

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/4

From Nothing
By Daniel Tobin
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Review by Dennis Daly

Melding together physics, mysticism, and mathematics, Daniel Tobin, in his epic paean to Jesuit priest and scientist Georges Lemaitre entitled *From Nothing*, creates and choreographs a twentieth century re-conjured world of cosmological wonder and Dantean horror. He conveys his tale to us in extraordinary lines of narrative poetry. Tobin's writing explodes onto the page with white-hot intensity, its numinous words and birthing suns expanding and cooling first into elegance and then into a compassionate understanding of our human condition.

Tobin's subject, Lemaitre, just for his acquaintances and geographic address, deserves substantial intrinsic interest. A friend of Albert Einstein, Lemaitre visited with him often after Einstein had fled Germany for the temporary sanctuary of Belgium.

No stranger to savagery, Lemaitre fought in the trenches during the First World War and was awarded the Croix de Guerre. Lemaitre remained in Belgium up until and through the 1940s and the Jewish holocaust. He witnessed the horrors first-hand and was himself questioned by the Nazis because of his friendships with multiple Jewish scientists.

In his work Lemaitre anticipated and solved many of the problems inherent in Einstein's physics. He disagreed with Einstein on issues of quantum mechanics and his insights were later proved correct. He also developed the theory of cosmology that became known as the "Big Bang."

Though writing mostly in the third person, Tobin occasionally speaks in the voices of preeminent scientists of the time such as Lemaitre himself, astronomer Edwin Hubble, Robert Oppenheimer, and George Gamow. The technique works wonderfully by infusing emotion, humor, and, generally, other points of view into the text.

A consideration of Lemaitre's deeply felt faith and his scientific persona opens this collection of distinct, yet intrinsically connected, poems. In this piece entitled (Fountain) Tobin expounds on the attraction between matter and anti-matter before ending his argument with Lemaitre's own words,

*... your physics and your faith,
the divergent roads with their singular horizon*

*where the radius of space converges into zero,
where what was, is, will be waxes without boundary*

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/4

into seed and sand grain, a Cepheid luster of eyes —

*news of the minor signature keyed from everywhere,
the primal radiation, omnipresent, the prodigal
wave arriving from its Now that has no yesterday,*

*the proof of your calculus, the tour of the expanse:
"The evolution of the universe might be compared
to a display of fireworks that has just ended,*

*some few red wisps, ashes, and smoke. So we stand
on a well-cooled cinder to see the fading of suns,
to glimpse a vanished brilliance, the origin of worlds."*

At the Battle of Yser Lemaitre details a chemical gas attack and pivots from reality into a work of art. The poem, (De Rerum), is spoken, amidst the spattering of machine guns, in Lemaitre's voice. Here's the heart of the piece,

*Why is it, O my Precious Christ, we do this to each other,
crouching in transverse, trench, the barbed, deadlocked lines,
who might have joined like harvesters among hedge and fold?*

*A hiss, and from enemy dug-outs the strange cloud curls
in waves, grayish, yellow to green, darkest at the bottom.
And I know we are in a biblical plague, the men fumbling*

*for bits of flannel, cotton pads, the gassed in spasm, clawing
at their throats, their eyes, vomiting, crawling off to die —
the way the forsaken do in Bruegel's The Triumph of Death,*

*its black plumes of smoke and burning cities, its scythes
and armies, skeletal, their coffin lid shields, the slit throats,
wagonloads of skulls, that dog nibbling a dead child's face.*

At his most provocative Tobin summons up Pope Pius XII, the mystic and Vicar of Christ, loathed by Adolf Hitler, obsessed with apparitions in Fatima, and utterly alone in his bureaucracy. He had ordered his churches to save individual Jews by hiding them and issuing phony baptismal records. He broadcasted veiled condemnations of the Nazis. He seemed to mean well, but yet.... The poet, speaking to the audience Lemaitre had with the Pope, concludes the piece this way,

... his silence at the roundups

*near Vatican walls: culpability caught by hindsight,
the encyclical denouncing hate shelved for diplomacy.
In the photograph you look up at him, your pontiff,*

*as he welcomes you. Obedient, open, to his throne.
And had he donned the yellow star? History's "What if."*

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Using the famous double-slit thought experiment as a metaphor in his poem (Aperture), Tobin plots out the possibilities and paths of science, as well as Lemaitre's mystical hope for religious salvation. In the experiment that charts "wave theory," particle photons, when shot through a slit screen, seem to know where to go; they have a kind of consciousness. Does probability theory indubitably lead to an invisible world? The poet explains,

*--" Infinity is such an artistic creation, all symmetry
And elegance, but your method smacks of metaphysics,
Lifeless life, and the Bible is not a textbook of science.*

*If relativity theory had been necessary to salvation
it would have been revealed to St. Paul or Moses.
Still, the deeper we penetrate the universal mystery*

The more we will find one law and one goodness."

Lemaitre envisions cosmic microwave background radiation (CMB) in Tobin's poem entitled Canto. His predictions were validated shortly before he died by Arno Penzias and James Wilson. The poet begins his piece by quoting St Augustine,

*Is it motion itself that makes the day? Or is it the time
taken in the motion? Or is it both? The saint asked,
searchingly— Deus creator omnium: the measure*

*of mind made by the Maker of minds, and time
come to existence only observable as time, phase
transition to the radio spectrum, pre-recombinant,*

*the primordial light unchanged from the initial
sea of light, a television hiss homing everywhere,
mysterious, incessant...*

Tobin has dared mightily with this multi-faceted book of cosmological wonders and soaring divinations. The degree of his rarified achievement startles beyond mere artistic credence. Bravo.