

Border Crossings

**A talk given by Fay Zwicky
at the Annual General Meeting of
The Council of Christians and Jews, WA Inc.**

November 14, 1999

I'm often asked, "How did you come to be a writer?" a question not easily answered because there are so many mysterious factors involved: temperament, cultural background, historical circumstances, and many more. Although I was born into a Jewish family, my years spent at a Church of England school were equally, if not more, important to my emotional, intellectual, and moral development. Belonging, if tenuously, to one tradition and yet exposed to the freedoms of a country of transient allegiances, a country where you can re-invent yourself over and over again, where you can invent your community, your own mythology, I was ideally placed to become a writer. Whatever the influences determining the course of a life, the directions a writer's work takes will be affected by those cultural and ethical preoccupations and preconceptions with which one individual is saddled, whether present or absent from the stable.

When I was 34 years old, my father died and was buried at sea without the proper tribal obsequies: nobody to say Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, for him, and nobody to throw a spadeful of soil on the coffin. I wasn't present when he died. It happened far away on a ship travelling the Tasman Sea between New Zealand and Australia. At the time, I knew nothing about the Kaddish which is recited on every regular sabbath day in memory of deceased congregants as well as at the actual funeral service itself. It is not, as I was to discover, a lament but rather a hymn of praise to God and a celebration of all creation. Although saying Kaddish seems at first acquaintance to be like the Christian ritual of praying for the souls of the dead to speed them through Purgatory, it's not quite the same. Purgatory isn't one of our anticipated torments and Gehenna isn't really the equivalent of hell. It was an actual place near Jerusalem where propitiatory sacrifices used to be made to Moloch and today is where the ash-pits of the town's rubbish dumps stand. The notion of an after-life is less important in Judaic thinking than the memory of the dead retained and honoured by the living survivor.

At the time of my father's death, I knew how to study books but I didn't know how to miss my father. His death brought me up against my ignorance: ignorance about parenting, about who, if anyone, one belongs to or wants to belong to, and where, if anywhere, one imagines oneself coming from.

So, against all the rules, I took it upon myself to make amends to him by writing my own 'Kaddish', a long elegy, trying to find a way into what his death meant through the rituals of a religious tradition of which I was an attenuated product, lacking both knowledge and allegiance. Instinct came first. Knowledge came later. Drawing upon threads of the rediscovered wisdom of a tradition, the poem is haunted by layers of ghostly presences, earlier generations of those whose lives went to make a family, with all that such a fallibly heroic enterprise entails. The act of writing the poem was a kind of half-conscious mission to speak up against our mutual oblivion.

When I began writing this poem nine years after my father's death, I didn't know that what the prayer can tell you about familial love, obligation, guilt, and grief is supposed to be spoken only by men. It was a non-Jewish critic who eventually enlightened me as to where authority about family and communal duty belong - invariably and unarguably with the male, the right to speak his sole province. So what about the man unlucky enough to have three daughters and no sons?

To find out more on the subject, I went back to the books and commentaries by various Jewish

authorities, and found them, almost without exception, harsh and unyielding, the more so since my experience told me that women had deeper insights into and more sympathy with their fathers, especially those who grew up in an all-female household with a father absent for 6 years during World War I. In fairness to the commentators, it should be said that the emphasis tends to fall on the potential for weakening tradition should the female be permitted to speak rather than on women's inferiority. However, the traditional order of priorities; has always rankled with me and continues to do so.

In writing my own 'Kaddish', I turned back half-consciously to very fundamental sources of nurture drawn upon in early childhood: fragments of ritual, nursery rhyme, Biblical lore, all tied in with memories of comfort, anger, shame, and loss. Fragmented memories and isolated images randomly recalled are of no significance in themselves - only the poet's search for meaning within a recognisable context can be of interest. And for this, the poet needs muscles, emotional, spiritual and psychic muscles that transcend the limits of the self. And muscles take time to develop, longer for some than for others.

So, growing up in a family without religious dogma, and the haziest connections with Jewish origins, it was really only the coming of World War II and the gradual awakening to the fate of Jews in Europe that brought home something of what the religio-cultural meaning of "being Jewish" was. The sense of being a stranger both to one's own and to one's adopted culture is a familiar theme in Anglo-Jewish writing. I never saw the state of estrangement from mainstream culture as something to be regretted, although I lacked the confidence when young to use its invaluable vantage points. Having one home to know the privileges of exile from is a necessity for a writer, as the work of James Joyce or Henry James can tell you, Having two is a luxury.

Given the fact of that remote link with Judaism, it has always seemed surprising that what appeared to have so little substance in the sphere of language, belief, and way of life could have had so much impact on social identity, historical perspectives, and political attitudes.

My father and mother, like both my grandmothers, were born in Australia. Neither they nor I knew Hebrew or Yiddish. I attended the same Church of England school that my mother attended, and we both came top in what used to be called Divinity, a subject later to be termed "Religious Instruction," and eventually to disappear altogether from the curriculum. The first prayer I learned was the Lord's Prayer which my mother sat on the end of my bed and taught me the day before I started school though she always denied this. I paid devout attention to the weekly chapel service presided over by the Revd. Townsend who, pinkly illumined by morning sunlight through a fine stained-glass rose window, radiated an aura of spirituality but who, in retrospect, was pretty thick-witted and had a middling reputation as a cricketer.

On leaving this school, I was presented with the complete works of Shakespeare on austerity rations rice paper. Stamped with the school crest in gold was the daunting motto: *Nisi Dominus Frustra* (without the Lord all is vain). The certificate gummed inside stated your name and the dates you attended school, in my case, 1941-1950, the years that saw the bombing of Britain, the Holocaust, and the war with Japan. When the school was evacuated to the country, I tasted freedom for the first time, but it was not to last, Sent back to Melbourne to have a toe stitched back on after a typical act of disobedience, my mother decided to keep me home and sent me to another Church school to get me out of the house, having made up her mind the Japanese weren't coming.

Another motto, another school song. This time, *Vincit que Se Vincit* - (he conquers who conquers himself). Mottoes always implied fruitless struggle whichever way you put the emphasis. Mine fell naturally on *frustra*, knowing full well the meaning of fruitless struggle where my mother was concerned, and, since her wrath was indistinguishable from God's, one didn't tangle willingly with such a parent. The second motto was equally discouraging. What was this self that must be conquered? And was the need to conquer anything what I cared about anyway? Conquest was for the strong of this world, and I was powerless, my outsider

status confirmed by the lack of a uniform, a polysyllabic vocabulary, a prodigious piano repertoire and the mystery of Jewish birth.

Given this odd beginning, it's not surprising that it took a long time to find a voice for the buried self or that I felt diffident about using a ritual when my father died to which I felt barely entitled by upbringing, but to which more atavistic sources compelled me. Back in the 70's I analysed this complex response in an essay entitled, 'Democratic Repression: the Ethnic Strain.' In this essay, I spoke of those authors who helped me find a voice at a time when it needed the sort of sanction the community I lived in didn't provide. These were Jewish-American novelists like Malamud, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth whose work, as I wrote, "gave me a community I lacked in the Australian context...The concerns of Australian literature have always appeared essentially solitary, inward-turning, never outer-directed, the babble of speech masking a dumb void; a landscape without a recognisable human being in it."

From the same essay, I went on to speak of problems encountered in writing the Kaddish for my father

I would not have been capable of writing this in Australia ten years ago, so uncertain was I of my identification with the Jewish faith and the legitimacy of its existence in a bland Anglo-Saxon context. Nor would I have dared insert segments of phoneticized Aramaic for fear of revealing that exotic, interloping status of which I was ashamed and afraid...I felt the burden of those harsh, rasping syllables in the prayer for the dead as a personal penance...I could not reveal a long-kept secret, say prayers for the dead in my own tongue unless helped to find it.

A breakthrough came with the discovery of Alan Ginsberg's 'Kaddish' for his mother which I came upon 17 years after it had been published. After reading this long, moving poem, I felt freer to finish my own, less vulnerable about exposing it to public scrutiny in what used to seem an uncomprehending environment. No Australian writer could do this for me, and I went on to describe growing up in this country as "an exercise in repression."

While waiting for this breakthrough, I took nourishment where it was available. This came from poetry, from words used precisely, magically and musically. I loved words, their sound, their weight, their capacity to open new worlds. I wanted to use them effectively for they seemed to be my first defence against powerlessness. The source of my first serious acquaintance with poetry came from the hymns we sang every morning at assembly,

the words sometimes very fine and other times utterly banal. George Herbert and William Blake rubbed shoulders with Edward Grubb and Percy Dearmer in our battered, blue hymn books, but the combination of words and rousing music never failed to inspire a sense of well-being. We didn't always know exactly what we were singing about, but the music carried us along. For example, "There is a green hill far away without a city wall." If there was no wall, why was it necessary to mention the fact that it wasn't there? It took quite a few years before the real meaning sank in, that the word "without" meant "outside", and was an obsolete usage. Another misunderstanding involved the word "aweful" as in "Let all your lamps be bright,/ And trim the golden flame;/ Gird up your loins as in his sight,/ For aweful is his name." Wasn't it meant to be a song of praise? Why did it seem to damn the Almighty? Just one more of those mysteries language set out to trap us in. Like those sham-making mispronunciations when required to read aloud in class like "mised" and "awry" that one never heard uttered in everyday conversation.

The hymns I liked best were not about God directly but about nature. I obviously hadn't tapped these hymns' original sources in the Psalms which are full of imagery from the natural world. The one I liked best was a hymn ascribed to St. Patrick and it was called, enigmatically, St Patrick's Breastplate:

I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the starlit heaven,

The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.

There was also a bit of plainsong supposed to be by St. Francis of Assisi which had a wonderful line, the only one I can remember:

"Praiséd be my Lord God for our Brother Water/Who is very serviceable unto us and humble and precious and clean." I wish I could remember the lines about fire and air but maybe someone here can tell me later.

Coming from a home of some turbulence, I liked the bare simplicity and meditative stillness of the Sarum Primer of 1558. It seemed to offer a safe passage through a stormy world from beginning to end, but I hadn't yet learned to question anything about belief when I took its simple lines to heart:

God be in my head,
 And in my understanding.
God be in my eyes,
 And in my looking;
God be in my mouth,
 And in my speaking;
God be in my heart,
 And in my thinking;
God be at mine end,
 And at my departing.

The same need for peace in the awful upheavals of adolescence, drew me to Miss Russell, my Quaker teacher who, sensing a troubled child, took me to the Quaker meeting house on Sundays where I encountered a productive silence for the first time in my life. It was from teachers like Miss Russell with her gentle voice and soothing kindness (she was extremely deaf) that I drew strength to help me overcome my fear and self-consciousness. I will never forget her intuitive tact in dealing with troubled young souls and I'm sure her Quaker affiliation had much to do with her pacific, and unintrusive nature. It struck me as remarkable that, very late in her life, she married the Jewish art master at Geelong Grammar, a refugee from Hitler's Germany, and, although they didn't have long together, I'm sure they were able to nourish each other. It was Miss Russell who taught me that to reflect wasn't simply an affair of the intellect and the will, but a gentler form of receptiveness. Her wisdom instilled the notion of a conscience, a social awareness of a wider morality that was never moralistic. Her quiet voice spoke louder to me than all the fervent injunctions addressed stridently at home, from pulpit at all denominations, and sometimes in the classroom. Channelling my natural sympathy for the poor and oppressed into creative paths, she gave me translations of classical Chinese poetry to read, and encouraged me to write and read poetry without feeling freakish.

There was no music in the Quaker meeting house, but the more energetic side of my nature was to find satisfaction in the grand martial rhythms of Mrs Julia Ward Howe's 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' with its promise of vengeance on an Old Testamental scale, the letting loose of destructive forces for mankind's betterment:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

And this rousing revolutionary vision is followed by a graphic picture of soldiers huddling in

encampments during the American Civil War that stirred my liberationist sympathies. and turned me eventually into a radical supporter of the oppressed and the enslaved:

I have seen him in the watchfires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I have read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His Day is marching on.

And, finally, at Easter, my need to share the pathos of the Crucifixion and identify with the rebel underdog found full and tearful outlets in sad hymns with solemn, funereal chorale music by J.S. Bach. As for example in:

O sacred head sore wounded,
Defiled and put to scorn,
O kingly head surrounded
With mocking crown of thorn.

The fate of the outsider who suffered multiple humiliations at the hands of the mainstream was uppermost in my garbled imagination, my sympathies always directed to the noble despised figure of the One who was Different in both life and literature. Mindful of my own early humiliations at the hands of the majority, I understood in my bones what it was like to feel and be thought stupid, the outsider with a lot on her mind and a weight on her heart like a guilty secret. So there were two kinds of education going on at home and at school. I took from each an enjoyment of and curiosity about the outside world which no amount of difficulty could quench, and for this I have to be grateful to the freedom to think that my parents and my education gave me, enabling me to cross borders without fear and to relish difference, to acquire the tools necessary in learning to discipline and shape the sprawl of raw temperamental protoplasm, and to avoid getting stuck in obsessional states of mind.

I've spoken so far about certain aspects of traditional rituals encountered prior to the development of consciousness, contacts charged with inescapable attitudes and values that have fed the post's imagination. But what happens when those attitudes and values absorbed in childhood come under intellectual scrutiny? How does the writer deal with the question of belief?

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. 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, at least acknowledging, if not accepting the legitimacy of 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 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 leave 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 -

That tooth nibbling at the soul is known to all moralists and seekers of the Puritan persuasion, easily crossing denominational borders. Few poets have been able to dramatise the working of the mind scrutinising its motives so effectively. These most concrete metaphors illuminate the authenticity of her understanding of the meaning of faith far better than abstract instructions from pulpits.

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?
If 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 the tragic foot in it. However, I began as an agnostic and an agnostic I remain, a stake in both the Hebrew and Greek traditions, too much of a Jew to be a Christian, too Christian to be much of a Jew.

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.

In the 1995 pages of my Journal kept over many years, the following passage occurs:

The Psalms have given me 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 human 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." The imagery is very poignant and feels right.

In the same engaging way, the poems of the 17th century parson-poet of Bemerton, George Herbert, modest and radiantly illuminating about his inner conflict, have the familiar pull between the attractions of 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 strength and survival. He's willing to go all the way with whatever God ordains whether he's "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 would appear 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 stern, fallible 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 depended on the means of expression rather than what was actually being expressed.

There is an epigraph to a recent autobiographical memoir by the now-deceased young professor of Philosophy at London University, Gillian Rose. The book is called *Love's Work*, and the epigraph is taken from an 18th century Kabbalist called Staretz Silouan. It reads, "Keep your mind in hell and despair not." Taken together with Herbert's poem, I believe it offers a kind of answer to Job. I'm grateful to both of them. After all, keeping afloat, keeping one's spiritual stamina intact even in hell seems a not unreasonable aim for ageing agnostics.