

## SUNFLOWERS AND GIANTS

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RIDDLES are out of fashion. They have sunk to an idle fourth form exercise. The classics, 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' or 'When is a door not a door?' hardly kindle enthusiasm. Even the more promising 'Why is a mouse when it spins?' with its answer 'The higher the fewer' cannot take one far. The Mad Hatter and Mr Salteena had one or two up their sleeve, but they were both in their own way rather questionable company, and nowadays riddles do not figure in polite society. Still less does one meet them in poetry. Yet this is strange, for they once flourished in our literature, rhyming riddles whose remnants survive in nursery jingles—'Long legs, crooked thighs, Little head and no eyes.' Every mind with a bent towards poetry has in it something that engenders riddles, and the recognition of these and the attempt to solve them are among a writer's most important tasks. The Sphinx in the mind propounds her dark saying and waits in her cave for the answer,

' . . . that Theban Monster that propos'd

Her riddle, and him, who solv'd it not, devour'd',  
showing that inability to answer may have serious consequences.

It is convenient to collect Milton, and Thebes, here, for they are part of my riddle (which I set, not officiously for you, but for myself). It was set me two years ago, one gusty Sunday afternoon in September on a farm in the Hudson Valley. I had been invited to spend the day there, whiling away the brief uneasy week before the opening of an academic year. Between showers we explored the big wooden barn, admired the packed zinnia beds against the white house and the apple trees, and skirted the edges of damp hillside fields. Along one of these stood an intermittent file of sunflowers, dead but waiting for the seeds to ripen. They stood very straight, high above my head, only the great blackened faces bent towards the earth, and suddenly my mind said 'Samson!'. There he stood, shorn of the flaming splendour

of strength and waiting now in a blind patience, 'with languish't head unpropt, As one past hope, abandon'd'.

Sunflowers and a blinded giant—it might have been just an image, and I tried to make a poem for it but it would not accommodate me. So then I knew it was a riddle and to be found out. It seemed to bear upon beauty, and all beauty if one writes poetry relates to poetry in one's mind; but beyond that I had no clue and from this point no leisure in which to consider it. I was teaching three courses that year, all new to me, and they absorbed all my attention. That, however, is no disadvantage when solving riddles, for clues appear in unlikely places, in the middle of doing the laundry, or when looking vaguely up at cloud formations after an exhausting day. This is part of a riddle's fascination; it becomes a kind of treasure hunt. All the same, I was not consciously concerned with beauty or any other abstract during those following weeks, but with my classes, principally with the twenty sophomores and juniors to whom I had to teach narrative writing. One cannot, I need hardly say, teach such a thing except indirectly. So, believing we might as well begin at the beginning, I set them for their first written work to do an imaginative account of the Creation, under any figure they chose.

The results astounded me: three-quarters of the class wrote in uniformity of rocket ships, interplanetary travel, electronic men from Mars, the whole spawn of science fiction and the comic strip. This was to me as dismaying as it was unexpected, and we settled down to a great argument which lasted us fruitfully almost all year. Why were rocket ships no good? I had to work that out myself, calling in rational argument to support instinct as one so often does. But my argument began with one of the class productions, for among the jejune supermen I had netted one real giant. He had made a huge bread pudding for his supper and gone to sleep while it was cooking, and the pudding had swollen right out of the oven and from the overflow of the giant's bread pudding the world was made. That one recognised at once as entirely authentic. But why? What do giants have that all the supermen put together do not?

Could the answer be beauty? The giant's creator would

have been surprised at it, yet there was a certain congruity there which delighted the mind while it laughed. Somewhere in the memory is knowledge of the sun who 'cometh forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber and rejoiceth as a giant to run his course', and in a sense the earth is the overflow of the sun-pudding. But one did not see it very clearly at the time, and we had a lot of subsequent disagreements, equally cheerful. There was trouble, I remember, over silver-haired old ladies whom I pronounced inadmissible, and later I surprised the class and myself by suddenly saying we were all forbidden to hate any character we were writing about. It was rather haphazard, but what began to emerge was the realisation that what I wanted, for my own writing and theirs, was primarily strength. And that meant form, and rhythm with the body's co-operation, and beauty and an openness to splendour, so that we found ourselves doing in class an exercise on *Antony and Cleopatra in Autumn* as a practice in magnificence and listening to Donne sermons read aloud. We tried also to discern false splendours from true, just as we had to discern (most necessary in America) false toughness and violence from true strength. But what is strength in writing, and how does it relate to beauty? (I am sorry to end each paragraph with a question, but we are still involved in a riddle.)

This was later in the year; by then I was teaching Blake to my freshmen in another course, and *Samson Agonistes* to my seniors in a third. 'Teaching' though is the wrong word. With literature as with narrative writing one cannot instruct; one can only offer objects for contemplation and see what happens in one's fellows and oneself. The narrative writers, and I with their help, had come gradually to see the necessity for directed passion, without which there was only sentimentality or destruction. Even if I had known to start with that this was so, I could not have spoken to a group of young Americans about pure passion, the leopards and lilies, directly. They are too unsure of themselves when they first meet you, and would have opted for the leopards only, raging and destroying, or for the lilies only, supposing these to be safer, as do so many contemporary religious artists who in depicting the saints omit the leopards altogether. In all my classes

now we found ourselves in a positive battalion of wild beasts, bright and fierce and striped, and it seemed to us, in our various ways of approach, that without these blazing and perilous things there could be no tenderness or sweetness either. No lion, no lamb, in fact—and the lion that lies down with the lamb does so by a kind of grace or divine enchantment, not by abdication of his proper ferocity. One finds Blake marvelling at it over the tiger, 'Did He that made the lamb make thee?' So too it is fitting that Smart in *Jubilate Agno* should rejoice in lions and tigers, 'For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger', and one might imagine that the term to Blake's Sunflower, the Angel Sunflower, might be the Cherub Buttercup which reflects so delectably its dot of yellow under a child's chin to prove whether it likes butter—one of those tiny significant mechanisms of childhood like speaking rhymes to ladybirds or telling hours on dandelion clocks. Fancy holding a sunflower under a tiger's chin to see if it liked the sun! And yet it is perhaps one reason for the delight given by the story of *Little Black Sambo* that it combines these two worlds, and the tigers prowling round the tree prowl so fast they turn into butter in the end.

It might well be among the jungles of sunflowers that the lions and tigers live, the giant green leaves splashed boldly against their tawny hides. Below, in a green darkness, would move their bright faces, barred and brindled or flocked with a dusty, honey-coloured mane; and above would move the sunflower faces, no less wild with their black honeycomb orb and the flaming corona like the sun at the moment of eclipse, turning perpetually to follow the heavenly body for which they are named. Here too there could be Samson, my giant, with his shag of golden hair and his height and fierceness, a match for lion or Philistine, 'Irresistible Samson, whom unarm'd/ No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand'. We might almost have reached beauty already, in a world like that of Douanier Rousseau, decorative and innocently fierce.

With Samson, however, comes another note, for a giant is neither great golden flower nor wild beast, but human. The note is slight at first, but one can hear it already in the

curious wavering and weariness of Blake's sunflower, 'weary of time', going on to the suspicion of Quennell's 'O most strange masker', and the fear in another contemporary poem, whose author I cannot recall, which speaks of a huge sunflower left alone in the universe and eating the whole of creation with its sullen fire. (It is not hard to imagine a man-eating sunflower.) Modern poems on lions and tigers are mostly laments for their caging. Samson's own lion, on which he made his own riddle, was already dead and swarming; only so could it be fulfilled that 'out of the strong came forth sweetness'. Last of all there is Samson himself as he finally appears, the great bent blackened sunflower head, the rotting lion, the blinded giant shorn of his strength, crying in so vehement a passion it breaks the very lines of the verse into a rhythm so urgent that the whole body tingles to it, the great irregular speeches and choruses of the *Agonistes* which I shall not chop piecemeal to quote. They are to be remembered whole.

Milton, our third and so far our last titanic poet—upon him was laid the terror of living analogy. English poetry in the preceding century could erect such figures for itself and Europe as Hamlet or the first great Faustus. Even in *Lear* it is only Lear's shadow, Gloucester, who is blinded, not the king himself, and strange as it may seem, madness is possibly for genius an easier dispensation. By the seventeenth century the poet is himself a giant whose eyes are out, and it is Samson who typifies him, genius in agony at impotence. 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'

There is no abating that anguish; and yet in what a company does this poet find himself! Homer they say was a blind mendicant; there is a figure brought in at the gate of Damascus, stripped of threatenings and slaughter and led by the hand; there is Tiresias the blind prophet, and, confronting him, another, passionate, royal, the Sphinx's answerer, blinded by his own hand and calling out 'O dark intolerable inescapable night/ That has no day', Oedipus the king to whom Miltonic Samson makes answer with one of the greatest of English lines, 'O dark dark dark amid the blaze of noon'.

Yet the last cry is not of torture, nor at first of consolation. It is of justice.

Out of the night of his long hopeless torment  
 Surely a just God's hand  
 Will raise him up again.

That is Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Shakespeare seems to catch only the note of retribution:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
 Make instruments to plague us,

he pronounces over Gloucester. But Puritanical as it is, it is not Milton's answer to Samson or himself:

Just are the ways of God,  
 And justifiable to men.

It is an echo of the *Paradise Lost* opening, yet without the preaching note that creeps in there; for here Milton has to find the answer to his own riddle, his own plight, or sink into 'swounings of despair/ And sense of heav'n's desertion'. He gives us the answer. It is at the terrible sword-point itself that God's justice is manifested, not in retribution—that has gone by—but in that unimaginable gift of consummate beauty and peace to which all tragedy draws after the blaze and tigerishness of power is humbled and spent,

' . . . no weakness, no contempt,

Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair'.

I begin slowly to see an answer to my riddle, yet it is more riddling than the original giant and sunflower: that the first gift of God to those who desire beauty (which is God under one of his attributes) is blindness, with the injunction of patience. What that second gift may be, God knows. The Resurrection?