

Psalm 90, On Transience

by WALTER JENS

A PUZZLING TEXT, contradictory and dark, hopeful and somber, merciless and gentle. A song of dying and a word of life—a psalm marked equally by fear and trust, of terrible death and tender friendliness, lament and praise, wrathful judgment and hymnic eulogy. A song at once void of grace and proclaiming trustworthiness, about which Martin Luther wrote, “This psalm is a brief, noble, rich, full little prayer in which Moses describes the irksome life and anxiety-ridden death of mortals, where this anxiety originates, and where we, in life and in death, are to seek comfort, namely, from the eternal, merciful God.”

“A little prayer,” really? Is it not rather a desperate accusation, formulated in post-exilic darkness, against the infinitely remote God who governs without a trace of kindness and benevolence, a powerless humanity, doomed to be consumed in the sign of a graceless wrath like a flower that blooms in the morning and by evening is already faded?

Is it really “noble, rich, and full”? Is it not rather dramatic, rich with pathos, openly ambivalent—an appeal in darkness? A dirge, in the course of which a God who calmly observes humanity from an enormous distance, going down to the pit—early and fast—and who transforms himself into a kindly father who shows his glory to the children of this world?

A dark song in any case, it has been interpreted in various ways—a text for shrewd exegetes who contradict each other so blatantly that under the glaring analyses of learned scholars of Hebrew, simple readers of Psalm 90 lose both sight and sound. Just as with the perplexed Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* everything turns black before their eyes. Reason enough, I think, to examine the puzzling text verse by verse—under the guidance of the experts, certainly, but also with the fresh sense of a person who was not born yesterday, who will not permit an “x” in a text to be taken as a “u.” The kind of person, that is to say, who is able to accept the contradictions in all their roughness, without smoothing them out . . . and to do so, beginning with the first verse, in which the psalm is introduced

as a prayer of the great Moses. In the cold light of scholarly judgment, however, it was not written until centuries later, in post-exilic times. Nevertheless, by referring to the man of Sinai and Mount Nebo, it claims to be speaking with the authority, accumulated wisdom, and experiential power of the one and only man to whom on Mount Sinai God announced the commandments—in smoke and fire, to the sound of trumpets. (“All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking.”)

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God. Here is an assertion of authority: an individual who complains and protests, laments and prays, preceding his people like Moses, does not say “I,” but, in Moses’ steps, represents before God the collective of the downtrodden who need comfort. He speaks his prayer stereotypically, beginning with a hymnic entreaty, “Lord, you have been our dwelling-place in all generations.” The song of pain begins tenderly, full of confidence, in the manner of the Pilgrim Song, Psalm 125: “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.” But those words are barely said when the basic direction changes. Now it is a complaint against the unmerciful God who grants no refuge to the fugitive because he, the granite non-father, is too great and too remote ever to be reached by humans.

For more than ten verses, far beyond the middle of the text, the psalmist, like Ecclesiastes, describes the vanity and transience of all human activity before the horizon of the One who seems to be not a friendly savior, but a colossus from another star; not even a creator, but a numen from before all creation.

When the world lay in labor and brought forth the mountains, God looked on and permitted it to happen—a great master already at home in that *nothing*, that preceded the birth of the planet earth by as much as eternity surpasses all time. *Adonai*. For the psalmist he is a demiurge whose immortality wins its plastic shape in contrast to what is fleeting, perishing, and finite in humanity, and portrays it *e contrario*: look, how small you are! How transient the people!

An indifferent God, self-centered and dominating? Not so fast! The subject is still *Adonai*, who ten verses later is called on as *Jahweh*, who said to the people, “Come back again, children!” And, as Hebraists have pointed out, that could very well mean that the destroyer is at the same time the builder—the one who breaks is at the same time the one who puts together. And if not that, at least

he is a God who, in an illustration hinted at, permits the dead to return to himself, home to eternity.

But on closer consideration of the text in the context of the psalm, both interpretations are as good as impossible. In reality, "Come back again, children of men," means only this: new life is created constantly in permanent rigor; one generation follows another, each equally fleeting, each marked by futile effort, each miniscule in the presence of a God, the Wholly Other, who, line by line, grows in superiority. The smaller humans are, the greater is *he*; the more wretched the transience, the more glorious the terrible eternity—glorious for God, of course, but for mankind full of torment. Eternity! Incomprehensible according to the standards of temporal understanding, and for that reason, really inhuman.

With the author of the Book of Job, as close to our psalmist as is Ecclesiastes, it had to be said that God has no eyes and does not see as humans see. God's time is not human time (Job 10:4-5). God is the counterpart of that which is mortal. Job cries out, "A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last" (14:1-2). Again and again, in the lamentations of the period after the exile, the flower metaphor predominates, poetic and yet realistically bitter: "they are . . . like grass . . . in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers."

Here, two thousand years in advance, the great motif, *vanitas vanitatum*, everything is vain, played-out, is anticipated. It is the motif that characterizes the songs of the German baroque: Job, Ecclesiastes, and the psalmist are ancestors of Andreas Gryphius—all three controlled by the *one* thought, that life is vanity, planning is in vain, and in the midst of paradoxes and contrasts of human mock-existence, death alone is certain and sure. "All our days pass away" (Psalm 90:9). In the manner of the complaint of that psalm, Job says, "my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart. They make night into day: 'The light,' they say, 'is near the darkness.' If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness, if I say to the Pit, 'You are my father,' and to the worm, 'my mother,' or 'my sister,' where then is my hope? Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?" (Job 17:11-16).

A "brief, noble, rich, full little prayer"? No, a desperate lament about human misery and the remoteness of a God who is no longer

present in the here and now: no longer present bodily, as a support for Israel, who, in the battle of friends against enemies, points to life and removes death from the sight of the Jewish heroes on whose courage and piety the political fate of the people depends.

How different, in contrast, is our psalmist. He is no longer concerned with war and affliction, with flight and persecution. Before his eyes no deserts are crossed, no pinnacles conquered with the help of the living God. He is concerned with the vicarious entreaty of the miserable fate of a people driven into exile, to whom God is remote. He articulates a life-consciousness determined by sadness, by melancholy, the experience of God's distance—the same complaint of the great, universal lamentation of Ecclesiastes, lifted to heights of abstraction, an ahistorical adjuration of what cannot be changed. The people—in exile; God—in eternity, instead of being together, as in the heroic age. Now between God and the people there is only difference and inexorable separation. "The same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone" (Ecclesiastes 9:2f.).

Sadness came into the hearts of the people, in the inescapable monotony of the exile. The up and down, today one way and tomorrow quite another, is replaced by a sad monotony, the sadness of age, for which is no expectation of a future, no hope for a sudden change for the better, but only the dark contemplation of that death whose nearness Ecclesiastes, in one of the most splendid passages of the Old Testament, characterized by the splendor of great poetry, has portrayed as nearness to

... the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the street; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God

who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity (Ecclesiastes 12:3-8).

On the one side is the remote God who stands at the beginning and the end, but who never creates presence or grants meaningful activity in the midst of life. On the other side there is the human being whose sad existence in old age is reduced to one concept. It might seem that this is the way in which the psalmist reasoned, this adjurer of a universal melancholy, but it only *seems* so. Consistently the singer of his people, who appeals to Moses compares the thousand years of human life with a single day of God. Urgently, he lets the *saecula saeculorum* of mortals condense into a single night-watch that passes quickly and without interruption. The brief divine activity between evening and morning is hardly begun when it is already ended. Graphically, he identifies the post-exilic meaninglessness, in its mixture of mourning and boredom, with sleep, with being almost dead. Just so, here he is emphatically different from Ecclesiastes, and also from the author of the book of Job. For he desires to rebel against the remote man who lacks kindness (I follow the interpretation of Hans-Peter Müller), to revolt against the wrathful Lord God above the stars who, in his rage, lets humans pass away like cattle and extinguishes them without granting them the opportunity to let their light shine even once.

And why the rage? Why the wrath? Why the play with the transience of a people, of the "we" that suffers, opposed to a mournful individual, collectively and universally? Why the vain efforts of many generations? ("For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh"; v.1.) *Because God does not love humankind*; because he has his joy—not his pleasure, of course, but the affirmation for his actions and judgments—in confirming his right by the example of human misdeeds, regardless of whether humans are aware of their transgressions or not. Because God, as if he were an inquisitorial judge and not the "refuge" of mortals, seeks human transgressions with paltry pettiness, in a kind of self-reflection on the problem of theodicy, in order to justify the misery he brings on the world and to substantiate his merciless wrath, as if human beings preceded and God followed them—an avenger who calls to the accursed, "There! Just look it is your own fault!"

How great becomes the tiny human being, here, in God's irate meditations: a first perpetrator whom the Almighty calls into his

presence as if he were prosecutor and judge in one person, in order to spread guilt and transgression and, with thinly-disguised arguments for his wrathful action, to make the weak one still more miserable than he already is, in his futile effort and in the misery of his existence.

In the manifold misery! For that which seems to be the source of pride, human life, which could be an object of boasting and cause for recognition of an individual, visibly exalted among others brings about—even that is in truth just vexation and accursed drudgery, hardship, and labor. That is, if we understand the word, “labor,” in the way it was meant to be understood in Luther’s time, as *maloche* (toil) in the sweat of one’s brow and not as cheerful which makes for a meaningful existence. (It is not by accident that Luther once says “*arbeitselig*” where he means “*mühselig*.”

What seems to be delight—verse 10 of Psalm 90 wants to be understood just so, and not in any other way. It is an expression of futile effort in a long life of seventy or even eighty years. *Labor et dolor, kopos kai ponos*: burden and pain characterize human life and make mockery of delight.

There is no function in the text for the Protestant work ethic, celebrated for centuries, the sanctification of existence by sour effort and payment for guilt by way of industry and asceticism rich in labor. Puritanism, pointing to the praise of God-pleasing work, may call on Luther, who between 1528 and 1531 was suddenly so overcome by the desire for poetic paraphrase, that he changed the Hebrew noun, *rahbam*, “what is an object of boasting,” into a conditional clause (“and if it has been a delight.”) But the Hebrew text of Psalm 90 does not sanction Protestant striving for sanctification of work as it has influenced modern history. That has happened to the detriment of the free disposition of one’s time and also to the detriment of the contemplative hallowing of everyday sabbath hours, to the advantage of stifling seriousness of activity and the dogged rage of busyness but to the disadvantage of urbane, non-fanatical leisure that promotes sociability.

Here, the bitter industriousness of humanity, supposedly appropriate to the seriousness and the dignity of life after the Fall—“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken” (Genesis 3:19). There, the serene relaxation after the day’s burden and effort: *humanitas* in the sense of reflection with friends on Cicero’s estate, in the garden of

Lorenzo de Medici, or in the precincts of influence of the library where Erasmus of Rotterdam formulated his "Come, holy Socrates, and pray for us," which comprehends antiquity and Christianity, drugery and leisure, dialectically related. For the psalmist in the darkness that surrounds his people, and in his melancholy world view, according to the saying, "all is vanity," it is a foreign thought.

For the descendant of David who experiences the God of Sinai only at an infinite distance, *all* human action is futile effort, short-lived and vain: "they are soon gone, and we fly away." It almost seems as if the insight into the desperate situation of that community of mortals extends further than the people of Israel, comprehending *every* individual of whatever nation, generation, and age. It almost seems, in the course of the bitter meditation, as if this knowledge of the transience of the earthly reaches the point where the angry accusation against God, the cause of all misery, changes into resignation, universal pessimism, even into despair. "Who considers the power of your anger, and who is afraid of you in your wrath?" (v. 11).

Not rebellion against wrath, but submission to the inevitable, acceptance of the rage is now the watchword; humility and resignation have taken the place of defiance. The wise person, according to the psalmist, considers the invincible power of the divine wrath, not to be alleviated by rebellion, and attributes the misery among humans, the transience and the futile actions, not to accidental failure or the missing of self-assigned goals, but to the overwhelming oppression of the entire fallen creation by God's wrath.

Under the motto, *everything is vanity before Yahweh, the Lord*, thoughts of Psalm 49 are repeated. "Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish" (v. 12). A limit in thinking has been reached where life, this arrogant, absurd acting in torment and abandonment appears as misery and death as gain. The resignation of the psalmist echoes the complaint of the wailing Job.

Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts for me to suck? Now I would be lying down and quiet; I would be asleep; then I would be at rest with kings and counselors of the earth who rebuild ruins for themselves, or with princes who have gold, who fill their houses with silver. Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light? . . . Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in

soul . . . to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in? For my sighing comes like my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. (Job 3:11-25)

Can a complaint be imagined which is more shrill and desperate than Job's cry? Yes, it *can* be imagined, measured by the sad boredom of which the psalmist speaks, by the utter futility of earthly action under the sign of divine wrath, the up and down of Job, the alternation of blessing and condemnation, the change between happiness and pain, the blessing of God and the toil of begging, is a spectacle, dramatic and powerful, now serene, now tragic.

And just for that reason, the turn from plaint to petition, from horror about the great misery of creation to the *other*, the helping and saving God who is friendly and untouched by wrath and rage, is the more dramatic, "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Turn, O Lord! How Long! Have compassion on your servants!" (vv. 12-13).

It is moving, entrancing, touching to read how, in the situation of extreme lostness, the psalmist turns not to humans but to God. God alone can teach to count the days and to think not of death which is certain, but of life that is uncertain and requires meaningful order. While *mortality* is accepted without contradiction, the *futility* of human action is put into question. *That* can be changed into humane activity by a gracious God, the opposite of the wrathful being in the universe, by the caring one, who is inclined toward mortals. It can be changed from a fleeting, transitory action into a responsible, enduring work. This is because, in contrast to the beginning of the psalm, God is now seen to be gracious to his servants, and the mortal, once characterized by ambiguity and plaint, now arrives at the insight of the sage to whom every hour granted is significant, because God, the giver, and the human being to whom it is given, there the immense one and here the miniscule one, appear as secret partners, working together on one work in which the joyous praise on earth corresponds to the friendliness under the heavens.

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and so many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be manifest in your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of

the Lord be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—so prosper the work of our hands! (vv. 14-17)

Now, suddenly, at the end of the psalm, which is not a death- or a funeral song, but a poem, rests on a rapid transformation of wrath into friendliness above, and from futile vanity and transitory business into glad and meaningful work below. Now, suddenly, the rebuffing God becomes amenable and—finally!—bestows grace again on his servants. Now, suddenly, the joy of life and the elation of work becomes visible. Now, suddenly, the path of the psalmist who trusts the *other* God (and the new person) begins to diverge from the path of Job, tortured as he is by dour toil. The reader might even imagine that Psalm 90, with its great finale of the gracious God and of the mortals who transcend the transience of their actions thanks to the goodness of God—is an answer to the complaint in Job 7 about the slave-like life of the one who is beaten by God.

Do not human beings have a hard service on earth, and are not their days like the days of a laborer? Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like laborers who look for their wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down I say, "When shall I rise?" When I arise, the day is long until evening, and unrest tortures me until dusk . . . As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more." (Job 7:1-10)

They return no more. That is a thought common to the author of the story of Job and to the psalmist. The thought, in fact, at the base of the meditations of all who believe the biblical narratives: immortality and humanity exclude each other. *Nor do their places know them any more.* The psalmist, however, rejects this saying of Job at the end of his song, by pointing, after the dramatic change from wrath into friendliness, to the reliability of acting that is blessed by God and to the overcoming of a futile life in that blessed activity which is not drugery, but serene action, useful to the community and testifying to the glory of God. Thus it is not effort that could be called delight in itself, but a way of existence that proves to be meaningful, enduring, and reliable, in the knowledge of the finitude and limitation of the human being.

Psalm 90, which begins as a mourning song, rises to an angry complaint, and which seems to conclude in desperate resignation, at the end arrives at a breadth and depth of meditation on the unity

of divine actions and responding human reaction. Seen in this way, the psalm, misinterpreted for much too long a time, shaped by Luther into a song of toil and death—is a prayer, characterized by swift change and lightning-like reversal, which one can live with. But, despite the change to conciliatory serenity at the end, there remains a reservation that the human being, in a moment that for the first time in our history we have the power to destroy ourselves and revoke God's creation, as a creature of the wrathful or friendly God, is presented as too small, to permit us to identify with a being that, in the view of the psalmist is rather a dwarf than a demiurg, rather an impotent creator as independent creator.

In this situation, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, after Dresden and Vietnam, it is necessary, I think, to add a critical supplement to the 90th psalm, the chorus from Sophocles' "Antigone." It begins, "Mounstrous: much. But more monstrous than humans: nothing," and ends, "Far beyond expectation, endowed with skill and spirit, one time he (the mortal) proceeds to the good, another time to the evil."

The counter-thesis, introducing the inevitable debate with the psalmist, would be that it is not the dwarfishness of human beings before God, but their ambivalence that makes them monstrous. Monstrousness that at the same time implies greatness *and* horror, might *and* demonic nature, power, and disaster. Thus it makes mortals the reflection of that God who, in this way, regardless of neighbors, lives out the primeval power of his wrath *and* who at the same time can be the friendly one who, exercising solidarity with the whole creation, makes possible united action among humans.

Protest, Davidic psalmist, protest in the spirit of the Reformer who was a humble but also critical, partisan, even occasionally angry reader of biblical stories. Protest, because humans who are defined by insurmountable dependence never could climb to the pedestal where they now stand, characterized by the opposition of technical omnipotence and moral turpitude, from which they may fall further than any before them.

What an image of humanity! This goes beyond the Old Testament dwarf whom God's wrath blows to the ground with raging force. It also goes beyond the masterly being of Greek sophistry, that permits the mortal, to the extent that he possesses technical and political insight, to be self-sufficient. For the Greek poet who knew the ambiguity of the concept *anthropos eon* (*voilà un homme*,

nichts als ein Mensch) the problem begins where it ends for the psalmist, brooding about finitude and futility, and for the philosophers, enthusiastic about blind belief in progress, namely, at a point where the ones who are so highly exalted, as never before, can fall so deep as never before, into ruin, even into destruction of the species because their morality did not keep step with their knowledge, their ethos with their power of control, their ability to contemplate with their impious perfection in the technical realm, unaccompanied by "you let them sweep away like a stream."

The all-experienced and yet at the same time inexperienced human beings have made nature itself compliant, have shown the principle of "domination" to be seemingly incontestable, have made the future tractable, "far beyond experience endowed with ability and spirit." Precisely for this reason, they are filled with the blind arrogance of those who raise the insight "you *can* do everything" to "you *may* do everything." Thus they lose their humanity, which rests most of all on respect for God the Creator, as well as on everything else created, human beings, animals and all of nature.

Objection, therefore, after reading Psalm 90 with its confusing antimonies. Objection not only to God who has become too great (vv. 2-10). Objection not only to the one who is wrathful and foreign, to whom already Schleiermacher refused obedience. Objection not only to a being never touched by sadness, never by mourning over mortals who abused the freedom given to them for the destruction of what is created. Objection also to humans who, having become too small, lack the dialectic of what is monstrous. Objection, finally, to humans who consider it as lack and failure—and not as distinction—that they have no share in eternity, touched by time and held within boundaries. "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3-7). "A generation goes, and a generation comes, All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow." Would it really be gain, we have to ask, a gain for people if they were immortal instead—how soon!—to be "*consumed and overwhelmed*" (Psalm 90:7)?

Would it be gain for them not to be in time but to be imperishable like, perhaps, a stone or a faraway star? Does not the outstanding incomparable power lie exactly in the transience, and, most of all, in knowing it?

Objection, once more, to the deliberations of the psalmist which

rob human beings of their Janus face, their greatness *and* height from which they may fall, their dying and their knowledge of the limitation of earthly activity.

In striving to supplement the vision of the poetic psalmist (not to refute it, in its dignity, its sadness, and its seriousness), we have appealed to a poet, Sophocles, in order to take into consideration that monstrosity, the extent of which only our century sadly knows. At the end of our deliberations which, instead of giving swift answers, provoke more and more questions ("under your climbing feet," said Franz Kafka, "the stairs grow upward"), we call one more a poet, not a theologian, into the ring, in order to throw light on that dignity of finitude, of which the psalmist, oppressed by the burden of God reigning from eternity to eternity, loses sight.

We call, as the third and last witness, after the great-grandchild of Moses and the Attic tragedian, a poet of our century, Thomas Mann, who answered the question what he believes or what he esteems the highest, by saying, "transcience." But transcience, so Thomas Mann, "is something said, you will say,—No, I reply, it is the soul of being, it is that which gives worth, dignity, and interest to all life, for it creates *time*—and time is the highest, most useful gift, akin, even identical with everything creative and active, all venture, all willing and striving, all perfecting, all progress to the higher and better . . . Where there is no transcience, no beginning and ending, birth and death, there is no time—and timelessness is the standing nothing."

Humanity—an episode in the infinity of the universe; human beings, distinguished before all nature by knowledge of beginning and ending and commissioned to sanctify the time given to it in the act of self-perfection and in helpful unified action: these are the thoughts which, like the vision of the Sophoclean chorus of the double-sighted man, should be added when it is time to interpret Psalm 90 in the light of our experience. Thomas Mann writes in the essay, "Praise of Transcience," and similarly in the discussion of Felix Krull and Professor Kuckuck on the commotion of the galaxies and the episode of life, "The animation of being by transcience reaches its perfection in human beings. Not that they alone have a soul. Everything has a soul. But the human soul is the one most awake in its knowledge of the possibility of exchanging the terms of "being" and "transcience" and of the great gift of time. To the

human being (alone) it is given . . . to wrest the imperishable from the perishable.”

Thus Thomas Mann, in a powerful conversation with Sophocles and the psalmist—an imaginary dialog which, after controversial, heated, and passionate debate, could have led at the end to a consensus: if the two partners in the debate had echoed the statement of the psalmist, with conviction and a good conscience: “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands.”

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