

A Mother's Love: Spurs of Death And Utopia

Omar Sabbagh

For some of us have been betrayed into a frame of mind that is justly expressed in the saying: }Because they love no one, they imagine that they love God».

Thomas Keneally, Three Cheers for the Paraclete

[O]ne is not «always already» human. Humanity should not be understood as automatically including bodies of a certain shape; «humanity» should not be used in a lazy «referential» way. Humanity is indeed a project: the project of making certain bodies temples of diversity. So, if I favor (and I do) certain bodies, I favor them becoming human (their becoming what they are), their struggles to conquer and maintain humanity, to justify the definition I want to be true of them. I favor the disciplined, painstaking effort of building enough structure so that deviance can happen inside those bodies without taking them apart; ultimately, I favor the constitution of a human self - as an arena for a transgression that is not purely negative (destructive) of that very self.

Ermanno Bencivenga, A Theory of Language And Mind

...You are the God of the rich man and the happy man too, Lord, and therein lies your profound justice. You do not turn away Your eyes from the man who has been given everything from birth. You have not abandoned him, alone in his ensnaring ease. And he may be Your true lost sheep.

Jean Anouilh, Becket, Act Three

Is it a coincidence that I first discovered this play (in translation) in my mother's library? I was in my late teens, a (necessary) stage in life when both death and utopia hoot within the self with the same inflection, like two (incomplete) language games attendant at the cusp of achieving some sort of stable personhood. This 'Passion' narrative, the Calvary of this (historical) character spoke volumes (in vellum!) to me. His dichotomous Being was the spitting image of the narcissist I'd become since the age of fourteen / fifteen.

Becket's relation with the English king (Henry II) is one of one cad to another- they are fellow rakes engaged in ribaldry. Then, roughly half way, when we, as readers, have become aware of the 'objective' tension/crisis to do with the conflicting power bases of religion and state- Henry, thinking he's putting 'his' man in place makes Thomas a Becket Archbishop of Canterbury. And as soon as he's in place, Becket, after being boon companion with the young king, immediately undergoes a sea-change: he becomes devout, and a stalwart defender of religious authority against the King's (his former buddy) *real politik*.

What this characterization shows up, *at the level of characterization*, is the 'perfectionism' of the narcissist; his need, even (*especially*) through dichotomies, to be the best or most pure in whatever situation he finds himself in. And as those, such as I, who've had psychotic breaks as a result of such puritanical or rootless (radical) attitudes will know, the admitting or allowance of any weakness intends the (figurative) end of the world; *being borderline*, the end of *the world* (out there) is only a projection, a kind of metaphor for the end of a *subject's* (subjective) world. *At the level of plot*, though, this puritanical or extremist streak results, quite realistically, in the rampant idealist being killed - essentially *limited* in a, precisely, limited or 'thrown' or 'fallen' world. Death and utopia, as I say.

Or, in the sense of being abyssal and located at the extreme, a life full only at the margins, we might call this character- avatar of who I used to be in troubled times- an instantiation of the 'sublime'. It is precisely the least 'castrated' so to speak, the least tamed in a society, who most represent the ends (in the integral, Thomistic sense) of that society. Artists, traditionally, are those whose sensibilities are heightened enough to be such outriders and barometers of whatever present state 'we're' in. As both party-animal, busy drinking and a-

wenching, and as devout priest, Becket, as described, is the supreme (obsessional / instinctual personality and) artist. As it turns out, now over a decade since the main burden and ordeal of my psychic troubles, I, too, am an artist: a poet to be precise.

In this sense, Christ, too, is an artist. He is the least mediated (to use Hegelian terminology) in a (zero-sum) world of absolute immanence and universal mediation. He stands at the margins so that the rest of us can be anchored, centered. That said: I'm no Christ. Christ is the way we (purportedly) share in divinity or infinity. And yet, for all that, Christ is unique. What this tells me is that we are most images of God when we inhabit, precisely, the extremes, the margins. In illness and in pain and in any kind of privation, we resemble each other as we fall into set patterns. However, in plenitude, we are at our most individual, we become most like God, and, serendipitously thus, most representative. In this sense, at our most particular we are most universal.

Could this be possible without the logical shape (and not, *necessarily*, any contingent story in history; my thesis is potentially just as applicable to the role of Prophet Muhammad, say) of infinity kissing our finite world(s) tangentially. If there was no one significance at the margins, the holy, the sublime (what Weber dubbed as a 'charismatic' form of authority), would there be a place for hope in our lives; more to the point how can we have hope *in the first place*, which is to say attitudes to the as-yet non-existent, the fictional, without the idea of transcendence: whether it be transcendence of a 'langue' a discourse, society etc. What I suppose I'm trying to say is that humanity for the human animal is precisely located at the margins. And just as God (according to Leibniz, and contrary to Kant's division of the faculties) is 'intellectual intuition', so the ideal kind of utopian society would be a paradoxical state of affairs: namely, a society of absolute, hence, marginal, individuals (heaven?-for Aquinas each and every individual angel was a species to him/herself.)

And to state the matter in as clear a way as possible, all my quidditas derives, in the main, from the way I was encouraged as child and as a young adult by both my parents, but especially (in the earlier phase) by my mother. It's what's called 'hannan' in Arabic, a kind of loving encouragement. Both sublime height and abyss are creatures born of the sensual love of the mother. Utopia and Death, as I say.

(We might say, regarding my first (pre-specular) six months, when I experienced myself in a fragmented, part-object way- forerunner of the later, nineteen-year-old apocalypse and fragmentation- rather than as a Gestalt or unity, that it was the very air-tight (?) love of my mother qua object relation that led to revenge (later, misogynist) fantasies whenever, as is perfectly natural, she retracted that loving care. The concomitance of utopia and death, that juxtaposition of radicals, is thus the archetype of ambivalence, or, just, the equivocal nature of emotions in a life in time.)

In the sense, already adverted, of extremities, life at the margins, the sensualist and the puritan are the same person: one derives pleasure from asceticism and the other treats pleasure as a thing worthy of devotion. And to say that something 'positive' emerges from these marginal positions it is enough to point to many of the most truthful (in terms of longevity) of past artists; just as I am the poet I am today, primarily due to a mother's enduring love. Indeed, I might almost say: I am at all today due to the once-upon-a-time of a mother's intelligent and fierce affection.

Below is a poem (first published in Poetry Review, Winter 2006/7) from my first collection of poetry (My Only ever Oedipal Complaint), which I hope ties the idea or feeling of being marginalized (and/or victimized) with a certain enduring, protean hopefulness. I began it (in Marbella, Spain) with a simple aim to describe: slowly I found myself infusing the phallic symbol with the sense I had, whether realistic or neurotic, of endangered masculinity.

Vital

What does the palm tree say, its stalk
of tall hard ashes and concave bends,
sharkskin
caught in the dry sunshine's angles?

Rising and falling, rising and falling
in the late afternoon light, green on grey
on beige, it speaks like love or outrage,
saying, much like anything else

vital or unheard, with an urgency
before death's dark wrecking
and then the quiet that rescinds
words tall in the wind like these:

Treat me well, treat me well.

*Or chip if you dare, scratch, tear, crunch,
but I will still, still with a pinpoint glare,
burst my leaves in awry hosanna-*

*my hair, high and light and loose, big and
sprung like a millionaire's dowry,
will ridicule all of you.*

Upwards, the sky...