

THE SAVING GRACE

Ralph Gustafson

THE SAVING GRACE IS POETRY. If one defines poetry as the enlightenment of fact, the worth of experience, the attainment of sensibility, the establishment of compassion — in any of the ways in contradiction to the disharmony, the structural collapse, the pollution of right ritual, the violence and disgrace of our times — then poetry is the saving grace. It is the saving grace because it exhibits the worth of sensible harmony, of man with man, of man with himself, of man with nature. We need this worth if we are to survive even on the most pragmatic level. And poetry does not leave man on a pragmatic level; its procedure is never toward the lowest common denominator; its procedure is toward the highest common factor; it is elitist, it demands the ablest men, the rarest quotient; it is after the elimination of the mediocre; it desires to be left with only the most peaceable delight, sensual and cerebral. With a fraction of this desirable attainment achieved, our world is solvent and worthwhile.

Poetry fools no one with romanticism and sentimentality. Its commencement is from the crudest foundation of disillusionment, the wringingest awareness of irony, the very hatred and futility that is in historical mankind. Poetry is restless from the absurdity of not knowing; the refusal of the heavens to answer is its subject-matter. There they are, those black holes stuck in heaven,

swallowing space
Beyond ingestion while we walk streets,
The universe up to something and Sophie
Buying shoes for sore feet.
Poor Sophie. Poor universe
Not having Sophie know why.
The colossal swirl and mammoth pinpoint,
Children spinning tops, mankind
Screwing openings, birth to incontinency,
Dark about the eyes. Meanwhile
The true and starry heavens going
Somewhere with the reasons.
Redundancy! Infinity turning inside
Out while we eat prunes at breakfast.

We are kept ignorant; we are imposed upon. What insolence! We have to die to know the ultimate answer!

I want the answer,
I'm here now with circumstance,
Not exalted with God.

In the aspiring mind, even faith's not enough. Faith is an ignorance.

There he is: mankind in mid-Atlantic clinging to kindling,

This urge upon his mounting soul, height
Magisterial and managed by a wind,
Transcendent take-off fiddling Venus.

He is hero for a hairpin, spilled milk, an upright genetive with a creaky pump,
seeking

Himself between his huff and misty glass,

for now we see through a glass, darkly.

His incompleteness, mankind's, poetry abundantly acknowledges, not with melancholy but with paradoxical acknowledgement; its stance is that of John Falstaff's: Lord, Lord! man made after supper of a cheese-paring:

When a' was naked, he was, for all the world,
like a forked radish, with a head fantastically
carved upon it with a knife.

Poetry has no illusions. But it knows what is possible. There indeed Adam sits looking at permanent apples — and he's no more!

He shifts sitting bare-assed on the sod
Adjusting his balls to comfort. Alas.

But, a poet in the beginning if he is a sinner in the end, he notes something:

The bee sucks. He watches the tendril.
Above him falls syrupy melody.
He thinks a thought. Perception is perceived.
He sees himself sitting there, hearing birds.

Not much. But he's got his senses. At the very least, he perceives himself. He moves on, that first Adam.

Sometimes
The far scent of a downward wind
Overtops melancholy, fingers
Build structures of outlasting music.

Mostly not, perhaps. Structures of music sound little in our day. We strive and something gives way, that flaw in the blood that has been there anonymous for who knows how long, and there we are, one day, stricken, mortal!

What a celestial
Tautology to get there! fun in the dreaming,
Irony in choice, tragedy in the waste,
Getting nowhere with injustice.

THE CLICHES CATCH UP WITH US: life is brief and all is vanity. Looking around itself, poetry is aware of not much to praise. Wallace Stevens's attributive to poetry, "A sacrament of praise," diminishes itself. The majesty of man is derided. Youth is crucified in Cambodia for stealing a handful of rice; the bomb is hurled indifferently, a leg comically flies across the restaurant; in County Sligo a child is blown up in the boat of his grandfather; a little girl runs screaming down a road in Vietnam trying to tear the flaming napalm off her; a smell comes from ovens; treads roll in the streets of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw; accident is denied admission at a hospital. What newer? The poet makes his poem out of the unstructured world; he is driven to the last expression; he finds his lines in grievousness; his rhythm halts. His thoughts are confined to narrow nights:

It would seem that God is in nature
 But not in history. Roses bloom
 And are pretty. We can smell them. We also
 Smell ovens if you know what I mean. . .

The lack of divine
 Intervention is unaccountable.
 Loaves and fishes. But divinity since then?
 Best leave contemplation of history out of it
 And go smell jonquils.

And so he does, the poet, when the world seems insoluble and he gives way. Lacklustre, he gathers in to coteries. He goes to green gardens and cultivates his own shade from the glaring sun. He cuts up useful words into jots and syllables, scatters empty spaces around. He praises silence. He draws pictures with his typewriter. But the game does not satisfy. No one listens. Solipsism won't do. He gets sick of his ego, he gets bored with pretension. There is nothing for it but negative capability, losing himself to find himself. The true world greets him.

He is pitched headlong into irony and clarity. He is made human. The truth is delight. He is moral.

His defence against grievousness is the justification of his profession. Hollow pretension is exposed. He is returned to delight, the first function of his art. He knows that if his poem lies it is a bad poem. A poem cannot lie; its delight is spoiled — the magnificence of structuring verbal music, of moving it through its form so that the very outward existence of itself is the equivalence of its inner conviction, so that the very conveyance is the meaning of what it conveys. Untruth unravels it. He is on the side of love.

In agony he faces the world. He writes it down. Something is worth while. The poem and its meaning. He will make what he says engaging, significant, nay,

exalted, so that he will force listening. Revolutionary, he drags the world into acknowledgement, adjusts what is known

To new announcements.
 The rage isn't easy.
 Small minds persuade their triumph,
 The electrode harms
 Where no mark is left,
 Abraham puts the knife
 Through the throat of Isaac.
 Channels run littleness.

But the challenge is the delight. He knows all about violence and mortality; they are what he is writing about with delight.

Born to greatness is the man
 Who sees his skull:
 Again that pool
 Is come to that the torrent splashed to rainbow —
 That love is made whose finish was all
 That there was though morning was at the shutter
 Stars that night would be held by.

We are still naked Adam. But we want to be, we want to be! Make the worst of the glorious mortality of biology, biological man! What a corkscrew of pumps and arteries and sluices and drainages!

Micturition and dawns, not one
 Without the other, current for life.
 Amalgam of rude civilities!
 Not a naked early riser
 Isn't in for it, handsomeness
 In contempt, aspirations
 In contradiction . . .
 Mortalities of toilet!
 Wheelchair, swaddling, whatever drinks
 Has to go, nothing's for it.
 Epitaphs prove the worth of repairs,
 Birthdays confirm the ending!

O mortality, O crudities! How easy to put the site of evacuation and love together!
 But not a man-jack who is potent but welcomes the hard on,

Take-offs, aftermaths and plumbing.
 Notice at brink of dawn what's up!
 Lovers love it, popes start washing . . .

No cold shower for the poet!

In the very tightest of straits, notice what the poet finds for comfort, for his poem: comedy; puns, plays and paradoxes! That's the saving grace: art and

comedy. Even in the veriest straits, the poet finds rescue: in affirmations and incongruities. He who laughs, lasts. Charlie Chaplin's immortality. The hitch of the leg as he walks into the battered sunset.

Once upon a time the day was sacred to Saturn; nothing prevented the grandeur of bawdiness and paraphernalia:

lovers came;

Thoroughbreds mounted; spuds sprouted;
Autocracy crumbled; sails went up
The river, majestic; pinwheels spouted.

Three achieved their poem, the others
Shouted. Everything came off.
Our Lady (a little tipsy) wondered

What it was really like. Mirth
Compounded. Scheherezade gargled,
Jongleurs juggled. (No joke).

Irreverence and uncensorship, these the poet does not forget even though some things are sacred and the sheriff beats at the tavern door and, like Falstaff, the poet is left standing empty-pursed at the Abbey door. Poetry is never solemn.

Assumption of comedy, abilities of objectivity, these are one way out of the dilemma. It is never easy, that laughter:

Never stay down
For the count of ten, said the little girl
Running nowhere, her napalm on fire,

And that Jewish kid in Warsaw
With his hands up getting
The handout. Ha, ha.

Nevertheless, it is either that, sometimes, or black despair and despair is what poetry cannot be, being, as it is, on the side of life.

Not all is despair. Bitterness is the only emotion denied a poem. Compassion and affirmation, the two irrefutable instincts of poetry, eschew it, bitterness. Try to take the bitterness affirmation away from everyman, the sensitive man, and see what happens. No sir, he'll none of it.

Even the suffering's worth it.
When the ground-phlox blooms
What of the pain; there is cessation;
The jonquil is white, the oriole
Sings? No? Then surely there is
Remembrance, that first ecstasy? . . .

There is a sobering beyond all
 Comprehension. It is this leaving
 Of suffering, of birds, oriole and elm
 And remembrance and lake's side,
 And hearing of music.

The poet, everyman, remembers that day, that epiphany of experience how-
 ever rarely it repeats, that first ecstasy when it was also love.

Mind-boggling was the day.
 There was sun and a clear air.
 There was no fear of heart

Or lung or joint, the beginning of the end
 Anonymous, across the world no one
 Was inflicting death but in three places,

The television was turned off,
 The colour was highly placed, blue
 With white clouds, a quick bird

Across, ruby-throated, Lear
 Was read . . .

It was the radiance of roots working, natural
 Visitation, the iridescence,
 Green, of a red-headed fly,

Absurdity, evolutions of
 The inexplicable, tendrils, the wasp,
 Unswallowable sea-urchins, and of course

The mean mean enough to sit there
 Insensitive. Someone pushed a lawn-mower.
 Rabelais and Jesus had just met.

And why wouldn't, with the world like that, the poet write down affirmations?

The heart endures, the house
 Achieves its warmth and where
 He needs to, man in woollen
 Mitts, in muffler, without
 A deathwish, northern, walks.
 Except he stop at drifts
 He cannot hear this snow,
 The wind has fallen, and where
 The lake awaits, the road
 Is his. Softly the snow
 Falls. Chance is against him.
 But softly the snow falls.

THE IMPULSE, IN WHATEVER KIND OF MAN, is called creativity, we call it creativity. The poet calls it poetry. It is all the same thing. The poet is a lackluck, like all of us, but he targets love. He knows what he must do:

Oh, nothing now but I must out of oceans
Lift leviathan like a Job, my Moby
Dangle on a hook.

That is to say, nothing's left to do
But drag up god in the wig of my words. The rest's
A muddle of farewells.

He has believed that from the beginning. He ends up still determined to do that, "drag up god in the wig of his words." He knows that poetry is an art, that he is crafty. His poem is not the world but the world with something done to it. Poetry is not a substitute for anything, above all for religion. Poetry may give the poet solace and assurance and redemption but he knows that his poem is still only but a wig of words, not the real thing; no less necessary if divinity is to be exhibited, but still not the incarnation. The grace, surely it is and the dove descends, but only by angelic guidance.

His epiphanies are profane but no less of the nature of urgent beatitude. He says that no man can live without them. He finds them in the most wondrous areas, in the ordinary, the commonplace, the trivial.

The choice
Between weedy violet and potential
Ground-phlox massed in May and red
And white and to be propagated is Troy
Fallen or not, a thing of moment
And momentous choice whether the midge succeed
In swallowing smaller than itself or,
Should birdsong cease? Let Helen
Waddle down the street and be beautiful.
I shall go to bed far later on
And pull the sheet up over time.
Now I watch the cataclysmic gulp
By midges made and conjugate
What question lies in oriole song
Oblivious of Agamemnon and a thousand ships.

A segment of ten minutes can cause in the poet poetry. Especially if those segments of ten minutes are now few and mortality crowds in. Truth to tell, the mortality has attached itself to the poet from the start.

Never having clasped life so tightly
As in the leaving of it, he listens to the call
Of birds as though trees were an ultimate purpose.

He sits in the sun and grieves on behalf of those who have had to clasp mortality; he acts as though the turning on of a tap is important, as though flowers in a vase are significant. Mankind makes it easy to have done with the world and get out of it, the world's sanctification of cheapness and the handwashing. But not the immediate rare grace he can make of it will he do without, the morning's vastly responsible announcements,

Bats, belfry, proclamations,
 Bees at blossoms — the whole nightshirt
 Get-up and celestial existence of existence,

for the most trivial happening of a segment of ten minutes has happened to him:

Sun just reached the scarlet geranium
 Set out in the antique fire-bucket.

The fear of having missed a segment of significant ten minutes grips him, grips him the more he has time taken away from him. Waste and missings impel him to warnings. Regret is futile. A great compassion overcomes him, that the world lose the world, that an awareness of suffering has been missed, that what could have been exaltation was indifference. The most ordinary happenings of a day will bring this compassion upon him. The man nailing a step, repairing the biases of winter; she launching laundry out on a line that ran from the kitchen to the yard telephone, sheets smelling of winter's cold, each time the line is launched, the pulley squeaking, may have missed the significance, how those happenings of life quietly and lovingly lived may be thought neither important nor memorable, how, as they happen

neither

She nor the man pounding the clear air
 Fixing the green step with another nail,
 Will be aware of the importance, twenty
 Years later thought of by him
 Who drove nails and saw laundry,
 Who thought little of cardinals and clothespins
 And now love life, loves life.

Too late, too late.

Cardinals and clothespins, cathedrals and doughnuts, what trivia! And what greatness when in the truth of poetry!

It all boils down to love. Love is the answer.

Love without hurt
 The only choice.

The poet writes it down.

The irreplaceable reconstitution
Of desirable experience
Is what he scrapes out . . .

The kettle of fish would boil over
With clarity so to speak,
Taps in the midst of heatwaves
Run breathless
Spring water,

Heaven would put pleas on its backburners
And buckets of risen bread,
That yeast in them, go bust
Overflowing
If the world

Listened.

The poet knows that love is short but that it is for all time; he knows that heaven is miles-high, that as he drives west into hostile territory he will be besieged, driven to draw into circular defences his wagons, but he primes his guns,

His immediate preference not celestial,
But sundowns and prairies, pioneers
Turning cartwheels to the next corral.

THREE POEMS

Ralph Gustafson

THE MIND NEEDS WHAT THE POEM DOES

White lilacs and Berlioz —
Take them as standing for the world and what
We make of it. Say it is Berlioz' opera
Les Troyens, and let us say
They are white lilacs clipped from the bush
That last afternoon of May;
With late evening, the dark fragrance
In the room and burning Troy.

Which was as real as the other?
 What man creates in meaning is
 The world we live in though the rocky
 Earth is what we ride on. Flowers
 At the cost of wooden horses: heroic
 Foolishness.

Stars we got free.
 Fashioned, finagled implements.
 A door-hinge, wheel, straight nails:
 Worthier than the starry night,
 What we make of them, histories.

More than ourselves, lilacs are amorous
 Troy; without the town, abstract
 Music is competent mockery.

RAIN

The downpour is a cataclysm.
 Trees slant, eaves along the house
 Gush, no one can see beyond the walk.

The mind's drenched. Deserts blow sand.
 What has that to do with it? Cellar
 Windows spill, sills rise.

Each has his own anxieties truthfully,
 Green is perhaps everywhere dry,
 Ducks do not feel like song.

Each one's corner is his world, Allah
 Yelling and Christ hanging and Buddha supine.
 What is the god for rain? Oblique it pours!

Levels accumulate. Worms come out,
 Lying on the grass openly,
 Depressions wash over. I haven't spoken

POEM

Of the noise, the great swallowing ditch,
Surfaces rush. Generalities
Will no longer do, truth,

Truth, wrong positions, the universe,
Are what it's about, misapprehension.
Watch, outside! It can't last.

IN THE EVERGLADES

All animals are holy,
They are themselves.

The birds are sacred,
The sky theirs.

The heron stands for hours
On one leg

And the roseate spoonbill
Seeks side to side.

The alligator eats once a week
And slides in

And among the mangrove roots
His small one waits.

A movement! The spotter
Adjusts his lens,

He does not know why
But feels worship,

The fat woman feels worship,
And the camper, and the baseball

Cap, and bright eyes.
No one is articulate:

The egret is beautiful and the blue
Heron and the ibis.

No one can say why.
Each is itself.

The people do not move,
Each in identity.

TRUCE

R. A. D. Ford

*“Le coeur, comme des rois, sous la forme de paix
perpétuelle, ne signe donc que les trêves”*

— AMIEL

The war goes on, the words wound
Murderously, the blood flows and quickens,
Until the sacrifice is too great
And the heart sickens.

The emissaries sound out the enemy,
Cease-fire is called, the barrage dies down,
The sky is seen again through the haze,
And recognizable is the dawn.

Peace for a century should be ours,
But the heart opts only for a truce,
Though there is time enough for a hand-clasp
In the ruins of those countless Troys.

We think it is the threshold,
The going-in, the promise, the rosy
Future. But the armistice
Is like the wraith of a passing thought,
And our hearts harden with the sight of peace.