

Daniel Berrigan – Radical War Poet

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For most Americans the name Daniel Berrigan evokes strong response with respect to radical protest rather than literary accomplishment. For many his fame—or notoreity, depending on their view of his acts of civil disobedience—springs from social and political causes rather than poetic. The perceptive reader of Berrigan's works, sensing the close connection between his writings and his activities and life style will not pass judgment on one without regard to the other. It is possible, too, that eventually Daniel Berrigan will be remembered as much for his writings as for his radical protests.

Born and reared in Minnesota, he and his brothers were influenced, says his brother Philip, by their poverty in the depression years, when their family “lived with people and accepted them as they were.” The boys were deeply impressed with their mother's sharing of meager food supplies with the “many men.....traveling the roads impoverished and desperate.”

Educated in a devout Catholic family and a parochial school, after vigorous seminary training as a Jesuit, he was ordained a priest and served in the slums of American cities. His passionate identification with the “stench and cloth and fried eyes” of these people is felt in his scorn for a fellow priest in New York City who in the isolation of a teaching position

.....never conveyed a man, Christ, or himself—
His cleric's eye
forbade singulars, oddments, smells,
sickness, pushcarts, the poor.
He dwelt in the fierce Bronx, among a university's
stone faced acres
hemmed in by trucks and tumbrels. No avail.

(In Memoriam p. 131)

Daniel Berrigan's involvement with poor, miserable, and oppressed people was not for do-good or narrow pietistic reasons. He sensed the close relationship between poverty and social injustice and between social injustice and religion. He explains how he made this association and how it led him to protest:

I began to understand
one could not indefinitely obey the law
while social conditions deteriorated
structures of compassion breaking down
neighborhoods slowly rotting
the poor despairing unrest
forever present in the land especially among
the young people.

He noted specific relationships between social injustice and war, as may be seen in his declaration that "Part of the protest/was to dramatize that the war/is taking more cannon fodder from the poor areas/than from the more affluent areas." He summarized his reasons for helping to burn draft files by saying he knew he would be jailed

in consequence of our inability
to live and die content in the plagued city
to say 'peace peace' when there is no peace
to keep the poor poor
the thirsty and hungry thirsty and hungry.

He pointed out in connection with their trial that all of the defendants had "worked with the poor in the ghetto and abroad" and that all of them identified "with the victims of American oppression all over the world." And in his plea before the court he said, "All of us who act against the law/turn to the poor of the world."

The important events and activities of protest against war for which Daniel Berrigan is best known can be related briefly: Soon after the beginning of the American war with North Vietnam Daniel and his brother Philip worked with loosely formed peace groups, especially on campuses. They organized prayer vigils, meals of reconciliation, marches, and demonstrations at military bases, and attempted to carry their mes-

sage to officials in the Pentagon and the federal government. Extremely concerned about the physical, emotional, and moral destruction they felt that American involvement in the war was causing, and feeling unable to get a serious hearing, they took radical measures. Philip and his associates drew blood from their bodies and mixed it with animal blood which they poured on draft files in the Customs House at Baltimore, Maryland as a symbol of resistance to Americans shedding blood in the war. A few months later, on May 17, 1968, in Catonsville, Maryland, Philip, Daniel and seven friends carried 378 files of draftees from the draft board office to a parking lot, poured homemade napalm on them and burned them. At least two important results came about for Daniel Berrigan: he was given a prison sentence and was enabled to write a powerful drama about his experience entitled *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*.

Berrigan wrote this play "somewhat in the manner of the new 'factual theater,'" he says. He based it on twelve hundred pages of trial evidence, "making only those minute changes required for clarity or good sense." In it he felt he had put the "overriding sense that here, in one place, almost against our will, by choices that bore us headlong, the tragic ingredients of the war were being pressed into a single concentrate." This drama thus provides excellent material for a study of Berrigan as war protester and has been used generously in the preparation of this paper.

The play itself became a potent protest, along with Berrigan's other writings given over less completely to this purpose but pervaded by the same basic motives and thought, which often censured the war and its leaders. Such were his volumes entitled *Time Without Number*; *Encounters*; *The World for Wedding Ring*; *No One Walks Waters*; *False Gods*; *Real Men*; *Trial Poems*; *Night Flight to Hanoi*; *The Dark Night of Resistance*; and *America is Hard to Find*. For this paper the writer has found Berrigan's recent book *Selected and New Poems* a valuable source, one to be recommended as a fair sampling of his total poetic output.

This brief introduction to the acts and writings of Daniel Berrigan confirms the fact of his being a radical war protester. But in what sense? How is he radical? These are questions to which the remainder of this paper will be addressed.

One of the characteristics of Berrigan's protest is that it goes to the root of matters, more specifically to the causes of the war, as the brief quotations from his works already given would indicate. He is in the tradition of Americans such as Thoreau, who insist on simplifying moral, social, and political issues by going to their causes, as the derivative meaning of *radical* would suggest. For example, Berrigan exposed one of the real reasons for the war, namely, protection of American economic interests. One of the defendants in THE TRIAL OF THE CATONSVILLE NINE says,

.....We must have new markets
We must bring our industries our way of life
into Vietnam and Latin America
We must protect our interests there
But we asked at Catonsville
Whose interests are these?
Who represents the interests of Latin America?
Who represents the interests of Vietnam?

Berrigan also deplores the fuzzy, deceitful thinking that breeds patriotic rhetoric and the cliches of a false idealism. He says so, clearly, in this passage from his play:

I hear our President confuse greatness with strength
riches with goodness fear with respect
hopelessness and passivity with peace
The cliches of our leaders
pay tribute to property and indifference to suffering.

His insistence on getting to the heart of things emerges in hatred for abstractions, especially when they cover violence and injustice:

The great sinfulness
of modern war is
that it renders concrete things abstract
.....I was trying to be concrete

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about death because death
is a concrete fact.

Berrigan was also radical in the sense of using extreme measures to remedy what he considered to be an extreme situation and in opposing established institutions because he believed {they were perverted from their right ends by those who were bent on continuing the war or who were indifferent to its continuance. George Mische, a co-defendant, expressed Berrigan's views when he says:

I felt that the crisis
this country is in
needed something drastic
something people could see
But the act had to be nonviolent
We were not out to destroy life
There is a higher law we are commanded to obey
It takes precedence over human laws
My intent was to follow the higher law
My intent was to save lives Vietnamese lives
North and South American lives
To stop this madness
That was our intent.

His brother Philip really spoke for Daniel when he explains why he chose civil disobedience:

We have been accused of arrogance
But what of the fantastic arrogance of our leaders
What of their crimes against the people the poor and powerless
Still no court will try them no jail will receive them
They live in righteousness They will die in honor
For them we have one message for those
in whose manicured hands the power of the land lies
We say to them
Lead us Lead us to justice
and there will be no need to break the law.

In a passage of the play devoted to his own plea Berrigan makes even clearer his reasoning behind his actions to stop the violence of perverted institutions. He speaks of "the authorities/of that public order which is in effect/a massive institutionalized disorder." He describes kill-

ing as "disorder" and says, "Life and gentleness and community and unselfishness/is the only order we recognize."

Berrigan bases his acts of civil disobedience on an American tradition; he says:

My brother's action helped me realize
from the beginning of our republic
good men had said no
acted outside the law
when conditions so demanded
And if a man did this
Time might vindicate him show his act to be lawful
a gift to society
a gift to history
and to the community
A few men
must have a long view
must leave history to itself
to interpret their lives their repute
Someday
these defendants may be summoned
to the Rose Garden and decorated
but not today.

His protests soon involved his own church. He says, for example, that he had to oppose Cardinal Spellman, who "placed official approval/ on our military adventuring." He summarizes his opposition in the words "I had to say no to the church." His brother Philip expressed their view as having "lost confidence in the institutions of this country, including our own churches," which Daniel described in one poem ("The Wedding") as "gripping like locust shells the tegument of life."

Though a painful thorn in the side of the church, Daniel Berrigan was never excommunicated nor did he leave it. He has continued to play the part of a reformer within when possible, using his office of priest for a ministry of purification. Above all, he has continued to act from a deeply Christian base. In answer to the judge's question "Was your action at Catonsville a way of carrying out your religious beliefs?" he replied, "Of course, it was/May I say/if my religious belief is not accepted/as a substantial part of my action/then the action is eviscerated/

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of all meaning and I should be/committed for insanity." This intensely religious motivation as much as anything else unties all his writing, down to one of his most recent poems ("Tulips in the Prison Yard"), which ends

.....Against the whips
of ignorant furies, the slavish pieties of Judas priests
You stand, a first flicker in the brain's soil, a precursor
of judgment—
Dawn might be
Man may be
Or spelling it out in the hand's palm
of a blind mute;
God is fire
is live.

This *radical Christian* protest against war and its attendant evils for Berrigan and his friends rose logically from their understanding of what it means to follow Christ. Mary Moylan, one of the defendants said: "This is what it means to be a Christian/that you act on what you believe/this is what/Christ meant when He lived/We have not only to talk/but if we see something wrong/we have to be willing/to do something about it."

Berrigan believed that it was right to destroy property to save human life, that, in fact, the incident of Christ casting money changers out of the Temple, supported that view. In the words of Thomas Lewis, a Catonsville trial defendant, he believed

.....It is well documented
In Christianity
Civil disobedience was practiced
by the early Christians
The spirit of the New Testament deals
with a man's response to other men
and with a law that overrides
all laws The one law
is the primary law of love and justice
toward other men
As a Christian
I am obligated

to the primary law of brotherhood
Men have responsibilities not only
to their immediate family
but to the world.

Berrigan was impelled to his way of life especially by the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection. The belief that God was in human flesh, in Christ, the Messiah, profoundly moved Berrigan to value human life and see it as dignified and worthy. God-in-the-flesh was a miracle that makes it unthinkable to degrade or destroy human personality or life. To Berrigan the belief in the resurrection of Christ after his crucifixion and death was a triumph that assures the victory of goodness in humanity over evil. He puts these beliefs vividly and vigorously in these two stanzas from his poem "A Pittsburgh Beggar Reminds Me of the Dead of Hiroshima":

I believe in the Father almighty
and in Jesus Christ
his risen flesh, indistinguishable
from the permeating stench
that rises, spreads, drifts
on the prevailing island winds
when a people goes up, a
mockup of city
slapped together for a brief
~~sequence—lights, drone, target—~~
Flesh of Christ—
indistinguishable, compounded
yeast, seed, flowering
of flesh of man—
your healing starts here
with the tears the dead
were given no time for, the living
numbed, no heart for.

Berrigan sees that the pity which impels one to toss a coin into a beggar's cup as a soothing syrup for unimaginable horrors created by human beings, such as the bombing of Hiroshima, is a sham indeed. Real compassion is valuing human flesh, sanctified by the Incarnation, or at least: the healing of humanity by the tears of those who really care.

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Significantly, the several poems he has written about Christ and in the many allusions to Him, Berrigan stresses Christ's love of the poor. He says, for example, at the beginning of one poem:

The tragic beauty of the face of Christ
Shines in the face of man.

One of Berrigan's strongest expressions of this deeply Christian motivation is implicit in a poem he wrote on a trip to Hanoi to help secure the release of three American pilots who had been imprisoned there. On this mission he experienced American air raids first hand and wrote the following poem, which he says speaks for the "thousands of American and Vietnamese ghosts" created by the war. It is a picture of climbing down into an air raid shelter:

Imagine; three of them.

As though survival
were a rat's word
and a rat's death
waited there at the end

and I must have
in the century's boneyard
heft of flesh and bone in my arms

I picked up the littlest
a boy, his face
breaded with rice (his sister calmly feeding him
as we climbed down)

In my arms fathered
in a moment's grace, the messiah
of all my tears. I bore, reborn

a Hiroshima child from hell.

This poem conveys the sense of desolation, destruction, and degradation caused by seemingly interminable war. It also contains some sense of hope emerging from anguish over the bitter realities of the situation. This hope is made central by the Christian imagery in the last stanza, which is full of allusions to the incarnation of God in Christ: "fathered,"

which suggests God's love: "grace," also the love or favor of God manifested in Christ; "messiah," reference to One sent on a mission, especially of mercy; and "bore, rebore," the renewal of life and hope by God's love expressed to men through Christ.

For Berrigan this hope is related to reconciliation, also a concept integral to the Incarnation, for it is a part of Christian belief that through Christ human beings may become reconciled with God and with each other. In an introduction to *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* Berrigan explains the ultimate reason for their act of protest in terms of reconciliation:

We had not dismembered our brothers on a universal autopsy slab. And having no part in that murderous operation, perhaps we could remember man, perhaps we could surgically and lovingly put him together—according to the image of God, according to the law of life, by which the healer is healed in the very act of his art.

With that brief survey of the background and essential content of Berrigan's poetry of protest against war, it is well to focus more particularly on his style. It will be necessary to limit commentary mostly to poetry aside from his play, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, which used a kind of poetic prose, varying from lines of ordinary discourse to passages of eloquence and imaginative power. The analysis which follows is based mainly on those poems specifically related to his war protests, though the spirit of protest and the atmosphere created by the war pervade much of his work.

Many of Berrigan's poems move by free association of ideas and images. Their structure is based on psychological and imaginative "logic," with a wealth of allusions and echoes drawn from many sources—from the classics of Western literature, national events, friends' experiences, his own life. In the following lines from "False Gods, Real Men," some of this development by free association and suggestion may be seen.

Among the flag poles
Wrapped like Jansenist
conventicles
with rags

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at half mast
(alas for sexual
mortmain) the wooden poles
on high but
dry

Other parts of this poem help the reader to identify the scene as Berrigan's view of the flags flying over the courthouse where his trial is held as symbolizing a travesty of justice. The flags are "rags at half mast"; "wrapped like Jansenist conventicles" alludes to the holding of meetings by an unorthodox, outlawed sect of Puritanical Catholics and labels the trial as illegal. The "wooden poles," sticking up above the rags are "high but dry," that is, they seem to be waving in glory and triumph but are really symbols of lifelessness—based on the figure of sexual impotence. When he is at his best in this style Berrigan loads his lines with meaning, often securing significances on different levels, but sometimes the allusions are remote, the associations so hard to discover, or the lines so cryptic that the result is ambiguity and frustration for the reader.

In contrast to poems in this style, however, are many that move directly, straight-forwardly toward their goal. Such is the following, in which he describes the horrors of war for the multitudes of innocent civilians brutally injured or killed by highly sophisticated, mechanized bombing, so characteristic of the Vietnam war. In this poem he describes the materials used as evidence by the prosecution in the Catonsville trial:

THE BOXES OF PAPER ASH
the size of infant caskets
were rolled in on a dolly
heaped there like cordwood
or children after a usual
air strike on Hanoi.
I heard between the heartbeats
of Jesus and his hangman
the children's mouths mewling
for the breasts of murdered women
the blackened hands beating

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of radicalness that is appropriate and generally adequate to communicate artistically the ideas and emotions that seem ready to burst from him. In most respects his poetry both *is* and *means*: To use traditional terms, it forcefully combines form and matter, art and message in a protest that is uniquely his.

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Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest noted for radical opposition to American participation in the Vietnam War, has produced noteworthy poetry of social protest and personal faith. His poetry is radical in the original meaning of going to the root of things; it touches reality in a powerful manner. It is chiefly religious, the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ being central to his thought. These beliefs give human personality supreme worth and motivate social concern. His aim is reconciliation of persons with each other. His style is appropriately tense, concentrated, witty, paradoxical, and ironical.

Dreams, Machines, and the State — The War Poetry of Randall Jarrell

Robert KUNTZ

Randall Jarrell is often thought of as a war poet. But his war poems are never just about war itself. He is concerned with the role of the State both in and out of war. His early poems are concerned with many of the same themes as we find in his war poems. This essay concerns the development of three of these themes—dreams, machines, and the State.