

## DEEPENING THE FURROW

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I found having to write about religion and literature very difficult, and talking about it even more so. A lifetime of questioning reduced to a 15-minute statement! I wince hearing the untransmuted voice (my own in particular) trying to formulate what my teachers and poets like Auden and Eliot long ago assured me was none of poetry's business to deliver, namely, a message. As Alan Bennett remarked about Prince Charles at John Betjeman's memorial service: 'Never read the Bible as if it means something. Or at any rate don't *try* and mean it.' That warning about trying too hard to publicly give assent to something one has doubt about in private neatly pinpoints what lies behind my unease; for the poet, it also raises consideration of the relative values we assign to poetic sense and poetic sound when contemplating religious propositions.

If a writer is concerned with problems of belief and strong feeling, she aims, presumably, at truth to experience and a persuasive expression of that truth. But since questions of belief and feeling are so often areas of habitual disbelief and scepticism, conscious statements about them tend to sound suspect and a bit contrived. And for good reason, too. The discernment and revelation of imaginative truth doesn't come from the conscious mind in the first place. The conscious mind, more often than not, is busy disguising the truth from ourselves, and so I don't find it easy to believe (if believe is the right word) anyone who speaks directly and with facility about questions of ultimate belief and powerful feeling.

I find it especially hard to be convinced by writers who, being more prone to self-doubt than most, are proportionately more skilled and articulate in deluding themselves into certainty. My main concern here is to try and tell the truth as painlessly as possible and not sound boring on this most private subject.

Before the writer ever puts pen to paper, he/she will have acquired certain emotional attitudes and values from which he will never completely escape. It's true enough that a good part of a writer's development is taken up with learning to discipline and shape the sprawl of raw temperamental protoplasm, and to avoid getting stuck in some obsessional state or states of mind. On the other hand, if the writer chokes off those early influences altogether, he will be violating and distorting

those very ideas and beliefs that propelled him into expression in the first place. But what happens when those emotional attitudes and values seem to be becoming obsolete? How does the writer legitimize himself?

As a child of the 1930's, I was brought up to be suspicious of abstractions, to be wary of easy consolations, to be sceptical of any ideology or theology purporting to offer solutions. Growing up in wartime, my generation was trained early to be alert to language's betrayals, obliged to bury the natural hunger of the young for miraculous revelation. Consequently, the religious impulse unmediated by reason has always made me uneasy. I'm pretty sure that my stropky obsession with precision and accuracy in the use of language has at least part of its genesis in this growing up during the second World War, a historical accident for which I've always been grateful. As Miroslav Holub the poet has said when comparing the beady-eyed attention we paid language with today's cliched blur: 'Everything seemed so important, every image, every metaphor seemed to matter in a special way.'

Whether because one's senses are sharpened during childhood and times of crisis or because one's father suddenly disappeared for six crucial years, those early childhood years were the source of most potent memories. Across those painstaking notes dispatched with poignant regularity from Borneo, Brunei, Morotai, Tarakan, Biak was stamped the warning imprint, 'Careless Talk Costs Lives'. The impact of this cryptic message was to be felt far more deeply in my future work than I could possibly have realized at the time.

Back in our Australian provincial classrooms we studied examples of wartime propaganda, despising conceptually aerated adjectives like 'glorious', 'invincible', 'omnipotent', weighing up the approval, disapproval, and neutrality ratings of columns of synonyms 'I am firm. You are obstinate. He is pig-headed.' While being alerted to the manipulative powers of language, I was manipulating myself into linguistic paralysis, scrupulous to the point of schizophrenic self-distrust. To this day, when confronted with an adjective implying judgment, I still mentally shift through those old gradations of approval to mild disapproval right across the spectrum to strong disapproval in order to reach a fair conclusion and to get as close to the truth of the matter as possible. Very ethical, very idealistic, but hard on the imaginative life and the

notion of spontaneous utterance. As Brian Higgins says in *Genesis*, 'Reason is an angel in mathematics, a castration in literature, and a devil in life'.

As undergraduates, we read existentialist philosophers, believed in free will, and took personal responsibility for our actions. The writers I most admired were European dissidents, starting with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard who displayed stoic courage, steely irony, an unsmiling moral strenuousness cut off from religious affiliation. Writers who came later like Malraux, Koestler, Camus, Sartre, Orwell represented freedom from prejudice and superstition, not so influential for what they'd written as for the composite image projected of their conduct. Like the Russian poets encountered later in translation (Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, the Mandelstams, Pasternak, Mayakovsky), they epitomized courage, had been tested by dangerous times from which they were always at one remove. They emerged from the landscape of a war that took our fathers from home, writers inseparable from the apparatus of totalitarianism, the concentration camps, Nazism and Stalinism. Austere, tough, angry about social injustice, these were writers in whose work the notion of commitment to human solidarity was foremost, who raged against the dying of the light, and who, by testifying to the violence and futility of contemporary history, managed, in spite of everything, to keep faith and hope alive in the Western humanist legacy of art, literature, and the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition. The cranky moral earnestness of the Melbourne of my youth comprising a kind of stern Leftish didacticism coupled with the muscular Protestantism of my C. of E. schooling slotted easily into the cultural and political upheavals that animated my literary heroes.

I'm not sure in what sense these early concerns of my world could be called 'religious'. Cultural and ethical maybe, but not necessarily spiritual, surely a necessary component of the religious sensibility. Passionate dissent is sometimes confused with religious inclination in this country, a kind of stropy dissatisfaction with what this earth has to offer, and certainly my own writing seems to have depended for a long time on remaining adversarial, as if needing the skewed vantage point of isolation from which to maintain creative rage against the complacencies of safety, and the indifference to injustice.

I suppose the notion of spirituality is a bit fraught for me because, as popularly understood, it implies a bloodless, ascetic rejection of the physical world, a disembodied religiosity that leaves poetry and female experience out in the cold. So I'm sceptical of any system that divorces apprehension of the numinous from the life of the senses. It's not unusual for a writer keyed

in early childhood to the rhetoric of prayer and chant to be capable of shifting easily between practical complaint and transcendence in later life. Emily Dickinson describes this duality of poetic understanding as the most natural way of being imaginable, especially in a poem called 'This world is not Conclusion' which I'd like to read to you.

This world is not Conclusion.  
A species stands beyond -  
Invisible, as Music -  
But positive, as Sound -  
It beckons, and it baffles -  
Philosophy - don't know -  
And through a Riddle, at the last -  
Sagacity, must go -  
To guess it, puzzles scholars -  
To gain it, Men have borne  
Contempt of Generations  
And Crucifixion, shown -  
Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -  
Blushes, if any see -  
Plucks at a twig of Evidence -  
And asks a Vane, the way -  
Much gesture from the Pulpit -  
Strong Hallelujahs roll -  
Narcotics cannot still the tooth  
That nibbles at the soul -

I don't think the endless scrutiny of a mind and its intimations of religious direction has ever been better dramatized, a poem I wish I could have written myself. This nebulous private inner world has been rendered positively visible in the most concrete metaphors that illuminate the authenticity of her understanding of faith far better than the abstract instructions from the pulpit. That tooth nibbling at the soul is a state familiar to puritans of all persuasions but the way in which that intangible promise of something for which there's no easy word available other than the much-abused 'Eternity' is brought to startle and surprise us by its homeliness amounts to genius.

Much of what has appealed to me in past brushes with religious experience has, in fact, been paradoxically removed from the physical world, its very bodylessness something of a relief from the burden of the flesh and its assorted mischiefs. I associate this relief with language - the mysteries of the language of prayer, the poetry of the Psalms and the Prophets, the differing narrative styles of the Old Testament and the Gospels, the formalities of ritual, the repetitive comfort of well-known liturgical structures absorbed unconsciously in childhood. To a child with an

obedient, sensitive ear, the alternation of language levels from very simple everyday usage for the purpose of introspective meditation through to the formal embellishments of scriptural invocation celebrating major events in the ecclesiastical calendar provided an invaluable training ground for the nurture and development of a poet.

I may be chronologically remote from my childhood and yet its simpler concerns are still very present. I feel very little different from the child who once took delight in the idea of Aaron's rod causing water to spring from the rock in the desert. Nor do I feel a whit less sympathetic to Job's dilemma than I did as an eleven year old deputed to write the Morality play for our primary school's enactment of a mediaeval fairground. True to a lifetime preoccupation with the question of undeserved suffering, I chose the nearest story I could find in the Bible to a tragic drama. Although the script of that early effort no longer exists, I remember the buzz I got from devising cheeky lines for the Devil's interview with God, and from working up a lather on Job's behalf.

Writing this play marked the beginning of my conscious opposition to the God of the Bible. I found myself much readier to invest Job with a tragic hero's resistance to and complaint about the disasters that befell him than I was in coming to terms with a God bent on testing Job's endurance with such monstrous indifference. I certainly wasn't able to accept the idea that the servant of God should suffer willingly in order that others may be improved. I couldn't come at it when I was eleven and I still find his submission troubling even though I'm less likely to say so with such defiance: too many things have happened since those days of heedless bravado.

At one point, you may remember Job says

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him;  
 But I will argue my ways before Him.  
 This also shall be my salvation,  
 That a hypocrite cannot come before Him.

In these lines, it seemed to me that Job rose to inspirational heights, equally matched in his debate with God. But once God had spoken, Job gave away his swagger, his sublime defiance -

Wherefore I now abhor my words, and repent,  
 Seeing I am dust and ashes.

I have to admit I cheated on the original, refusing to have my hero abase himself in what seemed a craven way before God's harsh rebuke

Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer Thee?  
I lay my hand upon my mouth.

I was ready in those days to back tragedy's capacity to glorify human resistance to necessity. Prometheus defied Zeus with all stops out - why should Job not be allowed the same spiritual flare before extinction? Because Job belongs to the submissive Hebrew tradition and Prometheus to the intellectual hubris of the Greek. Tragedy is only possible to a mind which is agnostic since there can be no compensating hereafter for a tragic hero. Less defiant today, I'm more likely to lay a hand over my mouth before putting a tragic foot in it. However, I began as an agnostic and an agnostic I remain with a foot in both the Hebrew and Greek traditions, too much of a Jew to be a Christian, too Christian to be much of a Jew.

The child who wrote that presumptuous play became the twenty year old who wrote a dissertation entitled 'The Problem of Evil: Freedom, Suffering and Self-Assertion in the work of Dostoevsky.' The old obsession with undeserved suffering still around, probably clung to with more urgency coming from a tribe always on the edge of historic annihilation, usually in full lamentatory mode, holding forth about promised lands, messiahs who never come (and who aren't supposed to either) , the loss of homelands and the dark destiny of recurrent oppression.

'These return journeys between protestantism and Judaism defy any idea of ethnic identity. My protestantism has been imbibed with the vapours of the culture; my learning helps me to describe it. My judaism is cerebral and consciously learnt; it permits me to develop a perspective on quandries which would otherwise remain amorphous and alien'. (*Love's Work*)

From the twenty year old to the present-day keeper of a journal which receives confidences of a quasi-religious nature from time to time. One of last year's entries points up a slight change of direction, a movement towards (dare it be admitted?) submission:

How can God be benevolent? The Father?  
Linked in my mind with the judgmental wrath of  
my mother, dung's animus personified..! Thou  
shalt arise and have mercy on Zion' says Psalm  
102, 13... I've had to switch views about the  
nature of God, no longer an arbitrary capricious  
force whose mood swings paralleled those of my mother,

incomprehensible when I was young, but a source of *ira misericordiae* - the wrath that masks compassion... Whether I can forgive the ira in order to be open to the misericordia is something else again. So long as that doubt remains, I am unhealed.

Poetry has always seemed to me a source of hope, a means of speaking against any orthodoxy, be it religious, political, or social. It has offered a place for the dissenting imagination that hankers to encompass not only the truth of what is, what has been, but what might be or what might have been. The imaginative act is linked ( maybe illusorily) with freedom from prejudice, and sanctified by the specious notion that individualism and the search for meaning in the life of the individual are virtuously liberated from the dread of collective superstition. Romantic isolation has long been an alibi for those lofty vocational attributes claimed by poets of the prophetic or bardic persuasion. Given the dangers of this kind of self-delusion, I tend to cling to ordinariness and the restraining minutiae of everyday life.

Opposition to all established authority has meant, on occasion, confusing authority with authoritarianism, a kind of adolescent blind spot related to convictions about freedom of choice that in later years look more and more illusory. Further on in the 1995 pages of the journal comes the following entry:

If, as the Psalms say, the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, that he will not always chide nor keep his anger for ever (no. 103), that he removes our transgressions from us and pities those that fear him like a father pities his children, does 'pity' mean what we normally use it to mean and does 'fear' mean pure terror or to hold something or somebody in awe? I have such difficulty since I can neither claim belief nor disbelief, have always had trouble with a God who seems to have been created by man for his own ends, and whose reality has the same creative intensity as a literary construct. A Great Idea given a name. Do we all share the morality behind that Idea or are we coerced into believing its universal validity? Does conscience belong automatically to all or is it developed only in some who instinctively hold life sacred?

The Psalms provide the most inspired comfort. But is it just a trick of language or do I actually take hold of something in the act of reading? Some sustaining force behind the words, the voice of the fallible sinner seeking redemption in a crazy act of faith in an unseen being.

'I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I watch and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.' (102).

George Herbert's poems, modest and radiantly illuminating about his inner conflicts, have the familiar pull between the attractions on the world and the call to renounce it. Underneath it all, there is true belief in the one to whom he speaks as familiarly as to a mortal friend, his source of true strength and survival. He's willing to go all the way with whatever God

ordains, whether he is 'cast down' or afforded help:

I will complain, yet praise;  
I will bewail, approve;  
And all my sowre-sweet days  
I will lament and love.  
                                'Bitter-Sweet'

That just about says it all, sour-sweet days. The state of exile is relative and it seems that Herbert felt just as cut off in his village parish as I feel out of God's earshot on the remotest edge of this continent. We both received our sense of God from the fallible and transient beauty of the King James Version's resonant prose. It's an old infatuation and even now I can't tell how much of its impact depends on the means of expression rather than what is actually being expressed.

'Keep your mind in hell and despair not' is the epigraph to a recent autobiographical memoir, *Love's Work*, by the now-deceased young philosopher, Gillian Rose. It comes from an 18th century Kabbalist, Staretz Silouan, and, taken together with Herbert's poem, offers a kind of consolation to Job.

Keeping afloat, keeping one's spiritual stamina intact even in hell seems a not unreasonable wish for ageing poets. In Seamus Heaney's most recent book of essays, *The Redress of Poetry*, he quotes Vaclav Havel talking about hope and says that what Havel has to say about hope can also be said about poetry:

(Hope is) a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. I don't think you can explain it as a mere derivative of something here, of some movement, or of some favourable signs in the world. I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are... It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out...

Perhaps that's what might be called 'religious'. Whether it is or not, I hope that something has made sense for you in this stumbling attempt to speak about belief and one writer's tenuous connections with it.