THINKING OF THANKSGIVING

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THANKSGIVING, AS FAR AS I KNOW, is a uniquely North American festival, but God help us all as Christians if something of its spirit does not suffuse us wherever we may be. Gratitude is something in which we have to be schooled from our earliest childhood, and it is something to which, very often, we have to be recalled when our memory becomes blurred by distress, overwork, distraction or the insinuations of embitterment. Gratitude is a grace, and thus in principle a gift, but readying oneself to receive the gift is work, sometimes hard work.

If misery loves company, so can gratitude: we can be braced by one another to rejoice in our gifts, whether they be great or small. And given that one of the great gifts is the gift of others, it is doubly appropriate that we should give thanks in concert. For Catholic Christians, in particular, the prime ceremonial mode of thanksgiving is in *the* Thanksgiving, the eucharist. Over the centuries, the same eucharist has been rendered in different ways—not only in the sense that, say, funeral Masses differ importantly from wedding Masses, but also in the sense that architecture, music, painting, rhetoric and other arts have inflected it variously, bringing out now this, now that aspect of its inexhaustible potentialities.

Such contributions are, or should be, the result of what I shall call 'thinking the thanking'. It has been pointed out that there is an etymological connection between the two words—though there is also plenty of thankless thinking and quite a deal of thoughtless thanking. Thinking the thanking makes for good liturgy, even if there is not, and cannot be, a 'perfect' celebration, given the imperfections of those participating even in the planning.

In 2008 I wrote a series of poems called 'A Mass for Anglesea'.[1] In retrospect I see that what I was up to in this sequence was a kind of

[1] These poems, which suppose a solitary celebrant in Anglesea, a coastal township in Victoria, Australia, trace the broad course of a Catholic eucharist, though they take such liberties as imagination may suggest.

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'thinking the thanking': whatever their insufficiencies, the poems did keep faith with such an aspiration, and I know of nothing more significant to attempt as a project. The three stanzas of the poem called 'Offerings' bear a little reflection as an essay in gratitude. Its structure is very simple, deriving as it does from the eucharist's offering prayer, 'Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation…'.

> Blessed are you who called the mammoth-hunters,
> Russia to Mexico, their hearths
> trig or askew like our own, awl and bodkin
> tamped deep where they fell: and blessed
> in the bistre horse with his black mane at Lascaux,
> a thing received and given: blessed
> in the grubbing mattock of antler, the flint blade
> lustred from harvesting grain, the querns
> of Khirokitia, the tall tumblers of Susa,
> necklace of boars' teeth, ibex in glaze,
> horse-bells, trunnions, faience.

Everything named in this poem is regarded as a blessing, in that it is acknowledged as God's knowing and wise gift. The Navajo have a ceremonial 'Blessing Way', and it is part of the Christian tradition—part of its confidence—that life itself may be a 'blessing way'. The ceaseless gifts given us, every blessed day, are met by blessings returned from God's children to God. Each of the seven sacraments is a venue, a vector, of such a 'blessing way' in which the divine voice prompts and is met by the human voice. And, as those same sacraments at least imply and sometimes declare, there is no creature which cannot be drawn into the cycle of occasioned and then evoked blessing.

I was thinking, in this first stanza, of the long train of prehistoric and archaic ancestors through whom we people of the early twenty-first century have been blessed. There must be many of us who muse with fascination, if not gratitude, on those people, whose lives must have almost always been exacting, if not, in Hobbes's terrible phrase, 'nasty, brutish and short'. It is a privilege to live at a time when, through hint, guess and investigation, we can have some shadowy sense of these very early ones and then, little by little, of their descendants.

Collectively they are our ancestors, in all the disciplined learnings we enjoy, including the ability to learn itself. They were the pre-Socratic pre-Socratics, the fosterers, if not of faith, then of faith's possibility. And, long

Cave painting of a horse, Lascaux, France

before there was anything remotely like civilisation, they stuck by behaviours and practices without which civilisation could not even have been a dream. Very much later, in Ireland, household fires were kept smouldering at night, to be revived by day, for decades on end; but those distant women and men kept human aspirations smouldering, amid adversity, for much longer than that. They were blessed in so doing, and they are a blessing to us.

Of course it is to be supposed that these ancient people had many, if not most, of the unattractive features of modern human beings; but few of us need to be reminded of vulnerabilities shared over the centuries. All blessing takes place to some degree in the teeth of events or conditions that look more like curses: so much can be assumed. But let me remark on a couple of other things that are glanced at in this first stanza. For one thing, it celebrates making, fashioning. The mammoth-hunters had hearths because they could deploy fire; they could be the custodians of something elemental; they could be makers.

The whole business of human making, from knapped flint to space stations, from lisped syllables to the works of Shakespeare, is nothing if not wonderful, however fraught with historical ironies. In a whimsical poem, 'The First Geniuses', Billy Collins concludes by remarking that those first generations had not yet learnt 'how to sharpen a stone to a

deadly point', and we know too well what he means.[2] But if human beings have now learnt this, they have also learnt, amazingly, to give restitution and even forgiveness, and they have kept going, not entirely undone by their individual or collective false moves. And, all the while, people have kept on shaping things, intellectual disciplines, personal and shared policies. We later ones—who may still be very, very early in the divinely sponsored human project—are of a piece with those who made the grubbing mattocks from antlers, or the blades of flint which came to be polished by repeated harvesting.

And then there is the fact that, along with the ancient pursuit of things that are necessary or convenient, there grew up a pursuit of the beautiful. Who can say, whatever the conjectures, just why the artists worked as they did in the pitch-black caverns of Lascaux? They took fire with them, and they took the implements and resources they needed to make the beautiful things that can be seen nineteen thousand years later. Whatever their formulated motives—if they had such things—nobody who was not in part dwelling on the beautiful could have painted as they

Rice terraces, Luzon, Phillippines

[2] Billy Collins, 'The First Geniuses', in *Questions about Angels: Poems* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1991), 46.

did. And beauty is a sponsor of joy, a sponsor of the sense that we are blessed: beauty is a shepherd of the sacred.

Such beauty is not to be had easily or cheaply; great art is full of cancellations, false starts and dead ends; great art is like a great life, which is usually rich in reversals. Plenitude can be reduced to jumble, vivacity to obsession, elation to peacocking. But minor talents as well as major ones can still go on keeping faith with the notion that what Shakespeare calls 'a daily beauty' is discernible and, where discerned, is apt for celebration. Accordingly, I am trying in 'Offerings' for a sense of swing, of harmonies implied well beyond the little harmonies achieved, of largesse married to discipline. That, this time, is what the stanzaic form is all about. And here is another instance of it:

> Blessed are you in the sprawling tracts of loess,
> the oracle bones of oxen and turtle,
> dragon-mask bronzed on a coffin-handle, the brine
> drilled in Szechuan for salt-panning:
> blessed in the terraces bearing the rice of Luzon,
> in a Shan harmonica toning the air,
> in shippers of camphor and parrots, of copper and pearls:
> in the golden panther and crouching stags
> of Scythia lost and gone: in the bronze mirrors
> of the Britons: and in the hefted spears
> of those who walked the Dreaming.

This stanza, in its narrow compass, attests to the blessing of God which has been carried through in diverse quarters of the world as the repertoire of human skills has developed and as the human fascination with symbols has grown. In the canticle to be found in chapter three of the Book of Daniel, the cosmos and its human and other inhabitants are, as it were, sung into concert, danced into dance, and their truest identities are to be found in a blessing of God (Daniel 3:51–90). This is obviously a contribution to later notions—in prose, verse, painting and music—of heavenly harmonies in which many participants are glad to be joined. But the Daniel canticle is lodged in a book in which there is much to be endured and much to be done; the song is sung amid fire, in exile, and as an interlude. In which respects it sounds like much of the *Divine Comedy*, where the heart's yearnings are constantly intertwined with history's exactions.

And so it goes in 'Offerings'. In the eucharist, the prayer of offering says, 'Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which Earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.' The words are similar for the offered wine. It is essential to this prayer that a dual offering be acknowledged: God offers us the creation, which is summarised and focused in the bread and the wine, and we, in gratitude, 'bless' it back to God, making it the heart of our 'Blessing Way'. I had this in mind when writing the poem, though it is most explicit only in the third stanza.

It has been pointed out that our planet is named after that part of its surface which we associate with life-engendering and life-receiving—the 'good earth'. And, as has also been said, even 'In the depths of the sea I will find the land'.[3] The poem's 'sprawling tracts of loess' stand in for earth as both the recipient and the giver of blessings. The Wikipedia entry on 'loess' tells us:

> In China loess deposits along the Yellow River have been farmed and have produced phenomenal yields for over a thousand years; though a large amount of the credit for this goes to the farmers themselves, as Chinese farmers were the first to practice active erosion control, which also started about one thousand years ago.[4]

Faith says that there is more than a natural reciprocity involved in all such practices. Blessings are indeed grounded, but given human beings, they also tend to rise.

In this second stanza there is an increased stress on the ways in which we combine the useful and the beautiful, the pragmatic and the symbolic, together. We not only make and use things; we salute them. So, the remains of oxen and turtles have indeed been used for oracular purposes. That eminently pragmatic thing, a coffin, has in many cultures been adorned with figurations which imply the momentous, just when, from another point of view, the dead one has become absolutely insignificant. The rice terraces on Luzon, and in a multitude of other places, have a beauty which, even if it has come about by chance rather than by design, sits very well with their fertility and the relishability of the food that they provide.

[3] George Barker, *Essays* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1970), 125.
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loess.

Loess plateau, Yellow River, China

That 'Shan harmonica toning the air' is in principle the brother not only of bone or bamboo flutes, but also of all the assembled resources of the great orchestras of the world. The ways of music are mysterious, which is one reason why we turn so often and so appropriately to it when we picture the heavenly. Close to death, John Donne wrote in a majestic poem, 'I shall be made thy Musique'.[5] This is visionary stuff, but it is also prompted by his own and others' experience of music as the vector of mystery—of being the instruments if not of a music of the spheres then of a musicality of being. The ancient philosophers were not wrong about that. They knew that we are not turned in upon ourselves, but are in principle open to strange solicitations. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Benedick asks, 'Is it not strange that sheeps' guts should hale souls out of men's bodies?'[6] It is strange, and it is good too.

From one point of view, the parrots and pearls being shipped off in the next lines, the Scythian adornments and the decorated mirrors of the early Britons, are simply luxury goods—offensive to the socially conscious or to the instinctively puritanical. And I assume that there was as much ostentatious triumphalism among the privileged then as there is, unhappily, now. But 'abuse does not abolish use' is still a good slogan; and

[5] John Donne, 'Hymne to God My God, in My Sicknesse', in *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (London: J. M. Dent, 1985), 488.

[6] *Much Ado about Nothing*, II. iii. 55–56.

the attempt, by working beautifully with already beautiful things, to attest Being as something to be prized is valuable, if not therefore excused from recurrent discernment. The trouble with divinity is that it can occasion idolatry; the trouble with beauty of one kind is that it can elicit or endorse ugliness of another. But 'oaths in anguish count as prayers', it has been said, and life's treasurability can still be hymned in crooked verses.

Which brings me, in hope, to the final stanza of 'Offerings'. It goes like this:

> And blessed are you who fit us all for naming—
> telling the arrow's nock, the gladdie's
> corm, the Bellarmine jug, the Milky Way, spinnaker,
> follicle, Nome, Alaska:
> catfish, deckchairs, the age to fall in love,
> gaspers and megrims and the Taj Mahal,
> derricks, and El Dorado, and peach Melba.
> Blessed are you: the years toll,
> and yet I chance my arm enough to say,
> (the brute tide swayed by the moon)
> I bless the wine and the bread.

I remember the first time I read a line of S. J. Perelman's writing. I was, as a boy, on a seaside holiday with my parents and my younger brother in Western Australia. At a kerbside, second-hand books were on sale, and we picked up the master's *Acres and Pains*. I goggled at it while I read, as though some Rosetta Stone were divulging its amazing secrets. All that farcicality, all that *jongleur*'s tumbling through the language, all that unharmed fire-swallowing. 'Bless you for this', I thought, as I still do. The long spilling of language has been for me a primal experience, whatever its mysterious Nilotic sources. If thinking may be thanking, reading may also be rejoicing in concert with the language, as with all its readers, actual or potential.

The same is true when it comes to language itself, which is both a reading and an attestation of the world. And for all my love of reading, I know perfectly well that our being able to read and to write are lesser glories than our being able to speak and listen in all the registers from the companionable to the commanding. Shyness can inhibit, impatience roughen, narcissism bore, but the ability itself—what a good idea! For obvious reasons, nobody knows how it all happened in the first place, but even to think about that is to take us back to all that is moving in the

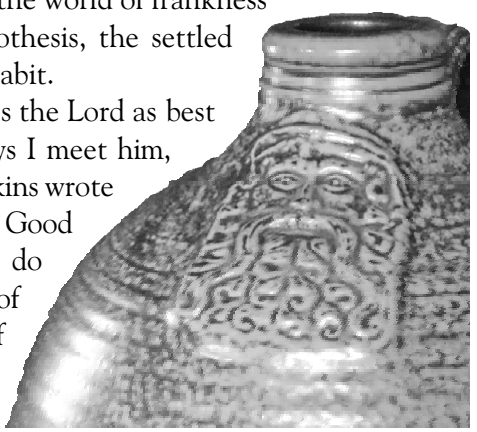
situation of our ancestors. With so much to cope with already, they came up with eloquence: and God bless them for it.

Richard Wilbur, in his 'Advice to a Prophet', urges a new understanding of the intimate association between word and world,

> … that glass …
> In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
> Horse of our courage, in which beheld
> The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
> And all we mean or wish to mean.[7]

This is particularly a poet's affair; but everybody has to look after the world, and to look after relationships, to some degree. That is one reason why telling the truth matters, hence my own third stanza's celebration of naming.

The sixteen things actually named there were not conceived as an interpretative grid or taxonomy of what we encounter, but a glance over them does hint at variety in the way we orientate ourselves towards the world. A notch for a bowstring; the subterranean bulb of a gladiolus; a vessel both jovial and mocking; a mythically imagined streak of the cosmos; part of a ship's rig; a lymphatic gland; an Alaskan city whose name perplexes even its own inhabitants; fish crossed with cat; a casual lolling-device; a phenomenon which in fact has no agreed name; an ominous demotic word for cigarettes; dreamland; a dessert named after a diva—together, they may suggest the world of frankness and artifice, immediacy and hypothesis, the settled and the unsettling, that we all inhabit.



It is out of all this that we bless the Lord as best we may. 'For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand', Hopkins wrote in 'The Wreck of the *Deutschland*'.[8] Good for you, Gerard, but we have to do much of our blessing out of imperfect meetings, not to speak of imperfect understandings. Not that you did not know that, and

[7] Richard Wilbur, 'Advice to a Prophet', in *New and Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 183.
[8] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Wreck of the *Deutschland*', in The Major Works (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 111.

pungently too. In any case, my own poem, having made a bow both to time's run and to nature's intransigence, winds up in the posture of blessing, a posture sanctified by the practice of the One who commanded it.

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