

# In the Beginning was the Gift . . .

## A marginal note on *God without Being*

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### I

A gift implies a giving and a giver distinct from the gift. But what if the giver is *all* giving? What if the gift and the giver is one? What if the giving alone *names* the giver? But surely the giver must first *in some sense* exist before it can be understood to act as giver (*actio sequitur esse*, said the old manuals that now languish in the deepest stackrooms of our libraries). But what if the *esse* is essentially *agere, actio*?

This line of inquiry has surfaced for me once again in reading Jean-Luc Marion's book (as presented in the University of Chicago translation), resuming a meditation that had its first airing in a paper prepared for the 1990 conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain. The paper was entitled 'Celtic Creation Spirituality,' and it tried to identify the understanding of God and creation as shown in the *Carmina Gadelica* of Alexander Carmichael and the people of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the 19th century, and as it remained in my memory from my own boyhood in the South-West of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> I felt that the common faith of all these people could be summed up in the Johannine variant: 'In the beginning was the gift and the gift was with God and the gift was God'.<sup>2</sup> My reading of Jean-Luc Marion's brilliant and challenging book has pushed me towards recalling that icon of the creator that was/is at the centre of Celtic Christianity and also at the centre of Jean-Luc Marion's thinking. The combination of innocence and sophistication makes this 'meeting of minds' all the more vibrant.

The marginalised Celtic (or Gaelic) people of the *Carmina Gadelica* in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, and of the ancient folk-culture of South-West Ireland, knew nothing of philosophy in the mode of what Fernand van Steenberghen of Louvain used to call *philosophie science* nor of the questions posed within that world. But they were deeply imbued with that *philosophie sagesse* which one associates with Doctor Johnson in his day or G.K. Chesterton in our day: the highest truth sought after and experienced, assimilated by a kind of osmosis from a long tradition of gravity and goodness and of that discourse in which, Plato tells us, playfulness and seriousness go hand in hand. From this

traditional *sagesse* comes a phrase which every master or mistress of *philosophie science* should put above the door: *nee veeon suee gan lockt*, untranslatable in its sharpness and finesse but saying clearly enough that there is no wise man (or woman!) without a flaw. Not Heidegger, not Nietzsche, not Derrida, not Thomas Aquinas . . . not anybody. Let us then walk gently as we try to attain some vision of the God whose *being* we have dared to erase, but who still comes to us as gift and giver and giving.

## II

The nearest and most variously perfect and indigent icon of God is the human face, such faces as appear out of the mist and storms and the thundering waves of a wild island called the Great Blasket in the far South-West corner of Ireland, the face of Tomas O’Crohan writer of *The Islandman* and the face of Peg Sayers of *An Old Woman Remembers*, a trilogy if completed with Maurice O’Sullivan’s *Twenty years a-growing*, though here already the first evening shades of modern Ireland with its thousand damaged beauties is beginning to appear.<sup>3</sup> But these three books and these three faces are full of the gift and the reality of the God who is all giving, giving unto death, not only as Jesus Emmanuel but as the Father-Source suffering the invasions of the dark, whose help is ‘nearer than the door.’ But the Adversary, the destroyer, is never far away; creation is truly God’s creation but these people did not any more than the people of the *Carmina Gadelica* ever succumb to a facile optimism in relation to mankind and to nature, as a bare livelihood was wrested from hard soil and the pitiless sea, so that the God-imaging faces of men and women became Christed in the prayer-postures of Gethsemane and Calvary.

In all this there is a deeply lived, deeply traditional *philosophie sagesse* reaching back beyond Christianity, waiting on Christ in its own house of waiting. It is echoed in the *Carmina Gadelica* of the Scottish Highlands and Islands. They are all equally people of the gift and of the Lord of creation, *Ree na Nul*, who is every single day present in that giving that is constant, joyous, elemental yet always *crossed* by the Adversary.

## III

This note seems to have verged away from the main concern of *God without Being*. Certainly it does not claim to add the least footnote to the brilliant deployment of all the gifts of a great writer in the mode of *philosophie science*. But Jean-Luc Marion’s book is above all a vibrant book. It is first and last a prayer, a prayer to that personal ever-demanding presence beyond all abstractions, bringing gifts so special, so

precious that they cannot even be named — perhaps not even as gifts.

For the name is not part of the gift nor part of the giving. But the gift must be *received*; unless and until it is received the gift is not a gift nor is the giving truly a giving, truly fruitful in its destination. Thus there is the Trinity of the giver, the receiver and between the giver and the receiver (no less active than the giver), the giving which proceeds equally from the giver and the receiver.

It is here at the heart of the giving and receiving that prayer arises; it is the “flame of living” love of John of the Cross, the original mystery that issues into time from beyond time. It says ‘God be thanked’ *before* it concerns itself with God’s existence or being, for we are deep in the Dionysian darkness of unknowing where the fire in the heart becomes the light in the mind. But this fire can come only from the place of great tribulation, from the *peirasmós* that is faced and outfaced in the great prayer of Christians, a prayer reinforced, renewed in the terrors and despairs of the great Irish famine and the Scottish Clearances. There, in the smithies of tribulation, God dwells and only comes out of concealment in answer to that *Lamma Sabacthani* which Thérèse of Lisieux could pray only in what she called ‘the night of nothingness’ (*le nuit de néant*) when all the lights have gone out in a place beyond despair. Only there can the reality of God be encountered in its full dimensions. Only there can mortal man meet the living God, the only giver of life.

- 1 The *Carmina Gadelica* published by Oliver and Boyd (of Edinburgh) and later taken over by the Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, is a collection of hymns, invocations and prayers made by Alexander Carmichael in the later 19th century and published volume by volume between 1900 and 1960, in Gaelic with English translations. Various anthologies have been culled from Carmichael’s English translation (*The Sun Dances* etc) and now the full text of the English translation is available from Floris books of Edinburgh with a helpful introduction by John McInnes of the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University. A second, corrected, edition of the translation has now appeared.
- 2 *The Month*, November 1990. p. 418. See *The Mountain behind the Mountain* by N.D. O’Donoghue, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993.
- 3 All three books have been several times published in English translation, most recently as Oxford University Press paperbacks. *An t’Oileánach (The Islandman)* by Tomás Ó Criomthain (Anglicised somewhat inaccurately as O’Crohan) first appeared 1929, *Peig (An old woman remembers)* in 1936, and *Fiche Blián ag Fas (Twenty years a growing)* in 1933. All three books carry the breath of an ancient world, not only pre-Modernist but pre-Reformation (though attempts have been made to ‘Romanise’ them), but also pre-Renaissance and pre-Enlightenment. Also pre-metaphysical, for life was all too often ‘a long, long night of cold, struggling against the sea only praying from moment to moment for the help of God’ (*The Islandman* ch.25).