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“The Gravity of Mystical Ascent”

“...for where levity is given us, gravity does not lack.”
Maurice Blanchot

In her major work of political philosophy, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt begins her Prologue in a manner philosophers of the time were, as a general rule, trained to avoid: reference to a specific current event. But the event in this case, occurring in 1957, a year before her book’s publication, was for Arendt so momentous, so world-changing, that she felt, no doubt, she was upholding her discipline. The event was the launching of the first satellite into space. The success of the Soviet Sputnik 1, “second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom” (Arendt, 1958, p. 1), represented a fundamental cosmological shift, whereby the relation of the fundament to the cosmos was, in human perception, forever altered. Humankind’s foundation, the terra firma of Earth, was no longer the touchstone by which we gained our bearings as *anthropos* and worked out our political and spiritual position in respect to the harmony of the whole. Earth was now something from which we could escape, the universe a place for ever-expanding recalculation – of ourselves as much as the world around us. This shift was at once scientific and theological. “Should the emancipation and secularization of the modern age”, Arendt asks, “which began with a turning away, not necessarily from God, but from a god who was the Father of men in heaven, end with an even more fateful repudiation of an Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky?” (Arendt, 1958, p. 2). The event threatened our very condition.

Having since put men on the moon and sent probes to the outer reaches of our solar system, we might now wonder what brought Arendt such disquiet, when, over a half-century on, the splitting of the atom seems a far more consequential development. But it was not merely the height at which humans could now elevate themselves that had made its impact on the author. It was what the event did to the below/above dichotomy. And we

learn later in *The Human Condition* that this event had precedence: the invention of the telescope by (among others) Galileo in the early seventeenth century. For what this instrument, this “Sidereus Nuncius”,¹ opened up was not merely our ability to reduce distance hitherto unfathomable to our naked eye, but to resituate ourselves in relation to what had been irreducibly above us and “put within the grasp of the earth-bound creature and its earth-bound senses what had seemed forever beyond his reach, at best open to the uncertainties of speculation and imagination” (Arendt, 1958, p. 260). Rather than bring the above closer, the more significant effect, argues Arendt, was to alienate us from our below. We can no longer stand in the same proximity to the earth and to the worlds we devise upon the earth as we once did, because below is no longer the sole reference point for our humanity. It lost that function for all of physical reality. The reference point is now truly “universal”, and no longer in any theological or philosophical sense, but in the sense of “valid beyond our solar system” (Arendt, 1958, p. 270).²

Yet while this paradigm shift may be disorienting in every single respect – and our physical orientation in the current expanding universe of black holes and space-time warp is no firmer, and arguably *less* firm, than Galileo’s late Renaissance universe – it does not, curiously, according to Arendt, invalidate our capacity for a faith in what may lie beyond the dichotomy of below/above. Of this disorientation she writes: “while it may affect greatly, perhaps even radically, the vocabulary and metaphoric content of the existing religions, it neither abolishes nor removes nor even shifts the unknown that is the region of faith” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 270-71). But wherein now lies this unknown? Or what would give faith its continuing gravitas?

The answer, which sits at the heart of this essay, operates as a paradox of movement, not merely between below and above, but beyond their binary orientation altogether. This movement will take us beyond the very division between science and theology, at which point Newton’s law of gravitation does not supersede the theological notion of gravity as Fall, but both give way to the paradox of opposing forces working simultaneously together, giving precedence neither to the above nor to the below. For the very law describing what keeps both satellites and celestial bodies in their orbit, or, like the inaugural Sputnik I, forces them back down to earth again, brings a universality to gravitation by uniting celestial

astronomy together with earthly physics. As we will see more clearly below, in redefining the centrifugal nature of ascension by means of the centripetal nature of declension, and making both external to all objects, Newton's gravitation unites the movement above and the movement below inseparably and universally. One no longer follows from the other in a sequence – “what goes up must come down” – but a more complex set of contradicting forces come into play, no less philosophical and theological in their import: *inherent in* going up is also, *at the same time*, a coming down. To take this paradoxical journey leaves us beyond either trajectory.

It was not Arendt's project to take us on this journey. It was her intent to show us that the contemplative life had, in the modern age, given itself over to the active life of the *homo faber*, as driven by the modern scientific agenda. One may still assume a contemplative posture, but only now by way of the cessation of activity, of doing, of making, so that the chief characteristic of modern contemplation is “motionlessness” (Arendt, 1958, p. 303). The idea of being transported through wonder was gone.

But in taking nothing away from Arendt's careful analysis – if anything, I hope to extend it – my intent in what follows is to argue that the motions accompanying our modern conceptions of space carry with them more than what meets the empirical eye and the productive hand, that there still exists a space in which contemplation can transport us, and that this space is governed by a gravity as *grativas*. “Take flight each day!”, quotes Pierre Hadot in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, using the words of Georges Friedmann from 1942 to call us to the practice of “spiritual exercises” designed, as it was for the ancient philosophers, to transform us (Hadot, 1995, p. 70). This does not preclude meditation upon physics, or Nature, and indeed Hadot elicits the Epicureans for our present world: “The closed universe is infinitely dilated, and we derive from this spectacle a unique spiritual pleasure” (Hadot, 1995, p. 88). The shifts from pre-modern to modern understanding suggest, on the surface, a shift from philosophy and theology to science. But in concert with Hadot I want to suggest that the categories of philosophy, theology, science and even the arts yield up their distinct boundaries under the force of a gravitational pull Hadot calls “spiritual” and which I, in focussing on the West's Christian tradition, will call “mystical”. This force complicates both terms, associated as they tend to be with an upward

movement, for the motions that help to define the rubric of gravity are, I want to insist, paradoxical, both spatially and conceptually, pulling us above and below simultaneously, so that the mystical flights that once took the contemplator beyond the above remain, in the *gravitas* of gravity, possible here below in the hyper-immanent frame of our modern context.³

The path I want to take, as someone working in the interdisciplinary spirit of this present volume of essays, and particularly at the Western intersection of religion, theology, philosophy and the arts, will be circuitous in its itinerary.⁴ The way of the paradox affords, even necessitates, a different method, one that disrupts the normal conventions of historical-critical analysis. The methodological procedures upon which Western scholarly discourse bases its validity are themselves reliant upon a certain understanding of time and space: the logic of discursive reasoning is *linear*. This linearity operates both horizontally (past-present-future) and vertically (below-above), so that chronological explication unfolds along the flat plane of history, while the thesis stands above the elements of its argument. The itinerary that follows, in bringing together several disciplines, alight upon thinkers who, beginning with Arendt, question, frustrate, or challenge this straightforward pathway – hence the apparent eclecticism of those placed in dialogue with each other. This path will first return us to the premodern ideas of gravity, as they then gave way to early modern theories, and to Pascal’s spiritual resistance to them. This resistance will then take us out of sequence, as all resistance strives to do, by leading us back to the Christian mystical path more directly, particularly in the spiritual elevations of Bonaventure from the thirteenth century. Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium*, as a paragon of the medieval, pre-Ignatian spiritual exercise, will then transport us forward again to the twentieth century, all with an elasticity of time that returns us to what Charles Taylor calls in *The Secular Age* “higher time”, a temporality outside ordinary or secular time (Taylor, 2007, pp. 54-59). We then encounter the mysticism of Salvador Dalí, whose Surrealist images did so much to visualise time’s elastic nature. Here, higher time will yield to a higher space, as Dalí’s depiction of the crucifix in his painting “Christ of Saint John of the Cross” disrupts our normal conceptions of spatial positioning. This in turn will yield to Maurice Blanchot’s mystical sense of literary space, where a gravity once again takes us “outside” (*Dehor*) our normal conceptions of space, and places us before an incalculable possibility.

Ultimately, I want to argue that the “outside” Blanchot directs us towards, as anticipated by Arendt and depicted by Dalí, is consistent with the earlier mystics’ ascent in that the spatial metaphor of above and below, as it applies to the reasoning mind or the contemplative soul, to *thinking space*, we might say, or to *thinking the movement of our place*, is itself exceeded, taking us beyond all dualisms, including those of metaphysics/physics, faith/empirical knowledge, logic/intuition, and even, chronologically, pre-modernity/modernity. Such is the nature of “paradox”: the defiance of expectation, as the ancients first understood the term, and as Arendt still found operating. After all, Arendt sets the entirety of her magnum opus on the fulcrum of a paradox, when in the book’s final line she quotes Cato’s words: “*Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret*” – “Never is he more active than when he does nothing” (Arendt, 1958, p. 325).

The Gravity of the Situation

Let our initial step go back beyond even the Romans. If we first understand the basis of pre-modern views about gravity, we understand better why the contemplative, mystical views that seem to defy gravity had such potency, at least in the imagination, if not in the mainstream of religious practice. For what keeps us to the ground in the ancient mind, at least since Socrates, is not anything external, such as a force caused by another object, a feature within space or time, or a particle, but something internal to our very nature – internal to all things of nature as an inherent property of their very essence. Aristotle’s thought here was foundational. At the beginning of Book II of his *Physics*, he states very clearly that everything that exists by nature “has *within itself* a beginning of movement and rest” and that if it is to move or stay at rest it is “not incidentally” (what the Latinists would later describe as *per accidens*) but by virtue of itself. This internal power Aristotle calls the ability to be the source of one’s own making or moving or generating (using the word *poesis* here for self-production – Aristotle, 1961, 192b, p. 23; 1957, pp. 106, 108). The movement towards one’s proper “place” – here the *topos* of our being, or that to which our very essence is oriented – is understood in a teleological sense: all matter has an intrinsic nature to gravitate towards the earth’s centre, as part of its *telos*, just as the element of fire has an intrinsic nature to rise into the air. Thus *gravitas* for Aristotle, as *telos*, was not something

we could cultivate, like the virtue it later became for Cato and the Romans. Rather, it was part of our constitutive being, our *primary* being, operating not just on the level of nature or *phusis* but also on the level of our soul or *psuche*: Aristotle works this out especially in *On the Soul (De Anima)* as *entelechy*, and in his *Metaphysics*, as operating on the level of *metaphusis*, in moving from potentiality to actuality, and with the mind's power to act. If we are to rise above our inherent gravitas, we must do this with the whole unity of our being, which means not abandoning our intrinsic nature but embracing its overall internal purpose, which unifies us, in the end, with Primary Being, the divine as First Principle.

Now this ancient view held court throughout all of the West's pre-modern development, with some theological and scientific adjustments along the way. We do not ascend above our station in life because it is not in our nature to ascend. Or we ascend only by finding within us that part of our nature that bears itself toward the gravitas of the Divine. As Aquinas said in his commentary upon Aristotle's *Physics*: "Hence, it is clear that nature is nothing but a certain kind of art, i.e., the divine art, impressed upon things, by which these things are moved to a determinate end" (Aquinas, 1999, p. 134). It is only in early modernity, starting with Galileo, but then spectacularly with Isaac Newton, that we get any sense of gravity as something *external* to us. The image of a falling apple is more than just an image of a felicitous accident (one that leads to the theory of *universal* gravitation); it is the *per accidens* of something extrinsically concomitant, a counter-image to the theological sense of natural being *per se* with its divinely installed proclivities. When in the Genesis story of the Fall the fruit descends from its bough, it is plucked by the hand of desire, or theologically, by the egoistical nature of sin, altering humankind's natural bent permanently thereafter. The extrinsic force of modern gravity, on the other hand, wakes up Newton, and indeed all of modernity, to a different sense of what it means to have one's feet on the ground, to tread the soils east of Eden, a sense that places *Homo erectus* above the rest of Nature no longer by virtue of a divine pedigree – created *per se* in the image of God – but now with nature concomitant to humanity, something that steps alongside humanity. Gravity becomes an external attribute, the *topos* of our being no longer something inherent within but, as Arendt perceived, determined by forces beyond our intrinsic human stance. This allows for a new disposition towards the world around us. We shift from a centripetal teleology, as the movement to our proper place at a pre-given centre, to a centrifugal

scientism, where the supreme human task is now to husband, through an expansion of empirical knowledge, the external forces of nature for humankind's own instrumental ends. Newton's theory of gravitational force is as much a revolution as Copernicus' theory of heliocentrism.

This shift invokes a fundamental split between *Anthropos* and *Nature*, one already captured a few generations before Newton by his compatriot Francis Bacon, who in the opening aphorisms of *The New Organon* (*Novum Organum*, 1620), whose very title signals an attempt to rewrite the logic (*organum*) of Aristotle, states: "All man can do to achieve results is to bring natural bodies together and take them apart; Nature does the rest internally" (Bacon, 2000, p. 33; 1889, p. 192). The "rest" here is a rewriting of the "whole", which no longer acts solely in a prescribed and self-contained manner; the bringing together and taking apart is a rewriting of the *poesis* of human activity and its *telos*, which, as Arendt saw it, would now become lost to instrumental labour and activity. Modern gravitation, as a force extrinsic to the human condition *per se*, ironically allows humans to elevate themselves as never before, literally and figuratively. As Bacon says of the old scientific dispensation: "It is like water; it ascends no higher than its starting point" (Bacon, 2000, p. 9). Yet of the new dispensation, he says: "The task and purpose of the human Power is to generate and superinduce on a given body *a new nature or new natures*" (Bacon, 2000, p. 102; 1889, p. 343; italics added).

For Bacon of *The New Organon*, what is left of Aquinas' "divine art" is only the divine impression, the "true prints and signatures made on the creation" (Bacon, 2000, p. 37; 1889, p. 205). It was Blaise Pascal, several decades later, who attempted to come to terms with this re-positioning of the human *topos* vis-à-vis the divine. When considering the new infinities opened up by this new Baconian worldview, humans are neither any further above nor any further below. We are midway, at a mid-point, Pascal says, between an infinitesimal nothingness, so small we cannot imagine it, and an overwhelming vastness, so large we cannot fathom it. Both extremes are incalculable and infinite – the former a "new abyss", the latter an ever-expanding firmament *in vacuo* (Pascal, 1995, p. 67; n.d., p. 56).⁵ Both spaces terrify Pascal, for they are everywhere and nowhere at once, a paradox he attempts to describe by drawing directly upon the medieval image made famous by two mystical

theologians/philosophers, Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa: its “centre is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere” (Pascal, 1995, p. 66). This is an image both Eckhart and, later, Cusa naturally ascribe to God: “God is the intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (Eckhart, 1986, p. 230); “for its circumference and centre is God, who is everywhere and nowhere” (Nicolas of Cusa, 1997, p. 161).⁶ That Pascal should draw upon mystical theology is not accidental, for his reference here comes under the heading “Transition from Knowledge of Man to Knowledge of God”, a transition that brings us into mystical contemplation by translating Bacon’s divine “signatures” and “impressions” directly back into unimaginable wonder: “In the end”, Pascal immediately adds, “it is the greatest perceivable sign of God’s overwhelming power that our imagination loses itself in this thought” (Pascal, 1995, p. 66; n.d., p. 56). The sign, the character, is now constituted by a loss.

Pascal is here calling us back to the most supreme elevation of the self, the *mystical* elevation, insofar as the mystical is predicated upon the intrinsic unity of nature and self, insofar as it depends upon a *gravitas* both human and divine, simultaneously. Thus in reference to gravity’s weight later in the same *pensée*, Pascal equates it with spirituality, not with corporeality:

almost all philosophers confuse the ideas of things, and speak spiritually of corporeal things and corporeally of spiritual ones. They boldly say that bodies are pulled downwards, that they tend towards their centres, that they flee their destruction, that they fear emptiness. They say bodies have inclinations, sympathies and antipathies, things which belong only to spiritual beings. (Pascal, 1995, p. 72)

The paradox of such gravity, and the “reason human beings are so slow in understanding nature”, is precisely that “the body can be combined with the spirit” (Pascal, 1995, p. 72). What Pascal tells us, as an early modern going against the currents of his day, is that such a paradox is not an alien feature of our inherited modernity. This paradox returns, I will suggest at the end, by way of yet another kind of elevated *gravitas*: a science that cannot fathom its own depths, despite its most ascendant discoveries and accomplishments.

The Ascent Above

Human ascension, speculated or realised, has long been a significant feature in our cultural and theological imaginaries. The transcending of the human – humans transcending their earth-bound station, humans transcending their own humanity – has typically been seen in spatial terms, so that almost all cosmologies prior to Newton placed the human in a realm *below* the gods.⁷ To seek beyond the human was to seek above the human. And therefore there has always been a sense of a *journey* to the divine: one must traverse places, but places with altitude, and the greater the altitude the closer to the divine. Height is thus a standard metaphor in religious imagery and imagination: the mountain, the ziggurat, the spire, the cloud, the celestial heavens, etc. To reach God, one must ascend, somewhere, somehow, above. This is all well known. But there has always been a tradition that, in relation to the divine, sees space and the below/above distinction as nothing more than a metaphorical contrivance, unavoidable though it may be. This approach, as Pascal drew upon it (bearing in mind its variegations well beyond Christian versions), is “grounded” in the mystical, which is to say, it re-conceives our notion of ground or of being grounded by doing away with “conception” altogether.⁸ For in this thinking and experience, God is truly *profundus*, so that the higher one attains towards God’s being, the deeper one goes (into a mystery), like Pascal’s “new abyss”. This is why we must begin by invoking a gravitas, for to move into the highest realms of the mystical divine requires an ever-expanding weightiness, whose centre of gravity is everywhere, its outer limits nowhere. And with this paradox comes other necessary oxymoronic metaphors: the blinding light, the moment of eternity, the point of the infinite, and so on. The material and immaterial also join this paradoxical schema, as Pascal tells us, for the body is caught up in an ecstasy by which it moves beyond itself, outside of itself. Thus the grave nature of the mystical experience: death is enjoined with life, life with death. But these contradictions are possible because they occur *within*, as an inherent part of unified nature, not as an external force acting upon us, with a formula⁹ that conforms only to the rules of non-contradiction. To journey above is to journey within. And the deeper one goes within, the higher one transcends oneself, or the more one goes outside oneself.

We get this kind of paradoxical movement already in pre-medieval and para-Christian forms of mystical visions, whether in that of Gnosticism or Neoplatonism, the former by moving beyond the material, the latter by moving through the material. Plotinus, for example, perhaps the best-known Neoplatonist, speaks of “the soul’s descent into the body” as a “voluntary plunge”, by which the soul journeys towards the eventual harmonisation with or subsumption by the One (Plotinus, 1992, p. 415 [IV.8]). But perhaps the best representative of this movement in Christian terms is the thirteenth-century Bonaventure, and his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, or *The Journey of the Mind to God*, written in 1259.

There are seven steps to Bonaventure’s journey, all leading upwards – “steps in the ascent to God”, as he calls them (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 38, 39). The first, rife with the metaphor of elevation (and Platonic/Aristotelean terms), begins this way: “Since happiness is nothing else than the enjoyment of the Supreme Good, and the Supreme Good is above us, no one can enjoy happiness unless he rise above himself, not, indeed, by bodily ascent, but by an ascent of the heart” (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 38, 39). Now we might conclude two things from this opening line: 1) that it shuns the material, and 2) that this journey is self-activated. And we might be forgiven for assuming such essential Socratic, even Aristotelean, features. But Bonaventure quickly punctures both assumptions. For in the very next line he says: “But we cannot rise above ourselves unless a superior power raise us” (Bonaventure, 1956, p. 39). This statement suggests we must rely on some external source. But that idea too is punctured in the next paragraph: “By praying, we are given light to discern the steps of the soul’s ascent to God. For we are so created that the material universe itself is a ladder by which we may ascend to God” (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 38,39). Here we see the unity that underpinned Aristotle’s *gravitas*, the unity of the soul’s created being with nature. And this unity allows the ladder’s rungs to be made of seemingly opposing elements: “some are vestiges, others, images; some corporeal, others, spiritual; some temporal, others, everlasting; some things are outside us, and some within” (Bonaventure, 1956, p. 39.) This union of opposites, contra the Gnostic schema, and in concert with Neoplatonism, calls us to engage with the material world around us: “In order to arrive at the consideration of the First Principle, which is the most spiritual being and eternal and above us, we must pass through vestiges which are corporeal and temporal and outside us” (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 38, 39). Here the image of the ladder is again employed: “Now since it is necessary to

ascend Jacob's ladder before we can descend it, let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, setting the whole visible world before us as a mirror through which we may pass over to God the Supreme Creator" (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 44, 45).

So the physical world constitutes the first of what Bonaventure calls a triple way of seeing, and takes up the first two steps of the ascent (vestiges of the universe and of the world respectively). The second way is to move from the vestiges of *phusis* to our mind, which is the image of God. Here our natural powers of thought and intellect come into play. And it was likely this move of Bonaventure's, marking the journey of the title (*Mentis*), that Pascal had in mind when he reflects in his own *pensée*: "All our dignity consists therefore of thought. It is from there that we must be lifted up and not from space and time, which we could never fill" (Pascal, 1995, p. 73). Yet for Bonaventure this ascension does not distance us from Nature; it goes through nature, as in the first step. The mind becomes a microcosm within the total macrocosm, through which we make discernments and judgements by means of a trinity of powers – natural, rational and moral philosophy (natural philosophy including both physics and metaphysics). In this the third step, God's image is similar to what we find later in Bacon, that is, an imprint on our natural powers. Bonaventure even speaks of an "eternal art" (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 66, 67),¹⁰ God's productive mind from which all things stem, suggesting Bacon's source for his "divine art". But the crucial difference here is that the imprint is as much on the mind as it is on the natural world as creation. There is no Deist inclination. This is not a "new organum", a new mode or method of rational thinking, but an ascent to the Prime Mode as underlying principle.

The fourth, fifth and sixth steps constitute the third way of seeing: looking to the First Principle and going beyond to the eternal, the Art which is above us. In the fourth step, Christ as Truth takes on human form and in doing so becomes "a ladder restoring the first ladder that had been broken in Adam" in the Fall (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 72, 73). We now access this second ladder through grace, which includes the Scriptures, which reforms the faculties of the soul. On the fifth rung we contemplate God's Being itself, as the basis of our ontotheological foundation, while on the sixth rung we contemplate the Blessed Trinity as the Supreme Good, in which "consists the perfect illumination of our mind" (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 94, 95).

Now all this might seem a good medieval Catholic journey, informed by the ruling Scholasticism of its time: we start with natural law, and move through divine revelation to eternal law. At this point we will have reached what Bonaventure calls “synderesis”, which he elsewhere describes as the highest power of reason and “the natural gravity of the soul towards the good” (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 41, 42). But this is not yet the pinnacle, the seventh step. In all the previous steps the mind is ascending first through the material world and then within itself, not by way of vision but awareness. But in this last step, the visionary step, the mind must “transcend and pass over, not only this visible world, but even itself” (Bonaventure, 1956, p. 97). And in doing so, the metaphor of height, of ascension, collapses. Here the image of Christ returns, not just as the ladder, but as the crucified Christ, hanging on the Cross, having climbed the ladder to his own death. This image, we are told, “also was shown to the Blessed Francis, when, in a transport of contemplation on the mountain height [...] there appeared to him the six-winged Seraph fastened to a cross” (Bonaventure, 1956, p. 99).¹¹ The image of height is still utilised – and in fact, Bonaventure interrupts the story of Francis to tell us that this very mountain is where he pondered over the matter that became the *Itinerarium* – but it is counterposed by that of the cross, so that the elevated Seraph is fastened to a wooden implement stuck in the ground. This juxtaposition becomes the mystery hidden from all eternity, leading to further oxymorons, to new mysteries:

shrouded in the superluminous darkness of a silence that teaches secretly in a most dark manner that is above all manifestation and resplendent above all splendor, and in which everything shines forth – a darkness which fills invisible intellects by an abundance above all plenitude with the splendors of invisible good things that are above all good. (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 98, 99)

Here we go above the above, beyond the beyond, transcending ourselves and all things, as we “ascend to the superessential gleam of the divine darkness by an incommensurable and absolute transport of a pure mind” (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 98, 99), but only after, Bonaventure quickly adds, we can say of ourselves: “*My soul chooses hanging, and my bones, death*” (Bonaventure, 1956, pp. 98, 99, original

emphasis). So the ascent becomes a “hanging”, a suspension between above and below, which is both beyond above and beyond below, a “superluminous darkness”.

Beyond Above

Of course Bonaventure’s journey is by no means unique. Its general itinerary features earlier in Pseudo-Dionysius’ theology of uplifting, or later in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in Nicolas of Cusa (“On the Summit of Contemplation”, e.g.), in the raptures of Teresa of Avila, and in the thought of St. John of the Cross (“The Ascent of Mount Carmel”, “The Dark Night”, e.g.), to name only some. Each of these speaks of a mystical ascending, but whose “apex” is beyond any sense of spatiality altogether – a yet “higher” place, we might say, alongside Taylor’s higher time we spoke of at the beginning. To ascend here requires a deep gravitas, which is why Bonaventure ends his seven steps on the grave tone of death: to die and enter into the silent darkness of the “new mystery” is to be uplifted into a place, a *topos*, beyond all orientation.

This *topos*, and its paradoxical nature, take us outside normal time and place; it is not a pre-modern preserve, and Pascal is not the last of its inheritors, by any means. Its disruption of logic and location allows transportation beyond the usual flow of a history of ideas. As so we can return to the twentieth century in a leap that would otherwise seem disjunct if not for the place at which we alight: six years before the launch of Sputnik 1 with which we opened our discussion, and Salvador Dalí’s visual reinterpretation of St. John of the Cross in his famous painting “Christ of Saint John of the Cross”:



(Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow, Scotland)

Painted in 1951, the suspension between above and below is here rendered for us perspectively, as the cross is neither planted in earth nor raised into heaven, but left hanging in darkness. We, the viewers, *look down* upon the Christ from a place that is neither the divine realm nor our earthly dwelling, as a mysterious source of light fuses with the starless blackness of the heavenly sky.¹² Dalí's vision is a remarkable reworking for us of a mystical gravitas depicted by Bonaventure and others. The weight of the cross is rendered immaterial, as gravity itself seems suspended, and yet all the more weighty for its mystical transport, and for the paradoxes by which the all-too-human Christ remains faceless and bloodless as he hangs, and by which the resurrection is only a resurrection while still on the cross.

But the crucial point to see here is that Dalí's vision also carries us beyond the gravity of modernity. For what we see when we cast our eyes upon the "Christ of St. John of the Cross" is a realism defied by our forced perspective: we are not in a place we should be; we are not in a place we can account for. We are above, from one angle, as we look upon the head of Christ; but we are not above from another angle, as we look parallel with the horizon, and with our fellow humans standing on the shore in what is foreground from one perspective but background from another. Much of Dalí's work explores in similar fashion the confounding of perspective within our post-Einsteinian

world. As Pascal struggled to situate himself amid the new infinities of his post-Baconian world and its post-Aristotelean rationalism, so we too struggle to situate ourselves amid the shifts and dislocation typical of our late modernity, as we try to account, with Arendt, for our place in a world where the splitting of “Human” and “Nature” has had such severe consequences, and where we no longer know where gravitas lies.

If Arendt in the middle of twentieth century saw the launch of the first object into space as a fundamental, irrevocable shift in the way we understand, philosophically and politically, ourselves and our world, another twentieth-century figure, the French thinker Maurice Blanchot, – a writer often associated, however qualified, with a new kind of mysticism – wrote a short piece in the early 1960s reflecting on the first man in space, the Russian Yuri Gagarin. Entitled “The Conquest of Space”, it begins:

Man does not want to leave his place. He says that technology is dangerous, that it threatens relations to the world, that true civilizations are fixed, and that the nomad acquires nothing. This is the man who felt a shock the day Gagarin became a spaceman. (Blanchot, 2010, p. 70)

Most, of course, expressed wonder and delight at this progress: the ultimate defiance and eluding of gravity. But for Blanchot the true meaning of the experience was this: “man broke with place” (Blanchot, 2010, p. 70). We set ourselves beyond our known boundaries; we went beyond what fixes us. This is what must be considered decisive, Blanchot says:

out there, in an abstract out there of pure sciences, subtracted from our common condition symbolized by gravity, there was someone, not even in the sky, but in space, space without being and without nature which is nothing but the reality of a measurable quasi-void. Man, but man without horizon. A sacrilegious act [...] [T]he old heavens, the heavens of religions and contemplation, the sublime and pure “up there,” was effaced in an instant, emptied of the privilege of inaccessibility, replaced by another absolute, the

space of scientists, which is nothing but a calculable possibility. (Blanchot, 2010, p. 70)

Our current scientific development tells us that if gravity remains the symbol of our common condition, it is no longer an earth-bound condition, one we observe with the universal detachment of inductive reasoning and that keeps us rooted to the ground. Defying gravity by escaping the earth's atmosphere only amplifies our rootlessness and places us more spectacularly before the infinities that terrified Pascal, whether they be at the infinitesimal or galactic levels. In ascending through scientific and technological advance we only impose upon ourselves with greater palpability the gravitas of our displaced condition – Pascal's midway point, we might say, between the infinite below and the infinite above. But following Pascal this position does not preclude, or preclude further, as if under some inexorable march of a "secularism", the *unknown* that Arendt marked as the region of faith, or what Blanchot in his way called the Outside (*Dehors*). Rather, as Dalí's "Christ of St. John of the Cross" emblematises, it brings us closer to it, whether in the name of an art – Dalí had much affinity with Surrealism; Blanchot's place of the Outside was most prominent within literature¹³ – or even, ironically, in the name of science, a science that increasingly thrusts us towards the superluminous darkness of a space we cannot fathom.

If the early twentieth-century discovery of a general theory of relativity continues to disorient us, it is because shifting, unstable frames of reference implode our sense of spatiality, and along with it the below/above distinction. Or if the following discovery of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, or Principle of Indeterminacy, continues to disturb us, it is because when we cannot observe the location of a particle without altering its location, or at least the precise measurement of its location, we lose our sense of a fixed place from which to elevate our perspective, any perspective, and we need yet an even newer organon. And when such discovery leads to the splitting of the atom, we find our moral and ethical perspectives dangerously, hopelessly disrupted by turn. For Arendt, it was not the splitting of the atom but our launch into space that most destabilised us. Blanchot concurred, but for a different reason: in that ascent he sees, along with his close friend, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, a certain necessity, even *religious* necessity: "Truth is nomad" (Blanchot, 2010, p. 72).¹⁴

If there is an equivalent in today's world of those weighty events, one that carries the same magnitude of philosophical cataclysm, or of spiritual reorientation, perhaps we find it in the recent discoveries, or measurable confirmations, of gravitational waves, the latest as recent as October 2017. If as Einstein predicted there is a warp in our spacetime fabric, it profoundly warps our sense of where to place ourselves, the *topos* of our being, in respect to the universe. If gravitational waves result from catastrophic astral collisions, or from two black holes locked in a death spiral, having collapsed into each other, generating energy beyond anything we could imagine, much less calculate, and distorting both space and time with its ripples, wherein now is our universal position? Wherefore now *are* we? Dalí's optical distortions (melting clocks, etc.) and *trompe l'oeil* perspectives dramatise the surrealism of our situation. So too does much of Hollywood's science fiction, in which the perspectival position no longer originates from upon Earth: in our imagination, we are no longer Earth-bound creatures, and we can easily see ourselves starting elsewhere, even if this elsewhere is as yet no place (the true meaning of utopia). If gravity can no longer be seen in the exclusive terms of an external force acting upon us, but is part of an internal distortion, altering the way we perceive ourselves and our external world, without us fully grasping either how or why; and if this gravity connects us back to the darkness and nothingness of astral generation and black holes, and thus to the birth of the universe before there was matter, then we move closer to the world of mysticism than we commonly think, and the above – the starry heavens full of dark matter and infinite spaces – is paradoxically all too close to home, all too within us. And if we do not dare name this above God, ultimately that too is consistent with the mystics, who saw that even language could not contain what must go beyond the "beyond" and above the "above".

Conclusion

Whatever our science, very few of us are willing now to follow the mystical *itinerarium*, or, from a more modern vantage, Blanchot's *Dehors* – that is, to enter into the night that stands outside the night of dark space as first witnessed by Gagarin and now by countless satellites and probes we send into weightless space to measure the measureless, to trace the traceless.

The *other* night is always the other, and he who senses it becomes the other. He who approaches it departs from himself, is no longer he who approaches but he who turns away, goes hither and yon. He who, having entered the first night, seeks intrepidly to go toward its profoundest intimacy, toward the essential, hears at a certain moment the other night – hears himself, hears the eternally reverberating echo of his own step, a step toward silence, toward the void. But the echo sends this step back to him as the whispering immensity, and the void is now a presence coming toward him. (Blanchot, 1989, p. 169)

However much the modern (many would say postmodern) Blanchot may have remained mute about his relationship to traditional mystical theology,¹⁵ the step he speaks of here rests unambiguously upon the mystical ladder of Bonaventure. And it is in line with the “vertical horizon” that moves from Pseudo-Dionysius through Eckhart and Cusa all the way to, in his way, Pascal, whose early modern realities had already reduced the possibilities to a wager, in light of the question he posed: “Is there no substantial truth, seeing that there are so many true things which are not truth itself?” (Pascal, 1995, p. 153). Our late modern realities open up those possibilities once again. But they do so only by means of the paradox: to abandon ourselves to an above that is within, and thus beyond above. To take this step requires less a wager than a still newer organon, one happy to accept, and accept perhaps even axiomatically, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, even of the physical and the spiritual. And to develop this mode of thinking requires a boldness even greater and more audacious than a launch into space, which, we have repeatedly seen, only forces us to confront our gravity anew. The mystics, long before astronautics, had this temerity. Dalí’s paintings had this temerity. Blanchot’s fictions had this temerity. Our ever-shifting cosmology is moving us again towards new truths. But they remain *incalculable* – and perhaps, for that very reason, nomadic. The question for us now is whether we might find the gravitas to ascend to them.

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NOTES

¹ The name of Galileo's astronomical treatise of 1610, translated either "Starry Messenger" or "Sidereal Message".

² Arendt was to expand these points several years later in an article entitled "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man" for the journal *American Scholar*, published later in *Between Past and Future* (Arendt, 1977). There, directed more to the lay reader, she writes: "The situation, as it presents itself today, oddly resembles an elaborate verification of a remark by Franz Kafka, written at the very beginning of this development: Man, he said, 'found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition.' For the conquest of space, the search for a point outside the earth from which it would be possible to move, to unhinge, as it were, the planet itself, is no accidental result of the modern age's science. This was from its very beginnings not a 'natural' but a universal science, it was not a physics but an astrophysics which looked upon the earth from a point in the universe. In terms of this development, the attempt to conquer space means that man hopes he will be able to journey to the Archimedean point which he anticipated by sheer force of abstraction and imagination. However, in doing so, he will necessarily lose his advantage. All he can find is the Archimedean point with respect to the earth, but once arrived there and having acquired this absolute power over his earthly habitat, he would need a new Archimedean point, and so ad infinitum. In other words, man can only get lost in the immensity of the universe, for the only true Archimedean point would be the absolute void behind the universe" (Arendt, 1977, p. 272).

³ The idea of the "immanent frame" is raised by Charles Taylor in his monumental *The Secular Age*, and described as wholly natural, self-sufficient, impersonal, governed by exceptionless laws, where "instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular" (Taylor, 2007, pp. 542-543). We might go further and call this context a hyper-modernity, amid the ongoing uncertainty of what to label our latest phase of modern life. If modernism led to postmodernism, what comes after no longer seems capable of bearing an "-ism". Is this then "late modernity", as some have said? But "late" in what sense: near the end, or slow in coming? About all we can say with certainty – and both Arendt and Taylor, each in their way, help us to see this – is that the modern fixations and dilemmas with how we situate the self vis-à-vis the world and the universe have, in the wake of postmodernity, become more acute, not less. Hence we live in a kind of hyper condition, even if what is hyper is its indeterminacy.

⁴ This path, of course, far exceeds the Christian tradition, or even the monotheisms of the Abrahamic tradition, and arguably finds more consistent expression in Eastern thought. My focus here, however, is on the West's traditions, whose early modern science resulted in the reorientations of the modern self that Arendt found so disruptive.

⁵ Cf. Arendt: "The progress of modern science has demonstrated very forcefully to what an extent this observed universe, the infinitely small no less than the infinitely large, escapes not only the coarseness of human sense perception but even the enormously ingenious instruments that have been built for its refinement" (Arendt, 1977, p. 261).

⁶ The full sentence, from Cusa's *De docta ignorantia (On Learned Ignorance)* of 1440, reads: "Therefore, the world machine will have, one might say, its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere, for its circumference and centre is God, who is everywhere and nowhere". Cf. also Chapter 21: "The Infinite Circle as Metaphor for Unity" (pp. 116-118).

⁷ Ancient polytheistic cultures had, of course, gods associated with earth, even resident below the earth. The chthonic gods of Ancient Greece are probably foremost here. But the Underworld was most associated with cults of the dead; transcending humanity meant, invariably, transcending mortality.

⁸ As Pseudo-Dionysius says in "Mystical Theology", Chapter V: "That the supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual" – "Again, as we climb higher we say this. It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding... It is beyond assertion and denial" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987, p. 141).

⁹ Literally: Gravitational force = Gm_1m_2/r^2 .

¹⁰ See also e.g. pp. 40, 111.

¹¹ See also the Prologue, p. 31.

¹² St. John of the Cross himself writes: "Images will always help individuals toward union with God, provided that no more attention is paid to them than is necessary, and that people allow themselves to soar – when

God bestows the favour – from the painted image to the living God, in forgetfulness of all creatures and things pertaining to creatures” (John of the Cross, 1987, p. 150).

¹³ See especially Blanchot’s 1955 text *L’Espace Littéraire* (*The Space of Literature*). On the question of *Dehors*, see especially the chapter “The Outside, the Night” (Blanchot, 1989, pp. 163-170).

¹⁴ At the end of “The Conquest of Space”, Blanchot acknowledges an indebtedness to Levinas, who in 1961 had written a similar piece on the importance of Gagarin’s adventure as a displacement from Place. Of the cosmonaut Levinas wrote: “But what perhaps counts most of all is that he left the Place. For one hour, man existed beyond any horizon – everything around him was sky or, more exactly, everything was geometrical space. A man existed in the absolute of homogeneous space”.(Levinas, 1990, p. 233).

¹⁵ For Blanchot’s relationship to the mystics and their theological tradition, see Hart, 2004, especially pp. 22-49.