

man (*homo*) as body-soul compound (*compositum*), David Braine begins simply with the human being as an animal. Instead of starting with thinking as an incorporeal activity his focus is on the physical expressiveness of language. Both moves surely take Aquinas further than ever from 'Platonism', in the direction he would have wanted to go. On this view, then, if we are open to God it is as animals that we are so, not just as souls. And the intellectuality that differentiates us, our capacity for language, is the way that we transcend our material environment. Aquinas shows no interest in language in connection with his theory of knowledge and he even says that, as a theologian, he need not be concerned with the body except to the extent that it has some relationship with the soul (Prologue to q.75). By rescuing language from oblivion and by bringing us as animals to the centre of attention, David Braine drives us back to reconsider some of Aquinas' fundamental options—but above all he shows us how to treat the possibility of our having some real openness to God as a question worthy of metaphysical consideration. Even if some of his contentions turn out on further study to be mistaken (and many of them already seem irrefutable and some suddenly have the obviousness that it took his perception to reveal), David Braine has achieved the rare distinction with this book of completely renewing an ancient philosophical topic about which most philosophers nowadays would think nothing need be said- but which is, of course, of great interest and significance to the ordinary human being.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

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Universities are curious, contrary institutions, and Oxford and Cambridge more curious and contrary than most. At one level they are centres of intellectual innovation and advance, places where the atom is split, new wonder-drugs developed, old orthodoxies overturned. And yet they are also the most conservative of institutions, wedded, with a fidelity which our society hardly grants to any ordinary marriage, to extraordinary rituals and ways of doing things whose sole commendation seems to be, that it has always been so.

The contradiction is more apparent than real; a strong sense of tradition is often a help, not a hindrance, to intellectual openness. But is not always easy to see how that works in practice, and much that we do and value in the ritual side of our common life has, to an unsympathetic eye, a faint air of the ridiculous about it. Today's service is a case in point. Just what is all this about? Some of you may know the spoof commemoration-day address given by a lunatic clergyman at the beginning of W H Auden's *The Orators*:

Commemoration: Commemoration. What *does* it mean? What does it mean? Not, what did it mean to them, there, then, but what does it mean to us, here, now? It's a facer, isn't it boys? But we've all got to answer it. What were the dead like? What sort of people are we living with now? Why are we here What are we going to do?

In the Lady Margaret's day, the questions "why are we here, what are we going to do?" had a universally understood and straightforward answer. We are here to repay the kindness of our benefactors, by praying for the release of their souls from whatever torment they might be undergoing in purgatory. Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford, of course, is the archetype:

But al he myghte of his frendes hente
On bookes and on learning he
it spente, And bisily gan for the soules praye
Of hem that yaf hym
wherwith to scoleye.

In fact, that was the main motive for most of the founding benefactions of the University : certainly it was the one behind the largesse of the Lady Margaret and her chaplain John Fisher, the effective founders of the modern University of Cambridge. The Colleges were first and foremost chantries. The return which benefactors expected from their largesse was the much needed prayers of celibate scholars, most of them engaged in the study of theology. Between the poor scholars and the rich givers there was a reciprocity of need, for the rich had it on the highest authority that they would enter heaven, if at all, only with extreme difficulty, a manoeuvre in fact as unlikely as squeezing a camel through a needle's eye. Any help afforded by the prayers of those whose studies and mode of life kept them close to heaven was gratefully received, and worth paying for.

But of course it has been some centuries since the original religious explanation of these curious occasions has been acceptable in the University: the Church of England, and its Universities, stopped praying for the dead in the late 1540s, and whatever reciprocal reward our

benefactors since then have hoped for, it has not been the help of of our prayers.

Perhaps it is our praise they wanted. On the face of it that is the explanation of the traditional reading for these occasions: we have come to praise the powerful, the rich, the famous, above all the lavish givers:

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us. Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power, rich men, furnished with ability. All these were honoured in their generations, and were the glory of their times. The people will tell of their wisdom, and the congregation will shew forth their praise.

In a few minutes the Vice-Chancellor will tell us who these famous men are whose praise we are to tell forth. And sure enough, it seems at first sight that they are a selection of the mighty of the earth—Richard III, Henry VIII, who came within a whisker of closing the whole University down in the 1540s; George I, whose benefaction to the library was almost universally recognised at the time as not really designed to promote learning, our enterprise, but to reward political subservience, which of course was his. At the same time that the Crown sent us the books which form the core of the University Library, it quartered a regiment of Cavalry to put down Jacobite sedition in Oxford, the contrast gave rise to some famous mocking verses:

The King, observing with judicious eyes
The state of both his Universities,
To one he sent a regiment: for why?
That learned body wanted loyalty.
To t'other he sent books, as well discerning
How much that loyal body wanted learning.

Can that be it, then? Does the roll-call of kings and queens, Dukes and Duchesses, lawyers, politicians and millionaires which we will shortly hear recited, constitute the meaning of this occasion: a commemoration of the fact that the University is part of the establishment, a canonization of the violent, the powerful and the very rich who have shared their wealth—in many cases their loot—with us and our predecessors? Today is All Saints Day: are these our Saints?

This is a disturbing thought, because it suggests that what we are about is at one and the same time an exercise in sanctified flattery and self-congratulation, and a devastatingly revealing act of self-definition. For to name the significant dead is always to offer an account of ourselves. In a recognisable sense every human community, from the family to the nation, chooses its own ancestors, or at any rate chooses

those whom it will remember and publicly acknowledge. So the names we name today do tell us something about how we see ourselves. Make what you like of it, they include the name of hardly a single scholar. These be your Gods, O Israel.

This is not the bilious perception of a late 20th century lefty. In 1905 a fellow and future Master of Magdalene, Arthur Benson, attended a University sermon in this church, and was deeply depressed by what it seemed to reveal about the University. Afterwards he confided to his diary his loathing of,

The slow, blear-eyed panting procession of Heads. . . . the nearly empty church, the snoring Masters who, God knows, want improving quite as much or more than the pious undergraduates who come. The stupid conventionality and stuffiness of the whole thing . . . the heavy respectability, the complacent security, the dull consciousness of rectitude in work and success.

This is strong stuff for a Victorian public-school housemaster, the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, and the author of *Land of Hope and Glory*. Benson's indictment has an almost prophetic ring to it. But is it true? Well, it is certainly the case that the carefully selected list of the fathers who begat us is conventional, even complacent. It contains no one awkward, no one who stood outside, much less up against the establishment of his or her day. We might reasonably expect to find in even the shortest list of the founding fathers of this University the name of John Fisher, the greatest Cambridge scholar of his times and the instigator or promoter of so much that was creative in Cambridge in the sixteenth century, that most formative of all the centuries of our history. If anyone in our past brings together passionate commitment to the University and its institutions, profound scholarship and unchallengeable human integrity, it is he. But he is not in our list: instead we commemorate the King who killed him.

It is also true that for much of the time what we seem to be dedicated to as an institution is the production of establishment fodder—powerful men and women like those to be named in our roll of honour—our pupils depart in search of wealth and fame, to be politicians, eminent lawyers, marketing consultants, something ruthless in the city. Is this what we celebrate? Is this what we are about?

Certainly, in commemorating our benefactors and therefore our past today, we are celebrating ourselves, and it is true that there is an inescapable element of shabbiness about that celebration. To contemplate our own past is to be brought hard up against a good deal that is shameful. Like every human institution, the University is

compromised by its past.

It has always been so: even our most saintly benefactors, like the Lady Margaret whose benefactions include this sermon, was a hardened and sometimes ruthless politician, dedicated in her prime to the single-minded and not always scrupulous promotion of the interests of her own family before all else. Our medieval forebears were no better than us. They too revered success, they too averted their eyes from the vices and motives of the great, they too went fishing for benefactions, and gave thanks when they had netted them. But there was built into the very structure of their commemoration a devastating irony, which undercut and subverted the flattery which they heaped on the great ones of the earth. To pray for the munificent dead was to pay tribute to their success, their wealth, their conspicuous generosity, it was a sanctified form of flattery. But before and beyond all that it was a declaration that they needed prayer: it insisted that in the one thing necessary, the search for salvation, the moneyed great were not so very successful after all, and the very things that made them great—power, wealth, grandeur weighed them down and hindered their human completeness. Within their thanksgiving was enshrined an assertion of absolute value, which weighed wealth and power and success against truth and humility and the desire to understand rather than to master the world, and found it wanting.

We do not have that structural irony to help prevent us bowing down before values which are in fact deeply inimical to the enterprise of scholarship. Since we have not gathered to pray for our benefactors, we do not in this service declare that the great who have given to us were sinners like us. We have no obvious way of symbolising the perception that power, wealth and the rule of the market are not necessarily the essential driving force of all human excellence, or that here in this place we serve values which go deeper and take men and women further along the path to wisdom, towards true humanity.

But there is a redemptive irony here all the same. It is to be found in Ecclesiasticus. Ecclesiasticus does indeed seem to invite us to praise the famous men and women whom the Vice-Chancellor is just about to name—King Richard, King Henry, King George, the Duke of Somerset and all the rest. In fact it does no such thing. The “fathers who begat us” are not the founders of Colleges and chairs, lectureships and libraries. They are the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, and if you read on beyond the point where we stopped today, you will find that there’s a list of them, for six long chapters, from Enoch and Abraham to Ezekiel and Nehemiah. These are the models set before us. They *do* include Kings and war-leaders and rich men, but for the author, that is not what is

significant about them. To see what is, we need to look elsewhere.

Most people will never have read that list in Ecclesiasticus, since it is not normally counted as part of the Old Testament, and is not even included in most bibles. So most people's acquaintance with it runs no further than the "Let us praise famous men" verses we heard earlier. But in fact there is a very similar list, almost certainly modelled on the one in Ecclesiasticus, in the New Testament. It is to be found in chapter eleven of Hebrews, and is the well-known passage about the great cloud of witnesses which surrounds us. The end of that list in Hebrews draws out and underlines the irony of *our* lesson: having recited the list of famous men, much the same list, it recalls that some indeed "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, waxed valiant in fight". But many also "were stoned, were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword.. being destitute, afflicted, tormented, they wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth (of whom the world was not worthy)".

That New Testament list spells out what is implicit in the list in Ecclesiasticus, that the greatness for which men and women should be held in remembrance can be, perhaps usually is, costly, that they are to be remembered not for their success, but for their persistence in a faith and a hope which marked them off from the world of the merely powerful, the merely successful. For the writers of both passages, the memory which constitutes the community, reminding them of their origins and recalling them to integrity, is not an anodyne, offering reassurance and lulling them into Benson's detested

heavy respectability, complacent security, the dull consciousness of rectitude in work and success.

It is something far more searching, something which places a question-mark against conventional measurements of achievement, and explicitly contrasts true achievement with what the world counts worth. In that perspective the lesson we heard acts not as a blanket endorsement of the values of the great and the good in our list, but as an invitation to measure them and ourselves against starker and more demanding criteria of greatness.

At the heart of Christianity and its most fundamental mode of worship lies an act of remembrance, the commemoration of a Benefactor. That benefactor is as different as could be from the captains and the kings we remember today. In the Christian Eucharist what is recalled is, precisely, a resounding worldly failure, the gruesome death, outside the city, of a man who ruled no kingdom, made no fortune, won no war, and who failed even to persuade the majority of his

contemporaries that he had anything of value to say.

His gift was his own death, a death that did not take him to the centre of human achievement. When he came to the courts and councils of kings it was not as a colleague or valued servant, heaped with orders and honours, but as a condemned criminal. When his message was presented in the Academy, the philosophers and men of letters yawned, and promised that they would hear some more, another day.

It is this man whose memory constitutes the community of his disciples and nourishes their life, and which long ago brought this University into existence. Week by week his memory is recalled not to lull into a complacent sense of achieved success, but to challenge and unsettle. "Why have you come to disturb us?" demands the Grand Inquisitor of the silent Christ in Dostoyevsky's fable. The Grand Inquisitor there stands for all that today's celebration should *not* be—the alliance of those whose proper concern is the freedom of the hearts and minds of humanity, with worldly power, and all the forces which erode the precarious freedoms of humanity in favour of a bestial security, human aspiration reduced to bread and circuses.

The greatest memorialist of the twentieth century was the Italian Jewish poet and novelist, Primo Levi, whose whole writing career issues out of the year and a half he spent in Auschwitz from 1944. At the heart of Levi's work was a desire to recall the men and women, good and bad, whom he had encountered there, and in the unblinking but compassionate remembrance of what, in that extremity, they had been to discover what it was to be a man. In the remembrance of their evil he discovered his own moral fragility: in the remembrance of the less frequent heroism or even simple decencies, he discovered what it was to hope. Of one such remembered figure, Lorenzo, he wrote:

it was due to Lorenzo that I am alive today . . . because he constantly reminded me . . . by his plain and natural manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror, something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, for which it was worth surviving . . . Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.

For Levi, such acts of remembrance, so central to his own integrity, were directly akin to the academic enterprise: he himself was a chemist, and he recalled how in Mussolini's Italy, as the common life of Italy was dissolved in manipulative rhetoric, and truth gave way to a sickening mixture of political dogma and brutal expediency, the pursuit of the hard realities of chemistry had a dignity and majesty: the elements

in the periodic table became for him,

the antidote to Fascism, because they were clear and distinct and verifiable at every step, and not a tissue of lies and emptiness, like the radio and newspapers.

Every human community needs to recall its beginnings, to memorialise the ancestors, to celebrate its achievements. But if that act of remembrance is to nourish rather than to stifle, it must have the capacity continually to subvert our complacencies, to upset the compromises we make and are forced to make with the world of the great and the good. It is quite right that we should celebrate the part this community of learning has played in the construction of the wider community. We do right to give thanks that sceptre and crown have been deflected, if only momentarily, from the pursuit of power and persuasion, to fund the activities of those whose concern is to tell the truth so far as it can be known. But we need to beware of a selective commemoration, which edits out the tension and downright opposition which will always exist and should always exist between the commercial and political worlds—the world of expediency, pragmatism and rhetoric and our world. And at a time in our history when the world of political expediency and the power of the market are being brought to bear with unprecedented force on the fundamental structures and objectives of the University, we have never needed a firmer sense of what it is we are about—we have never needed more urgently a sense of the complexity of our own past.

The builders of the Cambridge Divinity School got this right. Round its first story they set niches in which they enshrined the great figures of Cambridge theology—the Fathers who begat us. In compiling that pedigree they deliberately rejected the temptation to construct a selective memory, to edit out the tensions and contradictions within the past that has made us. On either side of the main entrance they set images of Thomas Cranmer and of John Fisher, two men who had bitterly opposed each other for the sake of truth, and two men who gave their lives in obedience to the truth as they understood it. It is as good an image as any of what an academic commemoration should be. There is room for the kings, the cabinet-ministers and the captains of industry—but only if, there is room also for the valiant for truth who withstood them to the face. And then we can keep faith with ourselves, and with them all.

May their souls, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.