned in the middle? Standing tall, he presides over the fleeting affair with a bravado not unlike the conductor over the orchestral pit. No doubt noticing that he has lost the attention of the man to his left, and thus sensing that at any moment the man to his right might be next, he redoubles his efforts to keep the latter under his spell. It is a challenge he welcomes, because it relieves him of having to descend into the solitude that would otherwise grip him. So long as he remains the center of at least someone's attention, he won't be returned to the unwelcome thoughts waiting to intrude. In the game of play-acting that results, each knows as much as the other that it is always easier to sustain an illusion with help. In a tavern as the theater stage, the most challenging of performances to carry off is the soliloquy. And so, in an unspoken cahoots rooted in the mutual recognition of their shared cause of not having to face up to the sorrow that plagues them, both of our two "happy" drunkards plays his part, reassuring the other that all is well. There is every reason to surmise, as Osbert himself intentionally but subtly suggests in the blotted faces of those relegated to the background, that this momentary spark of euphoria will shortly wane. Eventually, whether it be a minute or perhaps an hour, there will be a silence that overcomes them, just as it already has the man on the right, and our subjects will be left confronting a reality that rises into appearance as the preceding illusion correspondingly recedes. Inevitably, facts spoil any imaginary dalliance. Is this not why Osbert, in deciding to cast them in lighting akin to the spotlight of a stage, in effect emphasizes the inner theatricality of the scene unfolding before us? This, we see, as if peering through the tavern's door before choosing to instead pass on by, is a place that is not nearly as wonderful as our drunkards pretend that it is.

Bearing this all in mind, though it is not the explicit theme of Osbert's piece, how can seeing the state of those it depicts not inevitably evoke thoughts of a spiritual crisis? That it should is hardly surprising when one calls to mind the biblical depiction of drunkenness as a paradigmatic case of sleep, where sleep itself is used as an archetypal representation of faithlessness. The tavern, when appreciated in light of these near associations, turns out to be the scene of an unholy vigil. Waiting on exactly they know not what, the men remain lost. For in the last analysis, what are they seeking in each other's company and that of the bottle but a rest neither ever supplies? The liquid on tap at the tavern is unable to quench a thirst that only living water could, which is why, in even denying the very existence of this thirst that afflicts them, the drunkard on the right is so inconsolable. If it is difficult enough to be tormented by a thirst that remains in principle temporary (no one likes the feeling of being parched, but it's a comfort to know that such unpleasantness is only fleeting), so much the worse for those who suffer from a thirst of the spirit that will always remain, no matter how much liquid one drinks. The ale, they know though they dare not admit it for fear of scorn, cannot solve the predicament they are facing.

It is thus a testament to the genius of Osbert's vision that he knew to accentuate the theatricality of the spectacle by saturating our figures in a shroud of light replicating conditions not actually realizable until centuries later with the invention of electricity. That the interior's light, appearing precisely where it shouldn't, highlights the theatrical insincerity of the tavern's patrons is clear enough. But does it not

indicate more still? Our first clue that it does is one we already noted, if only first in passing. Strictly speaking, the light's shining where it does depicts what in effect remains an impossibility, given the natural surroundings of the room itself. It descends upon our figures, illuminating them in a spotlight, without any discernible candle (much less lightbulb!) to which we can attribute its source. What, then, is its source? We must conclude, if for no other reason than a lack of any equally convincing competing hypothesis, that the light, shining miraculously as it does, attests to the presence of heavenly heights. Even in the humblest and most wretched of places, Osbert has shown, the Light shines. That those who live enshrouded in darkness should fail to notice so in no way changes the fact, nor less the fact that they stand underneath it. And far from their obliviousness to it being something unexpected, that the three men should remain ignorant of its presence in fact reinforces that presence all the more. In a setting as seemingly innocuous as the lowly tavern, we see, in Osbert's rendering of it, what on the contrary proves to be an extraordinary event owing to the biblical dimension of the facts determining it. The setting in which the drunkards move is in reality nothing short of supernatural though they know it not: "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5).

That the plight confronting them should prove spiritual comes into view the moment one sees this thirst as a need for rest. Such rest, to the extent we all have received clues of it, would consist in a kind of total contentment nowhere available on this earth, much less the tavern. This is why no amount of travelling can produce it; there is no destination, however remote or exotic, that boasts it. In this, the drunkard is not at all the exception, but rather an exceptional reminder of it. He wants a rest that nothing, least of all the temporary relief of drunkenness, provides. If Osbert magnificently shows us that drunkards are looking to quench a thirst that no tavern can, it is only because we all suffer from a thirst that nothing on earth ever will.

The unwillingness or inability of others to admit so dumbstruck Socrates: "How can you wonder your travels do you no good when you carry yourself around with you? You are saddled with the very thing that drove you away." Some today view Socrates's point as a triteness ("you can leave anywhere behind but yourself," we have all heard), but it still remains true. If travel is incapable of eliminating one's discontent, is it then surprising that many turn to the bottle, hoping to simply eliminate themselves remaining where they are? The understandable strategy fails. And how could it not?

That the rest we need is heavenly in nature is evident in the undeniable futility of trying to manufacture it in all the ways people have. If, in accordance with the remarks of Aristophanes, we should say that the gods have split each of us into two (wholeness now a hope consigned to an irretrievable past), then it would fall to love alone to somehow restore us. But we know that not just any love will do. Some loves, far from making us whole again, instead only deepen the estrangement we were trying to escape or overcome, just as the imitable failures of a love of the bottle itself goes to show. That Socrates himself is reputed to have been the occasional binge drinker in no way unsettles a thing. More importantly for us is another fact Plato reports in the same *Symposium*: though Socrates drank, he nevertheless never became drunk. So while we do not know precisely what Socrates was hoping to achieve by drinking, we must conclude that it wasn't escape. If restlessness plagued him like everyone else, still he knew drinking wouldn't cure it.

A large part of daily existence, whether we realize it or not, is a struggle to bear the crushing weight of this yearning in ways that won't in the process destroy us. The danger is heightened by the fact that, though our vices are our own, it remains the case that devils tempt us. That the life of drunkenness must sometimes invariably boil into violence attests to it. One can trace the drunkard's behavior to a worldly anger stoking the unquenchable thirst for peace he cannot find. Every drunken fight thus

might remind us, if we are honest about the powerful emotions swirling beneath the seeming banalities that incite it, that drinking all too often will render those who play with it unable to control ourselves. If strong drink will sometimes make a man rage, is it not for the fact that its occasional irruption goes to show that the rage was always already there? This is why the simplest frivolities, as Adriaen Brouwer's *Peasants Brawling over Cards* (1630) or *Tavern Scene* (1635) illustrate, can elicit the fiercest of actions in those who, first giving into the temptation to drink, find themselves equally succumbing to whatever the occasion next presents. The fuse, Brouwer shows, could be something as silly as a game. In effect, drunkenness serves to exacerbate the carnality of a wrath, already present, it imbibes.



Who cannot notice that today, perhaps more than ever before, it is tempting to attribute the shame one experiences upon coming to after a drinking spell to the unseemliness of what one did while under the influence rather than to the inherent shamefulness of the drunkenness itself? But this is pure fantasy. Even if it must be conceded that alcoholism is a disease, the act of drunkenness itself remains a sin. Biblical vignettes, so frequently today ignored by those who think they know better, time and again demand that we not sweep aside this fact of conscience. Here we can recall the scene of Noah's wine-induced mishap, the episode of which is chronicled in Genesis 9:21, and reproduced in Bellini's 1515 *Drunkenness of Noah* below:



When Noah's sons discover him asleep in the naked condition they do, the shame they experience has less to do with any straightforward embarrassment (admittedly great) owing to seeing their father exposed. For more to the point, the shame of the situation consists in their disappointment with a father, who, until then, had remained righteous to the point of complete spotlessness. The sordidness has less to do with the fact of the resulting nakedness as it does the drunkenness itself which brought it about. Indeed, in emphasizing the shame of the nakedness, does not the narrative only underscore the severity of the calamity by attributing it to drink, rather than some other cause? It is not that Noah

bears too much in the sense of nakedness, as it is that he bears witness to the sin conditioning it. We do not know precisely how Noah himself met the dawn (the narrative does not say), but there is nothing illicit in our imagining that the grief he doubtless experienced less concerned the simple fact of being found naked (or even who might have happened to see him) than it did the fact that, at bottom, the spectacle in which he figured was simply the natural consequence of a decision to plunge himself there. Noah, in keeping with his character, would have mourned over the shamefulness of the very drunkenness itself, not so much any of the subsequent infelicities (bad as they were) to which it led.

The intrinsic ignominy in which drunkenness is enwrapped is borne witness by the fact that there is nothing more that bothers those swept up in a night's revelry than the sudden, unwelcome reminder that not everyone does the same. The sober other, even if no words or a passing glance is exchanged, convicts them. What makes Ham's reaction to his father's plight so distasteful, then, is not so much the cruelty of his choosing to ridicule someone he loves in a moment of the beloved's weakness, but instead that he revelled in the knowledge that Noah, who was formerly spotless, was in fact perhaps really no better than he. Ham's response to Noah's fall remains instructive, then, if for no other reason than the work it does in revealing a truth too often unacknowledged: though it is sometimes said that everyone secretly hates a do-gooder, it's only so because those who do already don't like themselves.

As it stands, our analysis to present might be accused of being little more than empty moralizing. Drunkenness perhaps leads to a host of misdeeds, but that, it might be said, merely goes to show that what one does while drunk is worthy of our disapproval, though drunkenness itself deserves no similar censure. To then insist, as we shall, that drunkenness is not only a moral failing, but a spiritual one, strikes the modern sensibility as too much. And in any case, though surely no one will deny the undeniable connection between drunkenness and anger, sexual indiscretion, or depravity (I once witnessed an elderly man in a nightclub, reduced to underwear, being led around the neck by a leash), have we gone any way toward showing that we are in fact dealing with a crisis of faith?

The words of the Apostle Paul suggest as much, even if many are sure to challenge the veracity of the connection they assert. In telling the recipients of his first letter of the power the hope of Resurrection unfurls, Paul presents the Corinthians with two stark alternatives. The first, known to all, lies outstretched before those who choose to lay their hope in nothing besides the paltry comforts which the time that leads to death will provide. This path, we read, and as all who follow it know already, is really just one of a hedonism that furiously nurses the despair of its underlying hopelessness. All there is to do is eat, and, in the end, drink: "If after the manner of men I have fought with the beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32). Far from merely entailing a morning headache or drowsiness, a night's drinking murders the spirit. In dulling its sensibility to a life that would otherwise remain intolerable, one simultaneously exhausts the fire of the inner thirsting for anything higher: "Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes?" (Proverbs 23:29). Bitten by the serpent, stung by the adder, those who indulge the cravenness of drinking culture stoke a dependency, not just on a chemical substance, but a despondency from which they see no escape. This fact is borne witness by what we read in the same proverbs just a few lines later: "Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast" (Proverbs 23:34). Directionless and adrift, one is thrown back upon the same bottle that never delivers.

Since today, more than ever, people are willing to ignore any truth, however profound or incontestable it might be, when it is the Bible that declares it to them, it bears emphasizing that others have noted the vanity at the heart of worldly pleasures. On the subject of earthly delights, Seneca cast the same verdict as Paul: “if they could ever satisfy us they would have done so by now.” And how could it escape our attention that in noting the vanity of earthly pleasures, Seneca chooses sleep as his metaphor for characterizing the condition of those who cling blindly to earthly things? The insensibility of sleep, Seneca saw, may in fact afflict us as much in the light of day as it does the dead of night. It is possible to be so inured to one’s sleeping that one moves through it without ever suspecting one isn’t awake. For although “a person sleeping lightly,” says Seneca, “perceives impressions in his dreams and is sometimes, even, aware during sleep that he is asleep,” there is a kind of sleep that “blots out even dreams and plunges the mind too deep for consciousness of self.” In a dreamless sleep such as this, one is nowhere, which is why Seneca saw that it described so well the obliviousness of those who sleepwalk through the day enslaved to the rigmarole of customary comforts. And it gets worse for the sleeper: for in order to extricate oneself from this condition, one must first admit that one is a victim of it, but is it not this very admission which the condition itself renders almost impossible? When asleep like this, one is totally insensible to the very fact of one’s sleeping: “Why does no one admit his failings? Because he’s still deep in them. It’s the person who’s awakened who recounts his dream, and acknowledging one’s failings is a sign of health.” How does one awake from a dream when it is one’s very waking life itself that one must awake from? We can disagree with Seneca’s own suggestion that it falls to philosophy alone to sound the needed alarm, but we can still at least agree that, in any case, drunkenness will not rouse anyone from this slumber. It will only deepen it.

It being shown that drunkenness is a path to hopelessness and hence in fact spiritual numbness, it would remain to be established that there exists an alternative open to those who, first being willing to seek it, in turn prove willing to follow it. Against the possibility, a natural doubt inserts itself: is not the apparent futility of a life reduced to food and drink, a futility which the drunkard knows perhaps better than anyone, final? That Paul should choose to characterize what separates the way of hope from the path of despair as one of choosing between resigning oneself to earthly drink, or else not, is thus instructive. If nothing else, this juxtaposition he draws implies, if not the actuality, at the very least the pure conceivability, of a kind of drink’s existence besides the only one the drunkard knows.

It is this hypothesis, if one may be forgiven for putting it this way, that the words contained in the Gospel according to John and attributed to Jesus Christ himself confirm. That the words confirming this drink’s reality should be Christ’s is fitting, as the very waters of which they speak are his alone to give. We read of this giving in Paul’s remarks concerning the prophets: “And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4). That Christ alone can quench this thirst is thus at once as much a matter of spiritual necessity as it is prophecy. If Paul later proved able to convince the crowds of his message by “showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ” (Acts 18:28), it was for this same reason that Jesus had already shown the disciples that the scriptures spoke of him. This is why, on the way to Emmaus with the two disciples, the Risen One could expound “unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). And if the prophets themselves drank of the Spirit, did not David also yearn for these waters? We read that he did: “And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, that is at the gate!” (1 Chronicles 11:17). We must realize (and not allow our astonishment to dissuade us from accepting the striking fact that caused it) that if the words of the New Testament can confirm the existence of such waters, this is because the very words of the Old which foretold of them are the substance of Christophany. The words that David himself gives

to his own experience prove as much. For if it is only the well at Bethlehem that will satisfy his thirst, it is because this longing casts a shadow which the fact of the Incarnation accomplished in Bethlehem alone finally removes. We are told more of this saga of longing in the scene in John that describes the manner in which it is brought to conclusion when, in response to the woman at the well whose only wish is as David's to no longer thirst, Christ tells of waters that give without ceasing, waters that give life, and thus the rest for which she (and no less the drunkard) yearns: "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again/But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst: but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a water springing up into everlasting life" (John 3:13-14). Thirst quenching drink, water that gives life. Waters that stir, rather than depress or stagnate, the spirit. The mere mention of these waters immediately provokes a question: if there are indeed such waters, and if such waters alone are able to quench this singular thirst that no other fountain possibly could, then why do so many reject them? Why, indeed, do so many simply deny even their very reality?

In order to meet the challenge this question poses, must we not return exactly to where we began, when we noted the curious connection between drunkenness and sleep? To taste Life's waters, one must first awake from the slumber that otherwise forbids all access to them. To drink them would require one to give up sleeping and wake, to no longer be drunken, but to be sober-minded. In short, it would demand a faith whose very lucidity drunkenness clouds. Thus, if, just as the words in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians caution, drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of Heaven, is this not so precisely because here drunkenness ultimately signals a profound faithlessness? Yes, and without question, for what else could resorting to drunkenness conceivably signify besides what it so plainly does? Above all, the drunkard's weariness is born of a spiritual refusal responsible for unfurling it. To go this way, to prefer the cup of drunkenness, is one those who, living a life of natural sobriety, but nonetheless never knowing faith, are as guilty as the drunkards wallowing away down at the bar in spirits and liquors. What explains this existential equivalence between the faithless who drink and those who abstain, one the worldly sober are sure to contest? What explains the extraordinary truth that it is perhaps in fact the drunkards who, in at least no longer suppressing the true extent of their despair, stand a step closer to health than those who, content in their insensibility, find no need to drown the sorrows of a hopeless heart? By way of our analysis of drunkenness, have we thus not in fact approached the border territories of a great decision?

Without a doubt we have, for at last we've run up against the choice between faith and disbelief. Though there are countless examples one could enlist to illustrate our point that drunkenness is biblically associated with sleep inasmuch as each in turn represents the same faithlessness, we shall restrict ourselves to just one. The setting is depicted in the eleventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel where Christ, having commenced his earthly ministry to the cities, responds to the accusations of his critics who dispute his claim to be the Son of God. And interestingly for us, of all things, he chooses the issue of drunkenness to do so. In the case of John the Baptist, he reminds his audience, the prophet's righteousness was indicated in part by the significance of a sobriety (indeed a total abstention from drink) the Pharisees only dismiss: "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil" (Matthew 11: 18). Just as the angel of the Lord had told Zacharias would be the case, his son John "shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). And still, sobriety in the eyes of doubt is not enough to convince that the Baptist was who he said he was. That some accuse the Baptist of unrighteousness despite his sobriety is our first tell-tale indication that, as the gospel narrative goes on to confirm, if sobriety is not enough to establish righteousness, it is only because drunkenness turns out to involve more than intoxication, but offense. We see so when we read as we do in the very next verse that drinking can just as much be used as a convenient excuse by

the unbelieving to dispute someone's genuine righteousness. For this is exactly the strategy the Pharisees employ against Jesus: "The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners" (Matthew 11:19). What concerns us, thus, is not so much the issue of whether Jesus himself was in fact a drinker (or whether on the contrary he was simply repeating the false rumours that were being circulated of him), but rather the fact that the words he is recorded as having said place drunkenness in the same context we have been saying all along it properly belongs.

Drunkenness is a question of sleep precisely insofar as it is one of unfaith. For if some, like John, are accused of unrighteousness despite their total sobriety, while others such as Jesus himself are equally accused of unrighteousness for simply having associated with those who do drink, then in hurling these accusations which refuse to see drunkenness as anything besides an issue of straightforward intoxication, the Pharisees only indict themselves, being unable to see in it the figure of faith. The narrative in Matthew reveals that righteousness, when taken in the strictest sense, is not merely a matter of whether or not one drinks. The reason it isn't, said another way, is that drunkenness itself signifies more than a state of natural intoxication. It in fact signifies a spiritual condition of unbelief, one in principle as capable of afflicting the teetotaler as much the winebibber. Transposed from a territory defined in terms of an opposition between natural sobriety and intoxication, drunkenness is here reassigned to another, and deeper, pairing. What decides the status of John's or Jesus' righteousness is not their individual handlings of alcohol, but the invisible commonality that unites them: each drinks of the same Spirit the unbelieving don't.

Far more than intoxication, drunkenness is a supernatural stupor. It is thus in this sense, and it alone, that the natural drunkard is said to sleep. To see why, one only has to see that the fact explaining it holds just as well of the one who, perhaps doing well by not drinking alcohol to excess, nevertheless does comparatively worse by abstaining from Holy waters. In the end, nothing of essential consequence separates the sober unbeliever from the Bacchanalian. Each sleeps the same sleep of faithlessness. The unmistakable but mysterious connection between drunkenness and sleep, evident to all, as we noted at the outset, therefore conceals within itself an incredible secret, one of literally biblical proportions. If in the last analysis drunkenness signifies a set of stakes decided not simply according to whether one lives indulging strong drink or else as a teetotaler, but by more, then it is precisely for this same reason that true sobriety signals nothing less than salvation itself.

Let us therefore awake from the slumber of these days. Let us light the lamp of our souls and, keeping vigil, prepare to endure the Night of tribulation that has drawn near: "And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch" (Mark 13:37). This challenge, to keep watch, falls to each of us. For in that peculiar stillness amidst the dark blues of moonlit walls, one lies alone, and, before drifting off to sleep, therefore either hears or silences God's call to "remember thee upon one's bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches" (Psalms 63:6). There, in moments as these, suspended in the solitude of the room's darkness, eternity looms. And so, the day, no different from any before it or yet to come, concludes in decision: will one prefer the restlessness of sleep, or the great awakening of faith?

