

Rendezvous

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Disbelief, Poetry and Religion

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Carlos Fuentes came to Cornell a few years ago, to teach a wonderful course on Mexican culture, its Hispanic and Indian roots. We became friends, and one day he confided to me that he was having difficulty finishing a novel he was working on. It was to become *Christopher Unborn* (*Cristobal Nonato*), a phantasmagoric account of a Mexico hell-bound in 1992, told through the voice of a child in the womb.¹ The child knows all, the history of its ancestors, the thoughts of its parents. And then, 400 pages along, it is time to be born. How could this child, with all its wisdom, be born?

I listened to Fuentes, and immediately there came to mind a story I had read in Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*,² of a question asked of Rabbi Baruch of Mezibich, who lived near where I was born in Southeast Poland, near the Ukraine. Let me retell the story in a poem I've written:

STRETCH MARKS

1

It is said in the Talmud that the child in the womb,
flexing her floating sac of the world, knows all, knows
the name of the angel who wrestled with Jacob, knows

and dreams, dreams all molecules her hands will make,
bowties of atoms centered by platinum, carboxypeptidase.
She remembers the constellations' pause as Abraham

held the knife over Isaac, and later, Dachau trains.
Reaching, through her mother's eyes, she blows life
into weeds and carbon chains from comets' tails;

and marks the lust, just that, of her father in her
conception. In volutes of gene threads and shells,
what a time to know! And then ... a time to be born.

As she is pushed into the colder world, an angel

strikes her on the head, and makes her forget all
she knew inside. The mark of the angel is on our lip.

2

Rabbi Baruch of Mezbizh explained it thus: If
the child were not made to forget, she would brood
on her death, the count of years and seconds left

audible like a repeater of death in her mind.
Contemplating her death she would not light candles,
or build a house. So the angel makes her forget.

3

But I think God, who knows, doubts (which is to know)
his design works. His winged observer marks the
onset of contractions, hydraulics of the amniotic

fluid. The angel is drawn into timing, hears
breathing, hoarser, instructed. He touches, an angel's
touch, the dilating neck of the womb. The child's

head is pushed against her own breast, the occiput
leads, rotates into the pelvic floor until bones
won't give, forcing the head to turn, shaping

a conformation that angles up; all this takes time
even if it is not a first birth. As the head emerges,
a thin shoulder slides into the place of resistance;

more pain, a push turning the face into the mother's
thigh. Confronted with this congruence of form and motion,
the angel is the one struck dumb, forgets, must attend

every birth. The mother stirs, unprompted, to the after-
birth; the daughter, like a seal coming up from its deep
dive, depressurizes, gasps for this unforgettable air.³

Sylvia Fuentes remembered at this point that in the Mexican countryside,

children with a cleft palate are called "the children of the angel." So Fuentes took the Hasidic story (with a credit to me) and ended his novel with it.

Now what am I doing telling Carlos Fuentes a Hasidic tale? Or retelling it in my turgid poem? I, a typical non-observant, assimilated Jew, an atheist (the word sounds strong, let's say a nonbeliever), and I'm telling a writer a patently religious story?

Let's fit another piece into the puzzle, again via a poem. This one tells you a little of my childhood:

BELIEVING

When I was eight I was a Catholic
for a while. 1946, Krakow, it was
time to start school, and only

the parochial ones were working.
So my parents said we had converted
during the war. That got me in.

My best grades were in Catechism.
I wasn't Catholic, but I wasn't
sure what I was. In church I

carried a censer and had my first
communion in white shorts. The priest
taught us to swallow the Host. You

weren't supposed to chew it, even
if it felt as if you would gag.
The sisters gave us colored pictures

of saints if we did well in class.
I remember confession, boys shoving
to get the soft priest. Sometimes

you didn't know who was in the
confessional. You had to sift your
sins; the priest wanted not just

a lie, but something like stealing

a soccer ball or looking at your
mother in the bath. He would ask:

How many times? Then you could get
away with a scolding and three quickly
said Hail Mary's. You wouldn't want

to confess really dark things, like
looking with the janitor's son at
his younger sister's sex, poking

her with a fork. The priest would be
angry, and who knows what the gilded
black woman on the altar, the one

I didn't believe in, but who looked
at me as I walked in my white robe behind
the priest, who knows what she might do.

If the poem really works, it does so only in capturing the ambiguity the child
feels; he knows he shouldn't believe, but ritual and the Black Madonna of
Czestochowa have their claims. Even for a Jew.

The disbeliever in me then fights back. If he writes about the concentration
camps after years of avoiding doing so, he will not play the believer:

FREE

On the day the guards ran, and
the shelling grew louder, the man
from Cernauti emptied the barrack
slop pail and went looking for blood.

He found men clumsy at butchering
a cow. They pushed him off, but
when he said it was only blood
he wanted, they let him catch it
spurting from the neck. The man

lifted a board, took out his clay
figures. He set them in a circle

