

# The Obscurity of Evasion

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It is difficult to differ in one's immediate reactions from the critical consensus on Peter Levi's *Collected Poems*.<sup>1</sup> The general impression is of a competent body of verse produced largely independently of the various 'movements' contemporary with it, descended in its early phase from Spender, derived in its later style from Eliot, and marked by an obscurity arising, as Colin Falk recognised, from the absence of "an authenticating life...whose depths and anxieties get smoothed over...without being built up into the poetic structure". Obscurity of this kind is not part of the difficulty characteristic of much significant 'modern' poetry: a problem of complex and contradictory things said and shown, often overburdening the signifier, in an already allusive and elliptical discourse. Levi's obscurity is, rather, part of a process of exclusion and elision, a *smoothing over* which deprives his work of a memorable presence.

To ascribe this as most reviewers have done to the limitations of Levi's imagination is an inadequate explanation. What is needed is some discrimination, however cursory, amongst *obscurities*: a distinction between that obscurity which is symptomatic of innovation and gives major works their multivalent character; and the indeterminacy of works where a lack of depth and conception make their resonances finally unmeaningful and insignificant.

Levi's obscurity, I want to suggest, arises from a conceptual naivete. His desire to smooth over conflict results in a suppression of contradictions that is made possible by his belief in an immanent, essential spiritual unity. This influences a mode which, in avoiding argument, is often either sententiously preachy or passive; either distanced from the problem in its generality—"O Great God what is human life like?"—or immersed indistinguishably in the problem itself—"I think England is prison of a kind/ and in that prison I am blank wall". These are the two voices of *Christmas Sermon*, a late meditational poem where the process described above is clearly visible. Its equivocation is a symptom of passivity: neither the voice of questioning and self-communing nor that of experience and identification can argue through the central spiritual anxiety to arrive at a vivid illumination of it.

The success of a long, discursive poem such as this one does not depend on the *validity* of its arguments, as much as on the very *process* of argument (as with Donne) to give it power and clarity. On Christmas Day, as tradition and ritual celebrate the birth of Christ, the priest-poet can only experience, in fear and trembling, His passion and crucifixion, and the lack of justice and

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Poems 1955-1975*. Anvil Press Poetry, London 1976. 256 pp. £5.00.

liberty in Society. Attitudes of traditional sanctity and theological speculation—imaged in the stylised “picture of Christ’s nativity”—are isolated, iconic, idealisations of the ‘christian’ life. They can no longer provide sustenance and guidance in imprisoned England, loveless London, amidst plainclothes policemen, judges speeding on benzedrine, handcuffed hysterical boys, mountains shining with brute desire. From this dark night of the soul where “Theology is a mass of shadows”, and he knows his religion as a stranger “wandering with no address” knows a city at night, the poet-priest asks his terrible questions... “What is human sanctity... Where are you God?... What is original justice to me?”

In an earlier poem, *Humanism*, a doctrine of “voluntary and strong acts” had once been obscurely celebrated in a prayer for those who “smashed ancestral glass”. This time when questions cry out and “I cannot pretend to enlightenment”, there is no effort in the poem to give doubt its full probing power, or to answer it with anything but the rhetoric of invocation or complaint; in either case a retreat from the potential conflict of the question:

“mine is a life that can never revive  
I cannot stop nature and nature’s course  
Good God, I do not know how to be free.”

If “Good God” had functioned as colloquial exclamation rather than consolation, it may have accompanied a desire for the poem to interrogate its own mood. As it is, Levi suppresses any conflict by finally consigning “human life”, the cause of his doubt, to “its own kind of reality”, equal and separate from “the picture of Christ’s nativity”, the source of his anxiety. In doing so he diffuses their conflictual, dialectical relationship which caused the agony in the first place and gave the poem its main dynamic. Both Society and Theology are now the merely phenomenal, part of the problematical, argumentative sphere of ‘becoming’ that must be peremptorily stilled and silenced in the presence of the essential truth of ‘being’. For what Christ *said* and *knew* had its origin “in his untamed simplicity/it was what God is...” “God is a kind of unenlightenment” and that part of the poet concerned with making the meaningful poem or building the city of wisdom can really only bear witness, for

“Christ is in our people and will increase  
true, divine society cannot cease”.

‘Bearing witness’ is a poetic attitude best suited to revealing an essence: that interrelatedness which is the subject’s identity and testimony to the wisdom and justice of God. This, to mangle some of Levi’s lines, is the way that the gospel that is lived unconsciously in human habit can also be understood. Levi uses two main ‘ontological’ languages and styles to make the truth appear. In *Political Poem* and *A Few Words about Fascism* he preaches a parable in obscure, private symbols to distance the reader from any commonsensical, conventional approach to his pristine understanding of the problem. This style, elaborated in images of antiquity and eternity—the Classics and Nature—is often impenetrable. Its obscurity is the casuality of a poetic justice which loses its power of focus in

trying to avoid any conflictual contexts.

More often he aspires towards a poem which is envisaged in his *for Joan*. It is ideally produced in an inconceivable state of innocence where God has never been and Adam never seen, "quite a new kind of poem/without excuses" which would be its "own explanation like the creed". *Thirty Ways of Drowning* is his most accomplished work of this kind. Here, in making thirty moments speak for themselves and of themselves, in fragments that form precariously before flowing back into the sea, Levi is able to evoke something remarkable, endless and indistinct. What, it would be difficult to say, for nothing significantly meaningful surfaces from the deep.

## Letter from an Argentinian Prison<sup>1</sup>

We want this letter to reach the League for the Rights of Man and the Permanent Assembly that defends human rights in order that the military, ecclesiastical, political and trade union authorities may know the atrocities that are committed daily by military, police and civil personnel acting behind the walls of the penitentiary prison of Cordoba in the name of the Third Army Corps.

We will try to get out further letters with factual accounts of the monstrosities that are committed here. But each time it will become more difficult; we will try, therefore, to strengthen the unity of the families of the political prisoners so that they may join together in a great solidarity movement.

We political prisoners are totally isolated from the world and from our loved ones. Since 24th March 1976 visits have been prohibited and we have not been allowed letters sent to us by our families; we are totally ignorant of their situation. We may not listen to the radio, and the ordinary prisoners have been forbidden to approach our quarters at any time. On 15th July, our comrade Moyakarcel was surprised by our executioners while talking with one of the common prisoners. He was brutally beaten, then stripped naked and tied to a stake in the open air. Suffering the intense cold of these conditions he died after 24 hours.

The guards come into our cells and beat us brutally and indiscriminately with hard rubber truncheons; witnesses to this are R. Salustro and B.N. Rivera who were beaten in a manner it would be obscene to describe.

Minimum human rights are disregarded, beatings take place according to the whim of the guard. Torture methods resemble those of the Gestapo. Each morning the authorities order beatings on the pretext of obtaining information, but this is not what

<sup>1</sup> This letter came to *New Blackfriars* through the Student Christian Movement of Holland.