A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

Marina Warner

on

Sunday, 10 June 2012

> Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you...
>
> Matt 5:11

Because All Souls was founded to sing for the souls of the dead at Agincourt and this chapel began as a chantry, and because the power of the word, written and spoken, is close to my heart as a writer and teacher of literature, I've taken for my theme the idea of blessing, as so resonantly conveyed by the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount.

But the idea of blessing did not use to appear only in religious contexts, and I want to look at some of its ways of surviving.

During the scene at the end of King Lear when Cordelia is found hanged and her body brought on stage and laid before her father, Lear's lament rises and falls while a turmoil of action swirls around him; his words move from grief-stricken recognition of her death to a series of exclamations, protests, refusals, rhetorical questions, ejaculations, commands – a whole gamut of what Beckett calls 'vociferations', the howl of the wounded and disempowered creature before the horror of loss and death. This bleak conclusion, abolishing hope, proved too much for some early producers, and the tragedy was rewritten as fairytale, with Cordelia resurrected and the pair of them embarked on a harmonious life together. A little earlier in the scene, the repentant Lear had painted a proleptic picture of their idyll:

> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage;
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,

> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies […]
> And take upon 's the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies...
>
> (*King Lear* V, iii:9–16)

No specific god is mentioned: the religious compass-points are not given, no reference made to Druids or other possibly appropriate historical colour evoked. But in Lear's wistful picture, he imagines an act that was and still is a custom – in Judaism, in Islam, in Hinduism – that is, a blessing, exchanged here between father and daughter. The blessing presents a counterpoise, unarticulated but powerfully present, to the storm of curses Lear has vented earlier in the play, first on Cordelia herself in the opening scene, and later, even more intemperately, on his other daughters. His blast of Goneril's womb sends shivers of fear running through us, as we feel the blows of

> Th' untented woundings of a father's curse
> pierce every sense [about thee]!
>
> (*King Lear* I, iv:300–1)

When Lear says that when Cordelia asks for his blessing, he'll kneel down and ask forgiveness, he is shading the act into another, turning blessing into pardon, with which it is associated, but not identical.

'[For we are wagering here that] thinking never has done with the conjuring impulse...', declares one contemporary philosopher.[1] This thought resonates for me with the aim of tales that are about the mystery of things –

1 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, introduction Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge), p. 207.

to use Lear's words – like The Tales of the 1001 Nights, made up and passed on to ward off danger. Shahrazad is telling tales to keep alive, and to save all women from the rage of the Sultan; she is the heroine of a ransom tale, and many of her stories are also ransom tales, so-called. Beneath the idea of chanting for the dead lies a similar desire for ransom; and the practice of blessing the living and the dead corresponds to the drive of literature and art to illuminate and protect, by remembering, by exposing what has happened and by reproducing what might happen, in order to conjure it – for the telling of it to bring about good, or to forestall harm. It is homeopathy by the word, and you do not have to have faith or belong to a church to believe in such verbal agency: this is one of the many areas where magical thinking survives and cannot be extinguished; it is bound up with the way our faculties work and language conveys consciousness.

Chanting for the dead involved asking for *their* sins to be forgiven them, as well as ours, for a blessed release from purgatory, and for remembrance. Pardon, one underlying motive in the desire for blessing, can be charted on a wind-rose that points also to apology, confession, blason, rhapsody, greeting, entreaty, praise song, elegy, and eulogy – *eulogia* possibly presenting the larger term for this section of the rhetorical compass. Fair words, good speech – beatitudes.

These are some of the great variety of ways of speaking fair – that inspire some of the earliest literature that has survived: in the Old Testament, rendered so influentially by the King James Bible, and explored with such versatility by Shakespeare. The dark reverse of blessing shows through these ways of speaking, their inseparable shadow: diatribe, cursing, ironic eulogy or invective – the curse is

blessing's furious twin. 'Woe on ye that are rich...', says Jesus later in his preaching (Luke 6:24). His beatitudes are balanced by denunciation.

Shakespeare's early training in rhetoric stood him in good stead, and these multiple expressions of speaking fair and speaking ill weave the complex kinetic fabric of his dramatic verse and prose. They belong among the forms of address – and of self-address and self-questioning – that he so richly mixes as he tracks shifts of thought and feeling – his innovation in the creation of character. Where the words follow the mind, they also carry it forward, into act.

Blessing comes from a very old word – proto-Germanic according to the dictionary – for blood-offering, and it was chosen to translate the Vulgate's *bene-dicere*, to speak well or say well, the word taking colour, erroneously, from 'bliss'. The term benediction now has an entirely clerical ring. Malediction, from *male-dicere*, forms its oppositional pair, but is not much used outside witchcraft scholarship these days, where like commination, it is bound up in concepts of *maleficium*. However, speaking ill has been encoded in law, for some time now, as Hate Speech. The force of injurious words does not need legal definition to be understood; in fact, the law in this respect attempts to pin down a common experience, even if you do not belong to the groups specifically protected by the law against verbal abuse, racist and other. When you find yourself in the wrong lane with everyone behind you blocked by your mistake, and one of the drivers hurls furious filth at you, giving you the finger, you know all too well the feeling of being cursed. Road rage is a fearsome experience for its target. Similarly with dirty phone calls: these aren't only frightening, they make you feel polluted. An irrational, superstitious response, some say, *I* say –

brush it off. Sticks and stones may break my bones ... Yes, indeed, the effect fades fast, with luck, and to survive you need to learn to shrug it off. Believing in the power of the curse concedes too much to the act itself, and gives the perpetrators too much influence.

Some upholders of freedom of speech reject laws against hate speech, but cases of bullying taunting, for example, complicate the issue, especially when a child is the target. Meanwhile a new law, against defamation, is currently going through parliament, and it is stirring significant anxiety and convincing protests against the threat it poses to the freedom of thought, and of scholars and researchers to analyse and criticise. These are very complicated and important issues, which need careful discussion; I am invoking them here to draw attention to the widespread acceptance that saying ill is efficacious and needs to be constrained. And that its power derives from the words themselves, and not from some higher or infernal power: race hatred doesn't need the devil as agent, the act of its utterance by anyone constitutes the harm. As another proverb goes, The tongue has no teeth but a deeper bite. An aspect of human experience also caught by John Donne – and quoted by the Chaplain in his sermon two years ago, 'And many times a *scorne* cuts deeper than a *sword*.'[2]

2 John Donne, *A Sermon of Commemoration of the Lady Danvers, late Wife of Sir John Danvers, Preach'd at Chilse, where she was lately buried by John Donne D. of St. Paul, Lond. 1 July 1627. Together with other Commemorations of Her; By her Sonne G. Herbert. London, printed by I.H. for Philemon Stephens and Christopher Meredith, and are to be sold at their shop at the golden Lion in Pauls Church yard 1627,* pages 11 and 12. (Facsimile by Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, Ann Arbor 2006.) My thanks to John Drury who quotes this in his sermon, given in All Souls on 13 June 2010, and for giving me the full reference.

Blessing, too, can also take place without supernatural guarantees: as a speech act, blessings used to be exchanged between individuals, not only clergy and their congregations, and sealed by mutual trust, like a promise, a pledge – or a gentleman's agreement. Surprisingly often, other species are involved in some rightly celebrated expressions of love and praise: St Francis's for birds, and for the sun, moon and stars – and for dear brother Donkey, too. And in *Jubilate Agno*, an affectionate tribute to Biblical song, Kit Smart limns the perfections of his cat Jeoffry in a tumult of rapturous blessings:

> for the wreathing of his body seven times round with elegant quickness.

By contrast, in more sinister mood and more revealingly, the Ancient Mariner watches the water snakes:

> They moved in tracks of shining white,
> And when they reared, the elfish light
> Fell off in hoary flakes...
> They coiled and swam ; and every track
> Was a flash of golden fire.

At the sight, he cries out,

> 'O happy living things!'
> […]
> And I blessed them unaware.

As in a charm, Coleridge repeats the line.[3]

By blessing the mysterious shining sea serpents, the Mariner performs an act of – what exactly? Propitiation? Exorcism? Containment? As with the blessing that Lear

3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Part IV: 272–287, in *Coleridge : Poems*, ed. J. B. Beer (London: Dent, 1970), p. 180

imagines Cordelia giving him, which will undo the anger she might justly feel, as with Shahrazad's tales, this could be an act of anticipatory conjuration, an apotropaic gesture, averting the water snakes' uncanny force: blessing is not only in opposition to cursing, but used to be the remedy against the implied presence of harm. The Ancient Mariner is holding the threat at bay, the water snakes' poison will be counteracted by good formulae: this is where the trace of blood sacrifice in the origins of 'blessing' remains relevant. Amuletic in its function, set as a shield on the vulnerable body of the speaker or protagonist.

This seems to me to describe the hopes that now fill acts of making – whether literature or art. Broadly speaking, much nineteenth- and twentieth-century creativity – from the Impressionists to Henry James – strove to represent phenomena by looking closely and paying attention to their properties. But it seems to me that we are returning to uses of mimesis as conjuration, to art as agency. Damien Hirst, talking about his diamond-encrusted skull, explains, 'I just want to celebrate life by saying to hell with death.'[4] Whatever you think of him, he is an artist of our time, and his audience understands that claim: that he is using a magical fetish – a jewelled skull, Mexican-style – to ward off what it represents, in an analogous fashion to the blessing which attempts to undo a threat, to cleanse a pollution.

I began thinking about the specific agency of words to bless and to wound when I was in the Middle East, and heard the customary greetings returned antiphonally. Some

4 In video about 'For the Love of God', in *Damien Hirst*, Tate Modern, 4 April – 9 September 2012.

of these do invoke Allah, it must be admitted, but not all: many simply wish long life on the speaker, and on their children. Interestingly, the root for words of blessing is *ba-ra-ka* in both Arabic and Hebrew, showing once again the closeness of Jewish and Arabic culture, especially in this area of investment in language's power, oral and scribal. In the Arabic Middle East, a hum of such salutations rises at every encounter and transaction. They do not seem insincere or perfunctory, I'm told; rather, the reciprocal nature of the exchange gives a sense of security in every kind of social situation. Such good words are often uttered to ward off the implied, felt danger of ill-speaking or ill-looking, and to equalise obligation. (There's a trace of this in French *merci,* too – mercy, that is, do not exact from me what I owe you for the gift you have made me – another verbal act of ransom.)

Today, however, while imprecation is feared, its power recognised and efforts made to regulate it and contain it, speaking fair has lost corresponding influence – it is granted no equivalent radiating glow or efficacy. The glamour of good grammar has faded: socially, even gentlemen's agreements have weakened, and more and more measures of transparency and accountability are required to confirm an undertaking, while the force of foul speech grows vigorous (so much so, that one football club in the north-west has banned it from its clubs and its playing fields – surely an astonishing step).

Several currents have contributed to this dimming of *eulogia*'s power and the disappearance of the practice of and belief in blessing, in the power of speaking fair.

First, changing ideas of authority, both of institutions and individuals: blessing is associated now with church services, and is performed only by bishops and priests. No

Hamlet now in his mother's bedroom could pile her with reproaches – with curses – for her sex life – and end his bitter words with:

> Once more, good night:
> And when you are desirous to be blest,
> I'll blessing beg of you.
>
> (Hamlet, III:iv, 170–2 )

The act has not just left the bedroom, it has quitted the private sphere altogether. It would be very odd – and I am not advocating a return to this custom – if a child asked for a blessing from his or her mother, for example, before leaving home to go to university. Secondly, arrangements in families make the idea of a father's blessing – and a mother's – quite outmoded: the flattening of hierarchy inside the family is a factor, and I am entirely in support of this emancipation. What is questionable, however, is the idea that a credible personal authority is needed for the blessing to work – the instances of cursing should make it clear that the power inheres in the words, not the person. When it comes to cursing none of us is a Donatist: anyone can perform the rite, anyone inflict a hurt with a word.

Insincerity also hangs about praise – how easily such speech strikes the ear as gush, as flattery. Shakespeare knew this side of blessings, that blasons lie in order to deceive and seduce. In the Sonnets, he is scathing about his rivals' glibness: they bless every part of their subject with fluent ease... while he, 'a true-telling friend', uses 'true plain words' only – or so he declares, though this is itself a feint on Shakespeare's part.[5] How often have friends complained to me about the vacuousness of American 'Have a nice day!'

5 Sonnet 82; cf Sonnet 85.

The imbalance between the efficacy of hate speech and the enfeeblement of all fair counterpoise reflects another development, which Bernard Williams diagnoses critically in his reflections on truth and truthfulness – that, in case of testifying, for example, sober report counts for less than tearful avowal, and objective accuracy no longer persuades as powerfully as a show of personal passion. Because abuse comes easily to the tongue and rises direct from the viscera, it feels *meant*, it carries the authority of conviction. But praise – let alone blessings – are much harder to utter with an equal degree of heartfeltness, direct from the gut; that is yet another reason for the prescriptions of custom in societies where such fair speaking still thrives. When courtesy, not emotion, is the currency, the sincerity or otherwise of fair speech matters less. But we consider ourselves plain dealers, and we prize honesty, so *we* don't indulge in 'oriental' flummery and falsehood; affirmation is tainted with boosterism, or worse, with New Age la-la-land ditsiness.

Blessings do not have to take the form of praise exclusively by any means; but freedom needs fair speech as well as invective, denunciation, satire and other instruments of truth-telling. Poetry, song, story, the imaginative representations of art are not necessarily vehicles of sweetness and light, either. Past evils can be remembered, and need to be so, as warnings, even while they are being averted by the power of fair words, 'the bread of faithful speech.'[6]

But is it entirely so, this claim I've making that we know how to curse? And have forgotten how to bless? That we

6 Wallace Stevens, 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction', in *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. 380–408: 408.

credit the efficacy of foul speech but not fair? Not entirely. I've been overstating the case. We can see a desire for its revival, I think, alongside a resurgence of ritual acts in general – graduation ceremonies, for example, avoided in my day but now popular, indeed huge.

In his elegy for W. B. Yeats, W.H. Auden wanted to set free a flow of blessings:

> In the deserts of the heart.
> Let the healing fountains start
> In the prison of his days
> Teach the free man how to praise.[7]

A woe can be undone by a blessing; woes are the ill that fair words circle, like antibodies attacking a diseased cell.

7 W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', in *Selected Poetry of W.H. Auden*, chosen by the author (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 52–4.