A Way of Reading the Book of Job"

by Henry Bugbee

Prefatory Note: The ensuing reflection was written in January and February of 1963. The Book of Job was certainly of central importance at the time in eliciting the thought engaged upon. Yet it will be observed that the basic drift of what is said does not derive from a full-fledged and detailed study of Job. Subsequent reckoning with that book, and in particular, study of it with the great help of my colleague, Professor John Lawry, have led me to regard what I wrote back there in '63 more as an event in attempting to fledge something central in my own thinking, rather than as an interpretation directly deriving from absorption in the text.

A Way of Reading the Book of Job

It came to me as in a dream, and it has that kind of logic, you know. Something about God and Satan and a man named Job.

Here were God and Satan getting into a bit of a dispute about this man, God contending Job was a pretty staunch follower in the ways of righteousness, the ways laid down by God for men to follow, and Satan maintaining this man could be corrupted and pried loose from the fold of the faithful. So God says to Satan to go ahead and do his darnedest, short of taking the man's life, and let's just see how it turns out. And maybe God harbors a little additional reservation to make amends to Job for the hardship this experiment is going to mean for Job if Job comes through and stands up under it. After all, a man who proves himself a staunch follower and retainer under severe trial really deserves to be rewarded by his Lord, and the Lord's good intention to follow through and make things right for Job In the end may ease the strain on the Lord's conscience of being a party to the whole plot.

Sounds like a rather rough deal, doesn't it? Never mind; this wouldn't be the first time a man had a rough deal. Let's get on with how the righteousness and the suffering pan out. After all, the Lord isn't letting Job in on any secrets, so now we have to take it from Job's point of view.

Satan lays it on pretty hard, to be sure. He piles calamity on calamity on Job, and just to give Job's fellow-men the cue to carry on where Satan's going to leave off, Satan so afflicts Job—as with scabs and boils—that he becomes repulsive, despicable, even a touch ridiculous, in human eyes, yes, even in his own. So here sits Job* as the story really begins to get underway, a sitting duck. And you can't say Satan didn't do his work in consummate fashion. He knew just what he needed to do, and where to leave off and let men take over. You might say he gave them the material they needed to work on and a clear hint on how to use it in carrying on to Satan's purpose where Satan himself couldn't turn the trick.

You see the plot thickens only with human interpretation of what has befallen Job. The question is, what do these catastrophes mean? And it's that question which really plagues Job. The question introduces a suffering, an anguish suffusing but going quite beyond all that has befallen him. No telling what a man can or can't bear, but everything seems to depend on how profoundly he is shaken, uprooted, or undermined in the course of events. And with Job the drama is a drama of belief, of belief in ... of what he stakes himself on.

Well, here comes his wife, the first to hit him where it really hurts. "Curse God and die!" she screams at him. What is the lady saying? How does she mock and taunt him?

"You wretched, you miserable, you pitiful fool! So you persist in your old 'do what is right and trust in the Lord'. Look where it's got you. Look what's become of all of us. Why if there's any man left in you, go ahead. Stick by your position. Admit you have to see yourself betrayed. Then go ahead and say it: to hell with the pious cant! and to hell with God! And let this be your last breath! What else is left for you to say?"

She knows he won't do it, and heaps him with her shrill vexation, with maddened contempt: this caricature of a man.

And now come the friends of Job, ready to sit with him in his travail. Initially they seem respectful of his suffering and keep silence. Perhaps his suffering makes them uncomfortable. One can feel their relief as they begin to find their tongues. They will console him, patiently reason with him, help him to a proper perspective on what has befallen him:

Divine Providence, Divine Justice is at work in all events, in all that touches a human life. There is the basis of man's acceptance of whatever befalls him.

A pretty touchy theme, since they can hardly voice it for Job's benefit without making explicit the tough implication for his case which they want him to swallow:

You see, Job, it's this way; a man gets what he has coming to him. (Right now the friends are feeling no pain.) And so, Job, it is no accident you have been brought to suffer like this. If you hadn't put yourself in wrong . . . You see?

Accept, then, the stern hand of Divine Punishment upon you. Repent, and be reconciled to your sufferings.

It is hard for them to be as tactful about this as they might have wished, but Job soon relieves them of any anxiety on that score by protesting his own innocence, nay, his integrity in his own eyes. Accordingly, it becomes their duty to remonstrate with him, and then as he persists, to rise up in righteous indignation and rebuke him.

Well, they have a field day at his expense, going one another better in justifying the ways of God to man, and to Job in particular. Small wonder they get him riled up and side-tracked into a defense of himself. But also they goad him to the point, and bring him to the abyss of his own despair. For if their version of Divine Justice does not hold, what is it that Job can have believed in, and what is left for him to believe in still? What can sustain him—not in a belief in his own righteousness, but in keeping faith?

In the idiom of his faith Job calls upon God for understanding. With utter singleness of heart and will and mind his whole soul, his whole life issue under the pressure of his suffering into that cry. A cry for understanding of man's predicament—and not a curse; this is the last breath of the man left in him, feeling himself utterly forsaken.

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Tuesday, January 15, 1963

No wind stirs. At Zero Fahrenheit the flakes of snow are not at all large. Incredibly lightly and unwaveringly they fall. A myriad of them fills our meadow round the house. One sees them best looking at the trees beyond. Their falling accentuates the still-standing trees, the dark trunks. And the still of the trees is the nearness of falling snow,

Occasionally, in the meadow, a weed nods and lifts again.

The low fire on the hearth is even more discreet.

Tuesday, February 12, 1963

No great pressure of anything to say. No salient point to be made. No sureness about what might need to be done. Doubt with respect to so much of past thought. A sense of turning away from overstatement, a reticence almost to speak at all.

Yet—perhaps even when so situated, some things need to be said, await being discovered in a way of saying them, if one were only to try it patiently and unassumingly enough, beginning over and again just with what offers itself.

Perhaps some things need to be said; and it might even be as well to set out from a sustained reticence to speak. For whatever there may be amiss in it,

that reticence also seems attuned to the quiet of heaven-and-earth, the unprejudiced silence of things that are, companioning an unlonely solitude. Not a life apart or solitary, but such solitude as heaven-and-earth dispense, to which one may give himself. Surely silence and solitude may be a measure for our thought and speech.

And since by this measure we are simply placed on our own as well, it is a measure that also makes for reflection, and a finding out of what we make of things, in the course of having to do with them. In a mortal life.

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Thursday, February 1

Three elements are bound to be powerfully related to what may need to be said here: a certain style of life, closely related to the second--a certain region, a place, in which that style of life is nurtured; and a certain company of thinkers and friends.

Among the thinkers are some who provide comments helpful in fixing the character of the style of life in question, and the importance in it of the place to which it belongs.

First, as to the undertaking of what may need to be said, in its kinship with the style of life, there is something Vincent van Gogh says in a letter to his brother that comes very near to the matter:

". . . the figure of a labourer--some furrows in a ploughed field—a bit of sand, sea, and sky—are serious subjects, very difficult, but at the same time so beautiful that it is indeed worth while to devote one's life to the task of expressing the poetry hidden in them." (DEAR THEO, New York, Doubleday, 1957, p. 173).

And again:

"I believe one gets more sound ideas when thoughts arise from direct contact with things than when one looks at them with the set purpose of finding Certain facts in them." (Ibid., p. 183).

This also:

"Yes, lad, if one perseveres and works on without minding the rest, if one tries honestly and freely to fathom nature, and does not lose hold of what one has in mind, whatever people may say, one feels calm and firm, and faces the future quietly," (Ibid., p. 244).

But this also:

"To study from nature, to wrestle with reality—I don't want to do away with it for years and years. I should not like to have missed that error. One starts with a hopeless struggle to follow nature, and everything goes wrong; one ends by calmly creating from one's palette, and nature agrees with it, and follows. But these two contrasts do not exist separately. The drudging, though it may seem in vain, gives an intimacy with nature, a sounder knowledge of things." (Ibid., pp. 363-4).

"It is looking at things for a long time that ripens you and gives you a deeper understanding." (Ibid., p. 462),

Looking at things for a long time . . . , or as Thoreau says, with his touch of hyperbole: "And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us." (WALDEN, New York, Modern Library, 1937, p. 87).

"And to be among conditions that work at us, that set us before big natural things from time to time, that is all we need." (Rainer Maria Rilke, LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET, trans, by M. D, Herter Norton, New York, W. W. Norton, 1937, p. 78).

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Monday, February 18

"You can't idealize brute labour. That is to say, you can't idealize brute labour, without coming undone, as an idealist." (D. H. Lawrence, STUDIES IN CLASSIC AMERICAN LITERATURE, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, p. 121).

"You can't idealize mother earth. You can try. You can even succeed. But succeeding, you succumb. She will have no pure idealist sons. None.

"If you are a child of mother earth, you must learn to discard your ideal self, in season, as you discard your clothes at night." (Ibid,, p. 122).

It is not in the direction of idealizing heaven-and-earth, and the things therein, that one is sustained by them. In this sense, making something of them is making nothing of them. As Gertrude Stein says, a rose is a rose.

However. Let us consider what is said of the rose by Angelus Silesius in the sentence taken by Martin Heidegger as a text for so much of his work, SATZ VOM GRUND:

"La rose est sans pourquoi, fleurit parce qu'elle fleurit,

N'a souci d'elle-meme, ne desire etre vue." (Quoted from the French translation of SATZ VOM GRUND by Andre Preau, LE PRINCIPE DE RAISON, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 103 ff.).

Something may happen in relation with things themselves, in mutual address, that is the mode of sense they make, and it has nothing to do with explaining them. The mode of sense in question imparts to life a purposiveness without purpose. Purposes exfoliating and sustained out of that purposiveness, as they may well' be, cannot explain it, nor do they explain things, A purposiveness prior to purposes, to which they remain subordinate, precludes reading the sense things make in terms of purposes.

Thus it may be that in a style of life governed by mutual address with things, one may stand to attune hearing to that language which things and events speak without metaphor, "which alone is copious and standard". (Thoreau, op. cit., p. 101). Perhaps that, precisely, is their beauty. As, for example it concerned van Gogh.

Tuesday, February 19

"Bien courte, a vrai dire, serait notre pensee, si nous admettions que la sentence d'Angelus Silesius n'a d'autre sens que d'indiquer la difference des manieres dont la rose, dont 1'homme, sont ce qu'i1s sont. Ce que la sentence ne dit pas—et qui est tout 1'essentiel—, c'est bien plutot ceci qu'au fond le plus secret de son etre 1'homme n'est verItablement que s'tl est a sa maniere comme la rose—sans pourquoi." (Heidegger, op. cit., p. 108).

At the core of personal life there seems to be something inviolately impersonal, akin in our fashion to the mode of being of rose, or rock—known and owned by all weather. It is through this in us that the elements seem most deeply to befriend us — sun and rain, earth and seasons, the constant rivers and the starry night. It is through this that one may "go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself." (Thoreau, op. cit., p. 117)- And it is this as well which may ground and fortify both critical reserve and human warmth; something inviolately impersonal.

Perhaps it was to this that Job was led; and one may discern it through the life and thought of that man of our times, Albert Camus, (See especially the essay, "Retour a Tipasa," L'ETE, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, pp. 141-163).

Thursday, February 21

Justice: In a way, that is the great issue. If one can believe in it, and willingly align himself in what he feels as accord with it, then to that extent he is not undermined* dissipated, or adrift. In the broadest terms this would mean participating in a situation that makes sense, and in such a way that it makes sense. In those terms justice appears to be the issue defined by the Book of Job.

And here the situation must be construed as both cosmic and that of a man. The meaning of his situation is what is at issue. Job as a man stands revealed as dependent on what his situation means to him; it is through their bearing on that meaning—or as they seem to consolidate that meaning, that things, people, events prove telling. It is not sufficient to think of him as having been the victim of a succession of catastrophes, to the point where his sufferings become virtually unbearable. The caustic bite of these catastrophes is in their inducing the

definingly human anguish of doubt to the verge of unbelief in human existence and the significance of everything entering into it. The raw catastrophes themselves occupy little space in the story. Their afflicting power and threat to Job as a man is dramatized at length, and is to be seen as the drama of their interpretation. It is through their interpretation, and only through the bearing they thus implicitly or explicitly exert upon significance, that they acquire the force of affliction.

Justice is in question. Justice pertaining to man's situation as a cosmic one, and as a situation which cannot be humanly lived except interpretatingly—however implicitly so.

Now Job is presented as having believed in cosmic justice. And it is through that very belief that the sufferings befalling him acquire the force of affliction. His 'friends', and perhaps his wife as well, appeal to that very belief: in terms of it, why should he not feel himself in contempt? How can he reject the implication of being stigmatized by the holocaust of adversities besetting him?

Cosmic, or if you will—divine—justice: Very well. How can you believe in it without giving unlimited range to your moral persuasions, and so accept it that a man gets what he has coming to him, from whatever quarter it comes? How can you believe in it without reading all events as the expression of a cosmic agency whose intentions and purpose are everywhere at work, seeing to it that only justice comes to pass?

What is this belief, then, on which Job stakes himself, if it does not entail either holding sufferers as such in contempt; or rejection, resentment, defiance with regard to the agency of cosmic 'justice' seemingly invoked? Shouldn't Job knuckle under to the verdict of events, and acquiesce in the stigma with which his 'friends' have it that these events brand him; or shouldn't he, as his wife taunts him to do, curse God and die?

The tone of Job's protests suggests that he has become vulnerable to these hateful alternatives in terms of his own belief, for only in such terms can a man come near to despairing.

Yet, uncomprehending, profoundly confused, with the bitterest of irony both foisted upon him and gaining hold in the ambiguity of his belief—and in the temptation to turn the issue into one of self-justification, at the point of utter desperation, Job holds open to a possibility of cosmic justice which nothing seems to sustain. Yet no way seems left even to grasp what it might mean.

What happens now in the story is naturally crucial: a verdict on the issue and a version on the theme, touching on what Job is able to believe in. For his reconciliation and renewal depend on the possibility of believing in. In what? Plainly, in the significance of things and events entering into human life, and as decisive for man's cosmic situation.

Perhaps it will seem, that since what happens now transpires in the idiom of speech — the utterance of the voice from the whirlwind — that what the story offers is in the vein of emphasis on a super-human, a cosmic agent calling attention to evidences of himself, his power, and in a way sufficient to still any human doubt or challenge to his authority. "Job, when you consider my handiwork, even a little of what I can do, and then consider by comparison how puny a man is, what right have you to insist upon an accounting for what befalls you, or to presume that you could understand what I may be up to? Now aren't you ashamed?" Job covers himself with contrition and his fortunes improve! And how consistently arbitrary this divine agent would be, turning on Job's friends, at the end. For haven't they themselves been holding forth at length to precisely the same effect?

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Friday, February 22

Indeed, the explicit thread of argument running through the utterance of the voice from the whirlwind seems to some such disappointing effect. And after what has been revealed to him, does not Job himself say that he has seen God, and to such effect that he despises himself and repents?

So Job turns out to have been guilty of insisting on his integrity? Perhaps. So, though he had freely emphasized the possibility himself, his questioning and tormented speculation had gotten him in way over his head? Guilty then too of a certain presumption in having uttered what he did not understand, even in crying out, above all, for understanding. Still, what is there interesting in this? Suppose Job stands convicted 'before God'. Suppose no mortal man is ever sustained of 'righteousness'. What has this to do with the issue of cosmic justice, touching Job? That is, what is there in the vision, the revelation that comes to him, not merely confounding him and casting him down, but actually making sense of his situation and speaking to his condition?

If we turn to the vision actually set forth In the utterance of the voice from the whirlwind, perhaps we must distinguish between the thread of argument intertwined with it and what actually emerges as to be seen, co-articulate with the mode of vision enacted. Simply, it is a vision of things: the things of heaven-and-earth, dramatized in their emergent majesty, wonder, and inviolable reserve. But seen in the mode of this, their being. And seen as if for the first time, yet as

belonging to a domain, in which dominion (not domination) reigns, forever and ever; the dominion of being itself.

Job's questioning has presupposed an explanation of things and events; he has believed in a justice embodied in them, but in a way suggesting the possibility of a raison d'etre through which comprehension of them would be the appropriate mode of understanding with regard to them. But his presupposition does not seem to be sustained; rather, it is shown to be irrelevant. No explanation of what has befallen him is forthcoming; certainly not any 'justification of human suffering'. In fact nothing by way of justification conceived on the model of moral persuasions occurs. No hidden purposes are revealed, to disclose that these, then, explain, or exemplify how explanation might be forthcoming, to whatever extent withheld.

Instead, wanting to understand as he does—with his whole heart—and at his wits' end, prepared to risk whatever in his belief he may have clung to, Job is opened in mutual address with things. And the vision enacted speaks, not according to his presuppositions, nevertheless in accord with his situation and condition. His belief in raison d'etre is strangely and wonderfully both contraverted and confirmed:

L'etre-meme, c'est la raison. But therefore: no raison d'etre.

Thus it is in a certain appreciation of things, in a relation of mutual address with them, and not in any comprehension of them, that a basic mode of understanding comes to pass.