THREE PRESENCES

The Dreamer, the Traveller and the Friend

Peter Steele

IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA and his first companions, Francis Xavier and Peter Favre, are, as its founding members, figures of fundamental importance to the Society of Jesus. But they can also be seen as emblematic of aspirations and attitudes which might be admired by people with little interest in the Jesuits, and perhaps with no liking for them. Though we are all pluriform, it can still be appropriate to see each of these men in one particular light, and to focus on a particular aspect of what he represents. As W. H. Auden says, 'The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from, Having nothing to hide'.[1]

I propose to associate each of the three with a poem which, while not written about him, does, for me at least, answer to something important about him as a figure and a presence. I know of no poem worth reading which is not in a significant degree a drama in miniature, a drama which is often truer to life because it includes revisions, inconclusions, and vistas seen only glancingly. Hagiography tends to blot out such things, and to leave us instead with what Yeats calls 'Character isolated by a deed To engross the present, and dominate memory'.[2] The familiar portraits cannot tell the whole story about Ignatius, or Xavier, or Favre, and I am hoping that these poems may be our helpers in understanding more.

The Dreamer

In both the New and the Old Testaments, to be visited by dreams is very often a blessing. In the Bible dream is a matrix of meaning; it

[1] W. H. Auden, 'In Praise of Limestone', in *Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2007), 191.
[2] W. B. Yeats, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', in *The Poems*, edited by Richard J. Finneran and George Mills Harper, volume 1 (London: Macmillan, 1989), 30.

The Way, 48/2 (April 2009), 7–24

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may require construal or divination, either by oneself or by someone else, but it is not something redundant, not simply some offscouring of consciousness, but a providential stirring of consciousness. Although dreams have been classified and reclassified with increasing confidence, most particularly in the last hundred years, they are still innately personal, the bearers of individual hopes and fears: I can be known by my dreams, though never as I know myself in those dreams.

Whatever else Ignatius of Loyola was, he was a waking dreamer. At various crucial, formative moments he was gripped by a dream whose contours were chivalric, whose locus was the wounded world at large, and whose issue was to be a mystical receptivity to God the maker and retriever of all. One of the fascinating things about the *Spiritual Exercises* is how they repeatedly immerse us in the elaborated dream of a world whose intrinsic goodness is often violated, and more often still subverted, but which is, for all that, constantly amenable to transformation, and is indeed called to transfiguration. Nightmare is, so to speak, a sub-plot of this dream, a very potent sub-plot which is never altogether to be washed away. Over the centuries many who have made the Exercises must have been schooled into a deeper sense both of life's bitterness and of its sweetness. One of the greatest benefits Ignatius gave to the world, if not the greatest, was the power of his belief that God was the diviner of the dreams, and nightmares, to which in one way or another we are all subject.

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All this, if axiomatic, may also be a little heady. Accordingly, let me introduce the first of my three poems. This one is

written by the contemporary US poet Billy Collins, and it is called 'Indoors':

> I lose perspective in national museums
> wandering through the nest of rooms.
> I forget that history is a long scroll
> floating over a smoky battlefield.
> When I bend over a glass case to inspect
> the detail on an engraved shield,
> I stop at a curlicue as if it were everything.
> Then in the rare books room I am mesmerized
> by little illustrations in the margins
> of dictionaries, ink pictures of a lizard, a kayak.
> Lost down a corridor of suits of armor,
> I cannot find the daylight of an exit
> or even an airy room of outdoor paintings,
> no blue sky and white clouds in a gold frame.
> Maybe it is time to return to the beginning
> of knowledge, to relearn everything quietly,
> to open an alphabet book and say to myself,
> lips moving silently, A is for Apple.[3]

Billy Collins's manner is often, as in this poem, one in which lightness of touch is essential to the whole performance, and I do not want to do it the violence of pretending that it contains a hidden religious intent. But for me, at least, 'the religious' is not cordoned off from the rest of life, and Ignatius' celebrated wish that we should be seeking to find God in all things does indeed mean just what it says. In any case, here are a few things I notice when reading this poem in the company of Ignatius, the waking dreamer.

The always-capitalised word, 'I', appears half a dozen times in this short poem. Writers may, like the French, say 'one', or use the third person like Julius Caesar in his military memoirs, or assume the grandeur of 'we' like a monarch or an editor: but in the end, of course, all human agency has this word 'I' on its flag. Every day, billions of times, life's choices are undertaken, I by I by I. And my first suggestion is that Ignatius, particularly in the *Spiritual Exercises*, is keenly aware of the importance of this ubiquitous pronoun, and that he wants others to become aware of it

[3] Billy Collins, 'Indoors', in *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville: U. of Arkansas P, 2006), 34. Reproduced by kind permission of University of Arkansas Press.

as well. I think it was Woody Allen who said that existentialism means nobody can take a bath for you; and Ignatius is a proto-existentialist at least in his eagerness to affirm how inescapably each of us is 'I', in the good times and in the bad. This is not to deny that we are all intricately and intimately bonded with one another but, for Ignatius, rudimentary virtue, let alone holiness, entails having the self step out of the shadows of anonymity to embrace personal responsibility. To speak of an Ignatian procedure is indeed to speak of a discerning mind, but the discerning mind is the instrument of a deciding heart. Ignatius knew that there is no future in simply being a connoisseur of choices.

My second point prompted by 'Indoors' is that however prominently our sense of selfhood may bulk in our consciousness, it should never be overbearing. Shakespeare's plays are rich in figures, comic and tragic, who wish to foist themselves upon the world, and so are Dickens's novels. Much more recently this aspiration has been embodied in the Don Maclean song whose refrain is, 'Everybody loves me, baby—what's the matter with you?'[4] By contrast, 'Indoors' begins, 'I lose perspective in national museums', and is preoccupied with the ways in which the world of the museum contains and encompasses the speaker, rather than with the speaker's impact on the world. In many of Collins's poems an observing figure is led in a similar way from one captivating experience to another: this figure is often a child and is, in any case, made a child at heart for a while—someone wondering and grateful.

Part of what Ignatius is up to, whether in the focused drama of the *Spiritual Exercises*, in his *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, or in his correspondence, is an endeavour to keep an appropriate balance between initiative and subjection, resolution and obedience, in the relationship between our selves and God. Once again, this is not something peculiar to Ignatius: it is, from one point of view, the whole drama of Christian being. Any acquaintance with the work of such celebrated twentieth-century theologians as Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar or Hans Urs von Balthasar will attest how earnestly they worked upon the outlines of that drama. But it is not necessary to be a theologian to be struck by Ignatius' sense that the primal drama of our

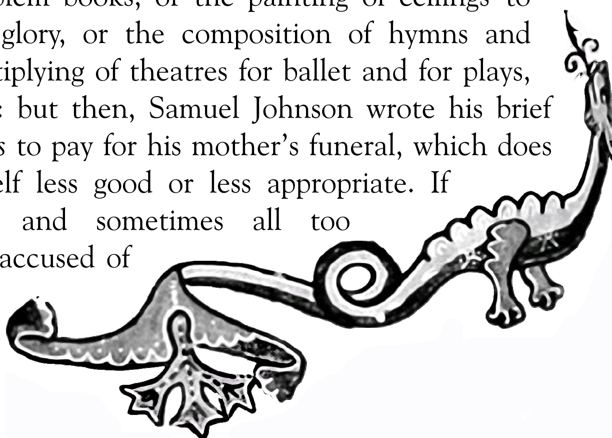
[4] This song is a powerful and ironic celebration of the self: see http://www.lyricstime.com/don-mclean-everybody-loves-me-baby-lyrics.html.

lives is one in which the dialectic between the demands of God and God's world on the one hand, and each person's distinctive aspirations and contributions on the other, is unceasing.

Ignatius has a pronounced sense of spectacle—as when, for example, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, he invites the exercitant to take a God's-eye view of the earth (Exx 102); or when, at the end of it all, he envisages God as supreme and sublime Fountain, showering creation with an unquenchable love (Exx 237). But he seems to me also to have an admirable and desirable readiness to appreciate the ways in which incarnation is, as it were, fleshed out in details (Exx 93). I am thinking of the attitude expressed in Billy Collins's poem, when he says,

> I forget that history is a long scroll
> floating over a smoky battlefield.
> … in the rare books room I am mesmerized
> by little illustrations in the margins
> of dictionaries, ink pictures of a lizard, a kayak.

Is this attitude a limitation or a strength? It is both, surely. We can conceive of beings who, in order to know, do not need to have recourse to material things or their traces; but we ourselves are not like this. Being what we are, we share the propensity that Collins describes to focus on specific and concrete detail. We are wedded to the world, in all its material panoply. There are those who reject this incarnational instinct, in both crude and nuanced ways, especially from a mystical perspective. But an intuitive sense that the God of all things, who is in all things, may aptly be saluted through those things has been a powerful source of artistic activity in the Society of Jesus and elsewhere. True, the making of emblem books, or the painting of ceilings to adumbrate the Lord in glory, or the composition of hymns and sacred music, or the multiplying of theatres for ballet and for plays, has had reverential ends: but then, Samuel Johnson wrote his brief prose masterpiece *Rasselas* to pay for his mother's funeral, which does not make that work itself less good or less appropriate. If Jesuits, all too often, and sometimes all too appropriately, have been accused of being 'worldly', this may in part be the shadow side of an ethos which



appreciates what might be called the groundedness of God, the earthing of the maker of heaven and earth.

I do not know whether Ignatius thought in a similar way, but I think he would have relished the last four lines of Collins's poem

> Maybe it is time to return to the beginning
> of knowledge, to relearn everything quietly,
> to open an alphabet book and say to myself,
> lips moving silently, A is for Apple.

The 33-year-old Ignatius, sitting down with schoolboys to get the rudiments of Latin into his head in order to be equipped for priesthood, is an important image for Jesuits. But beyond it there is the perpetual challenge 'to relearn everything quietly'. I am thinking here in part of the work of prayer: whatever some writers may say in their enthusiasm for schemata and advancement, one really remains an 'infant' in relation to prayer for the whole of one's life, at least in the etymological sense of the word, a 'speechless one'. The lips really are, decade by decade, 'moving silently', however noisily one may go about it.

Closely associated with this learning process is 'discerning' or, as I called it earlier, 'divining'. Ignatius did not, of course, invent the idea of God's tutoring our minds and hearts, which was potent in Judaism for hundreds of years before the coming of Christ, and has been elaborated and refined by many authors since. He did, however, have a bold confidence that people could be schooled by God, with finesse, in the thick of their lives, and that this experience could be prepared for, tested, confirmed and, where necessary, retrieved. And it seems to me that, although he came to have a very clear-eyed awareness of 'the world, the flesh and the devil', he remained sanguine about the realistic possibility that choices for God could be made frequently and, as we might say, incrementally. In Christian iconography, the apple can be bad news or good, and is frequently is a blend of the two: the Virgin holding an apple before her infant Son betokens both a primal disobedience and that greater obedience through which the apple of the world is to be made good. What Ignatius and those who follow him are constantly attempting to say is that, yes, we have to go on learning how to test our assumptions about the world. We must learn afresh that beyond testing there is choosing, and learn too that, mysteriously, the choosing is being

The Virgin and Child, ***by Hans Memling***

done along with us as well as by us. Even if all this is, as Billy Collins might say, to be learnt 'indoors', its implications reach to the limits of human affairs.

The Traveller

If Ignatius was, in the complex way at which I have tried to hint, a 'dreamer', his close friend and comrade Francis Xavier was, by anyone's measure, a 'traveller'. It is under that aspect that I want to think of him, and of those like him, at this point. Students of travel writing in its various forms often point out that there is more than an etymological connection between 'travel' and 'travail'. At least until quite recently, travel, if undertaken at all, was for most people a very demanding

business—slow, dirty, often dangerous, physically and psychologically exacting, without guarantees, and in various ways odious. Very few people undertook it for its own sweet sake, since it had no sweet sake. When, in a foundational document of the Jesuits, it says that 'It belongs to our vocation to travel',[5] the last thing that this implies is any romance of the open road. One needed a good deal of 'heart', of 'courage', to envisage being a traveller at all, and it is this matter of 'heart' on which I want to reflect a little here.

The business of taking heart, and of giving the heart, was clearly a matter of great importance to Xavier. On the one hand, his was a trenchant personality—'the hardest material I ever worked with',[6] as Ignatius said of him—and he seems to have had himself more in hand, more at his own command, than many other people. James Brodrick relates that when another Jesuit, destined for 'the Indies', fell ill, Xavier said to Ignatius, 'Splendid: I'm your man', and was on the road within a day, never to return.[7] To be like this is in effect to be a cultural hero to many Jesuits—most particularly, understandably, those charged with the giving of commands. On the other hand, while Xavier had indeed been captivated by Ignatius' evangelical dream, he too had his eyes thoroughly open to the difficulties and dangers involved in fostering it. Grandly styled 'Apostle of the Indies and of Japan', he may be compared with the Apostle Paul in his alertness to the menaces before him, about him, and indeed within him. This may be seen repeatedly in his letters, and in the written instructions that he issued while in his position of high responsibility. For example, in a long letter 'To the Society of Jesus in Europe', sent from Malacca on 22 June 1549, a little before he set out for Japan, he refers to

> …. the many difficulties and dangers of physical death to which we are exposed in these regions. This voyage to Japan is very dangerous because of the great storms, the many shallows, and the numerous pirates, but most of all because of the storms, for if two out of three

[5] *Constitutions* III. 2. G. [304].
[6] See Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times*, volume 1, *Europe 1506–1541*, translated by M. Joseph Costelloe (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1973 [1955]), 172 n. 189.
[7] James Broderick, *The Origin of the Jesuits* (London: Longmans Green, 1940), 85; and on the background see Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier*, volume 1, 554 n. 137.

> ships sailing from a harbour in these regions arrive safely, it is a great achievement.[8]

Three years later, he has weathered that voyage and has worked in Japan; and by 22 October 1552, he has fetched up on the island of Sancian, off the coast of China, opposite Canton. For all his eagerness to get to China, he is without illusions as to the challenges which may lie ahead of him. He writes to a colleague in Malacca,

> According to what we hear from the people of the land, there are two dangers which we shall incur: the first is that after he has been paid the two hundred *cruzados*, the man who takes us may leave us on some deserted island or throw us into the sea so that it does not come to the knowledge of the governor of Canton; the second is that, if he takes us to Canton and we come before the governor, he will order us to be tortured or to be thrown into prison, since it would be such a strange thing for us to do, and it has been so frequently forbidden for anyone to enter China without a pass from the king, who has very strictly forbidden strangers to enter his land without his permission. In addition to these two dangers, there are many others much greater, which do not threaten the people of the land and would take too long to recount, although I shall not fail to mention a few.[9]

He does indeed mention the 'few', and these turn out to be in effect dangers from within: irresolution would argue a lack of trust in God, together with imperillment of the soul. Accordingly, as he says, 'we find that it is safer and more secure to experience physical dangers than to be caught in spiritual dangers before God. We are therefore determined to go to China in any way whatever.'[10]

In the event, Xavier died in Sancian on 3 December of the same year. If we ask ourselves why this greatly talented man should have come to such a pass, the answer has to do both with a hope and with a fear. The fear stems from his belief that those who died without baptism would by that very fact be doomed, a conviction much more widely shared among Christians at that time than it is now, I should say. In

[8] *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, edited and translated by M. Joseph Costelloe (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 280.
[9] *Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, 440–441.
[10] *Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, 441.

short, Xavier saw himself (and his Jesuit comrades) as life-savers: his was a generous fear. The hope stems from his belief that Christianity is itself a foreshadowing of Heaven—hence his eagerness to preach the Good News, to foster devotion, to effect reconciliation, to promote the use of sacraments; and hence the intensity and constancy of his own prayer, which is widely attested.

So here he is, a traveller with a mission, a traveller whose life-journey is, as far as he can make it, identical with that mission. Life is not literally a journey, but the metaphor is so ancient and widespread and illuminating that we are unlikely to exchange it for another. For those who have, literally, to travel much, the memory of all their physical journeys lends force to the sense of a life-journey. And for anyone disposed to reflect on the spectacle of Xavier on the road and on the oceans, there is plenty to learn, much of it encouraging. But there is also the matter of the inner journey, the inner quest—the thing that made Xavier's friend and master Ignatius characterize himself as 'the pilgrim'. The pilgrimage at issue has to do with an intertwining of memory or imagination, intellect and will, those powers which are named and surrendered to God in the culminating prayer of the *Spiritual Exercises*. And in saying a little about that inner journey or quest, I want to allude to something which Xavier would have found surprising, namely a poem by Howard Nemerov, an American Jewish poet of sceptical but questing disposition. It is called 'The Gulls':

> I know them at their worst, when by the shore
> They raise the screaming practice of their peace,
> Disputing fish and floating garbage or
> Scraps of stale bread thrown by a child. In this,
> Even, they flash with senseless beauty more
> Than I believed—sweet are their bitter cries,
> As their fierce eyes are sweet; in their mere greed
> Is grace, as they fall splendidly to feed.
>
> And sometimes I have seen them as they glide
> Mysterious upon a morning sea
> Ghostly with mist, or when they ride
> White water or the shattered wind, while we
> Work at a wooden oar and huddle inside
> Our shallow hull against the sea-torn spray;
> And there they brutally are emblems of
> Soul's courage, summoners to a broken love.

Courage is always brutal, for it is
The bitter tooth fastens the soul to God
Unknowing and unwilling, but as a vise
Not to be torn away. In the great crowd,
Because it gathers from such empty skies,
Each eye is arrogant and each voice loud
With angry lust; while alone each bird must be
Dispassionate above a hollow sea.

White wanderers, sky-bearers from the wide
Rage of the waters! so may your moving wings
Defend you from the kingdom of the tide
Whose sullen sway beneath your journeyings
Wrinkles like death, so may your flying pride
Keep you in danger—bless the song that sings
Of mortal courage; bless it with your form
Compassed in calm amid the cloud-white storm.[11]

Nemerov has written, in verse and in prose, that life is 'hopeless and beautiful'.[12] You will not expect me to agree with the first of these adjectives, but it is certainly true that in much of his poetry Nemerov is

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[11] Howard Nemerov, 'The Gulls', in *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1981), 115. Reprinted by kind permission of Margaret Nemerov.
[12] Nemerov, 'The View from an Attic Window', in *Collected Poems*, 226.

courting the beautiful, and attesting it. That is one of the things happening in 'The Gulls'. His poem's stanzas are attractively meditative: they combine lyricism with formal structure; they are rhetorically various, having argument, invocation and narrative; and they are suffused with a dramatic spirit which keeps reaching towards both additional insight and imaginative denouement. The poem itself, in a variety of ways, goes a mental distance which is analogous to the distance gone by the gulls, its 'white wanderers'.

When we think of life-as-journey, not only may this have such different configurations as, say, pilgrimage, flight, voyage, advance or retreat, commerce and so on, it may also be operating on a variety of planes simultaneously, so that social encounters, familial processes, intellectual engagements, artistic experiences and so forth may be felt as taking place sometimes in parallel with, and sometimes in convergence or divergence from, one another. Nemerov's perception of the gulls as at home on the water or in the air in a fashion that we can understand but not share is, in effect, an example of this pluriform condition of ours.

In the midst of his poem—which works somewhat as a four-act play might—we are confronted by the lines,

> And there they brutally are emblems of
> Soul's courage, summoners to a broken love.
>
> Courage is always brutal, for it is
> The bitter tooth fastens the soul to God
> Unknowing and unwilling, but as a vise
> Not to be torn away.

Once again courage is being seen as something intrinsic to the well-conducted journey. To some, the notion of any human state being a 'bitter tooth fastening the soul to God' will seem *outré*. To me, it suggests a reworking of the metaphor by which the nails on Christ's cross fasten him to the will of his Father. But either way, it is clear, I think, that in 'The Gulls' a general, aphoristic reflection on the character of courage is lent additional vigour by the part it plays in a complex and dramatic tale. When the poem was written, about fifty years ago, the use of irony and paradox was widely prized, but there is a lot more than vogue behind, say, 'sweet are their bitter cries, As their fierce eyes are sweet'.

Near the end of the poem, Nemerov asks the gulls to 'bless the song that sings Of mortal courage'—the song being perhaps the poem itself. One might see Francis Xavier's letters as, in effect, songs that sing of mortal courage, as well as sometimes acknowledging the fear that mortal courage will fail. For Xavier this entails a 'mortal' loss indeed, for himself and for others. Unlike Nemerov, he knows in whom he hopes; but both know what it feels like to have the flame of courage flicker.

Xavier's missiology, his rationale for being a missionary, may well be significantly different from those most widely held, at least among Roman Catholics, nowadays. But what is unlikely to become outdated is his language of mental venturing, by which I mean his readiness to understand what are his most precious beliefs and insights and his eagerness to share these with others. I have spent most of my adult life teaching in universities, an enterprise which might be thought to involve just such a venturing. I hope that in my case it often has. But all too often I have seen students making the best of an intellectual atmosphere compounded in about equal measure of ideological fervour and rank scepticism. Were I to be asked what would be a better way of travelling intellectually, a way that is also moral and spiritual, I should point to two passages from Hans Urs von Balthasar, both from his *Theo-logic I: Truth of the World*:

> Apart from Christian revelation, there is only one way in which the thinker in the world can progressively lay hold of the truth: by taking seriously the personal situation in which he finds himself, on the one hand, and the inconclusible dialogue with all the perspectives surrounding him, on the other. He must do all he can to satisfy at one and the same time the two, contradictory requirements that Nietzsche stipulated in this regard: to consider things more personally, with more decision, with a greater acceptance of responsibility, and yet to attempt to look at them through the perspective of many other persons. This movement is, in principle, open and resistant to closure; it is yet another reflection of the two-sided essence of unity, which is at once a unity of the person and a unity of the species ….[13]

> Every deep thing has a way of becoming deeper and more enticing, more difficult to dismiss, more urgent, more youthful, as it were, the

[13] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory*, volume 1, *Truth of the World*, translated by Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 187.

> more time we spend with it. This does not mean that we have come to know it less and less or that there is no progress in knowledge …. What genuine progress there is to be made in the knowledge of the truth is no linear, one-way affair, no simple ascent of the intellectual ladder. Rather, every step forward is, at the same time, a new proof of the ever greater richness of being, which ceaselessly opens out on to an immense horizon and, far from discouraging the knower, entices him precisely in this way into ever new, ever more exciting adventures of knowing. The experience of being overwhelmed by the immensity of all real truth is thus an integral part of the act of knowing, which wants to find only in such a way that, at the same time, it must begin seeking again.[14]

This is, I think, a point at which Xavier and Nemerov and von Balthasar could meet.

The Friend

Our third and final figure is Pierre Favre who, together with Ignatius and Xavier, makes up the trio who were to originate the Society of Jesus. In the modern Society, each member is listed in an annual catalogue of appointments under a rubric such as 'teacher', 'administrator', 'parish priest' or the like. In such a listing Favre might have appeared as 'reconciler and friend', odd though it seems to think of befriending as an assignment.

But anyone who considers the challenge of reconciliation, in its various contexts and modalities, will surely grant that it is often a delicate and difficult business. Relationships between different ethnic groups, between the generations, between men and women, between the well-heeled and the down-at-heel, can range from the benign to the poisonous, and it is often a thankless task to attempt to be a source of peace in them. Favre spent much of his short life—he died at forty—engaged in such work, though his activities were of course coloured by the circumstances of his time. He was living in what one commentator has called 'the labyrinth of pre-Tridentine Europe',[15] a milieu of social, political, religious and personal upheaval in which many people lived if not literally at daggers-drawn with one another

[14] Balthasar, *Truth of the World*, 201–202.

[15] Michel de Certeau, introduction, in Pierre Favre, *Mémorial*, translated into French by Michel de Certeau (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1960), 56.

then imaginatively and emotionally so. Sailing, tramping, occasionally riding on mule-back, Favre moved around from place to place, giving the Spiritual Exercises, preaching, reconciling people with the God whom they had been evading, and making such peace as he could wherever he went.

He was by nature a man of generous sympathies, and was recognised as such by his Jesuit companions. There is an entry in the *Memoriale* or spiritual diary which he wrote for his own use where he remembers the consolation he had found in praying 'without taking notice of their faults', for Pope Paul III, the Emperor Charles V, Francis I of France, Henry VIII of England, Martin Luther, Suleiman II, Martin Bucer and Philipp Melanchthon.[16] For most of us, I suppose, these are little more than portraits in the gallery of history: for someone in Favre's position, each of them was a deeply contentious, and a deeply troubling, figure. His endeavours at reconciliation were not confined to his prayers and, for all his self-deprecation, the public record here is striking and was seen at the time to be so.

But I should like to turn to something which was more private: Favre's very pronounced sense of solidarity, and of lived-out friendship, between what are called the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. He was deeply devoted to the saints, as living and companionable presences; and his eagerness to foster peace between dissident humanity and its loving God was enhanced by his awareness that we are not, and were never meant to be, without help and solace mediated by those who have gone before us. Favre was also devoted to the angels, whom, like Ignatius, he saw as both the ideal contemplators of God and the ideal agents of God's will on earth, and thus as examples 'in excelsis' of the Jesuits' commitment to being 'contemplatives in action'. It seems as though for Favre there was a seamless connection between the prayerful exercise of faith and hope on the one hand, and the day-to-day practical love for needy humanity on the other, for which he was well known.

Peace between dissident humanity and its loving God

[16] *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre: The* Memoriale *and Selected Letters and Instructions*, translated by Edmond C. Murphy and Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), *Memoriale* n. 25.

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The trouble with being as eager, and as obedient, as Favre was in his travels on the hundreds of miles of what he called 'our roads', is that he was constantly leaving the familiar, and friends, behind. He cherished a vision of peace and creative harmony between Catholic Spain and the Protestant Rhineland, though he knew how unlikely it was ever to be realised. My own Master of Novices retailed to us, almost fifty years ago, a dictum of a fellow-Irishman about someone else—that 'he was a holy man, and a good man too'. Favre was a holy man, and a good man too.

Some of the greatest poems ever written have had as their theme the preciousness of individual friendships. Often these poems have been addressed to a particular person, who may in fact have died. There can be an additional pathos in such poems if the poet does not believe, and is known not to believe, in a life after death. I offer now a poem by the Australian Gwen Harwood, whose views on that question are unknown to me, but whose prizing of friendship is transparently clear from the poem. It is called 'The Sun Descending', and it is inscribed 'To the memory of Vera Cottew':

> I have the Oxford Blake you left me;
> hold it as if to bring you close.
> Walk with me where the old houses
> offer their frogs and gnomes and artless
> flower-filled swans made of bald tyres.
> It will soon be night. The gutter's pouring
> quicksilver and a broken bottle
> glitters like Cinderella's slipper.
>
> You loved the first of everything:
> first breath of any season, first

light on anything, first blossom
on any bush, brush-stroke on canvas.

Half a lifetime, and I am holding
your favourite book, dark blue and gold.
Your spirit brushes mine. You walk
under the shining heavenly shell
with me, clean through the solid world.[17]

Gwen Harwood and I liked each other enough for me to be confident that she would not mind if I thought of this poem for a moment with the Jesuit backdrop showing through. The title, as titles will, keys our attention to much that is in the poem, and much beyond it: 'The Sun Descending' can remind us of that plummet of light and energy in virtue of which we are here at all, and also of our sense that we are all bound, like the sun, to 'set'. That the poem is dedicated to a friend is a token of what we all want to do and can never entirely manage: to give ourselves to at least one dear person. And that the dedication says 'To the memory of Vera Cottew' is a piece of honesty, both about the prizing of friends and about their partial fugitivity.

These aspects of the poem recall things that I touched on earlier: the outpouring of life from its divine source, so celebrated by Ignatius; the affectionate solidarity among the original trio of Jesuits, without which they neither could nor should have pressed on with their project of serving the divine embrace of the human; and the shadow of mortality which lies over and infiltrates absolutely everything human, to a good outcome or to an ill one.

In 'The Sun Descending', a friend is invoked in a particular setting, a place without pretension—those 'frogs and gnomes and artless Flower-filled swans' create a kind of outdoor domesticity, which the dedicatee may have known while she was alive, and in which she is briefly made at home here. This, surely, is a feature of many friendships: not only that they are lived out in particular milieux, but that they themselves colour those milieux. We have in the end no way of being in the world, of having it impinge upon us, that is not human. Friendship very often heightens this effect, making places more relishable, or less

[17] Gwen Harwood, 'The Sun Descending', in *Collected Poems 1943–1995* (St Lucia, Queensland: U. of Queensland P, 2003), 387. Reprinted by kind permission of John Harwood and Penguin Group (Australia).

so, because of what might be called friendship's ecology of the imagination. We are so accustomed to seeing this being illustrated and explored in novels and films that it may be difficult for us to see a similar consciousness in those who lived and wrote before such media were available: but it is fair to guess that such fleshed-out awareness was powerful for our predecessors, as for ourselves. And after all, much can be implied in little, as 'The Sun Descending' itself shows.

If friendship's places are of importance, so are friendship's times. In Harwood's poem, the title flags this, as does 'It will soon be night' and 'Half a lifetime, and I am holding your favourite book'. At privileged moments—and the poem surely aspires to be one of these—the past seems to be folded into the present, to the enrichment of both. The poet shares vicariously in her dead friend's loving 'the first of everything': it is as if time, which takes everything away from us, is for once itself befriended, so that the pristine newness of 'the first' may be treasured.

It occurs to me that, for all of Xavier's hectic endeavours, and Ignatius' transformation through various social and personal situations, and Favre's bitter-sweet mobility, one thing that they have in common is the conviction of access to an abiding divine Presence which, making itself present to them, also makes them present to one another in such a privileged moment. Time slips through their fingers, but the Lord of Time is with them still.

The late Graham Little wrote a remarkable book which is called *Friendship: Being Ourselves with Others*. His title may alert us to the fact that, like the physical heart, friendship beats outwards and inwards, again and again. Gwen Harwood says to her friend, 'Your spirit brushes mine': implicitly, that claim was made repeatedly by Ignatius, by Xavier and by Favre. It must have been an aspiration as well as a claim: and I hope that, for Jesuits and for many others, it will never go out of date.

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