



Theology and Literature (2) – Serge Liberman, *Voices from the Corner: A Response*

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Veronica Brady, a professor of English and member of the Loreto order (Australia), explores the theological significance of the work of Serge Liberman, author of *The Messiah in Acland Street* and other stories.

Symposium:

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by **Veronica Brady**

How do different religious traditions come to understand and respect one another, particularly traditions so closely and, from the Christian side at least, as fratricidally related as Judaism and Christianity? It seems to me as a Christian that the first step is to accept the fact that both worship the One High and Holy God, revealed not only in his dealings with his people but also in the Scriptures which tell of these dealings – though we Christians have added to these Scriptures and read them in ways the Jewish tradition cannot accept. But this brings us to the second step, the acknowledgement of the depths of the suspicion, often hatred – in the name of God! – that has nevertheless existed between us. How to move beyond this division?

In the paradoxical light and terrible darkness of the Holocaust this may well be a more urgent question for Christians than for Jewish people – for reasons too obvious to spell out. Clearly abstract theological discussion will not do, however. For one thing abstraction lies at the heart of the problem, to the extent not only that movements like Nazism represent the triumph of abstraction over humanity but also because, when we try to explain events it tends to filter out elements and options that do not fit into its rational framework – often the crucial ones if change is to come about. In the present case, for example, we tend to ignore the long history of suffering, humiliation and exclusion which is for Jewish people the other side of our triumphalist reading of history as the history of Christendom and the assumption that this is synonymous with "civilisation". In this way we define history in our own terms and put our purposes in charge of it.

By definition, of course, this points in the opposite direction to understanding and respect. It is not a position I would agree with; in fact it seems to me fundamentally atheistic, an aspect of that tendency within institutional Christianity – and I dare say in all religions – and the theology which supports it, to make a God to the image of our own desires; the tendency that the great Jewish thinker Karl Marx identified in the famous passage in his criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law* in

which he described religion as a "generalised theory of this world". It is this tendency which, Stanley Hopper argues, helps explain why "Christianity, in its historic forms, has progressively destroyed its own meanings through the fixation of its language brought about by its capitulation to a language not its own (Hopper & Miller, 1967: xix), the language, we have already suggested, of abstract thought.

The Scriptures on which we both rely remind us, however, that God speaks beyond human reason and speaks into experience in all its messy reality rather than abstract thought. Judaism has drawn on this understanding more closely than Christian theology, though the Christian mystical tradition has perhaps remained more faithful, refusing to privilege reason at the expense of worship and of the continuing search for an Other who/which exceeds thought and thus constitutes the measure of conceptual thought's limits and limitations. This search, I believe, lies at the heart of both of our traditions. That is why in the task we are engaged in Wittgenstein's proposition becomes crucial: "We do not need to know the meaning, we need to do the meaning". It is for that reason that, to come to them, Serge Liberman's stories have become so important for me.

What I find most powerful in them in the first place is their focus on experience, especially the experience of disbelief in, even of defiance of, God – an experience which has a long and splendid Biblical history, at least from the time of Job, but which Christian piety has tended to shrink from. This, I believe, is our loss since it underplays the tension between the divine and the human. As a contemporary Christian theologian, David Tracy, puts it, all talk about God needs to begin with and in our human experience, even if it also derives from the Divine event. But the two by definition exist in tension; the one always exceeds, baffles and often seems to contradict the other. Indeed this is, or, in my opinion, ought to be, at the heart of a Christian tradition which centres on the image of a crucified God; an idea perhaps more scandalous than any Jewish tradition entertains.

This excess and bafflement, however, means, as Tracy insists, that there must be a constant conversation between them with no holds barred; no surrender of our human integrity: the God in whom we believe is no bully; He respects the integrity of those who stand up for their beliefs, as the story of Job makes clear. It is this conversation which often becomes an argument, lopsided as it necessarily must be, which gives shape, form and development to our understanding of God. (Tracy, 1989). For me Liberman's stories are part of this conversation and what makes them particularly valuable is their energy. The human here is not meekly acquiescent. Like Job, Liberman's characters often reject God, but in the name of the promises he has made. In *The Promise*, for example, the narrator, Shimen, Holocaust survivor and "long-gone exile", who has returned to his former family home in Warsaw, recalls the last Passover meal they celebrated together in the midst of the Uprising, where for Christians, memory gives access to the saving power of God in Jesus, but for many Jewish people, in the century just past, it often, perhaps usually, speaks of its absence.

One of Liberman's other characters puts it this way: ""There are times ... when I would pay to any man a fortune ... if only he could tear out memory and let me sleep one, just one dreamless night through."" (p.117). This is the kind of memory which confronts Shimen as he stands in the room in which he celebrated that Passover with his family:

At my place and at the place to the left which had been Hana's (whom he was to marry), there lies our *Haggadot*, both open on the same page then as now, still marking the moment at which ... I had risen from my seat and with a passion I could no longer contain, declared "If this is truly a festival of freedom, then let us like our ancestors in Egypt again be free!" This having been followed by a volley of gunfire and a rumbling that made the flames of the candle on the table fairly leap, I had run outside, Hanna following me and saying, "If you're going to fight, I'm coming too". (p.19-20).

They do not see each other again. Shimen survives and eventually comes to Australia where he

prospers financially. But his loss of Hanna makes mockery of the prayer they prayed that night: "Let us sing a new song of thanks to God for our salvation and freedom" (p.22). His marriage having failed, he is left alone in this new land with his memories. "As for the Sabbath ... and Passover and the High Holy Days and so on ... The war, our war ... changed many things ... Such as the way a man looks at the world, at other men ... even at God" (p.23). The only certainty, the only truth left, as he tells his father's spirit as he stands where they celebrated the Passover, is the "appalling one: that your martyrdom, like all martyrdoms, was the price for our obeisance to a lie. And therefore all for nothing! And all a waste!" This lie is the belief "that there was someone, somewhere, Who saw, heard and cared, and Who, so seeing, hearing and caring, would be greatly moved to protect, deliver, redeem...", (p.24).

This must trouble a complacent faith which regards the word "God" as an absolute. But the experience which generates it, the experience not only of many of Liberman's characters but of Jewish people generally, leaves no room for complacency. But it seems to me that Christians need to take this experience more profoundly to heart since we are implicated in it, to the extent that it could be said that the anti-Semitism which culminated in the horror of the Holocaust was, and sometimes still is, justified in "religious" terms. This is surely a crucial challenge for us. As we have noted already, it is all too easy to make a God to our own image, and I suspect this is one of the dangers the belief in the Incarnation poses to Christians. But this is to ease the necessary tension between the Divine and the human, the scandal as it were of a God who gives us the tragic power of the freedom which is burden as well as gift and, in refusing to intervene, in a sense, limits His power over us. The Jewish tradition, I think, has been much more conscious of this scandal and what Levinas calls the "impossible requirement" it imposes on us, to connect loyalty to the world we live in with commitment to a reality no longer in this world – though Christians would probably amend this to "no longer of this world". What we have in common, however, is, or should be, the problem: I hope it will not seem offensive if I find a parallel to the memory of the Holocaust in the image of the crucified Holy One for Christians. In both, to use Elie Wiesel's magnificent phrase, "God and humankind full of terror look into each other's eyes".

The difference, however, is pointed out by J.B. Metz reflecting on Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the story of the Jew in the concentration camp witnessing the death of a child, his cry, "Where is God now?" and the answering voice, "Here He is - he hangs on the gallows". In Metz's view it is only a Jew who can speak in this way of

"a God on the gallows", not we Christians outside of Auschwitz who sent the Jew into such a situation of despair or at least left him in it. Here, for me, there is no sense in which we could testify without the Jew. Without the Jews in the hell of Auschwitz, we are condemned to non-sense, to God-lessness. (Metz, 1995:43)

Greek philosophy may equate truth with intelligible presence. But Biblical revelation, to say nothing of human experience in history, is aware that this will not do; that we are called to go further, to confront the sheer Otherness of divinity and leave behind what Veling calls a "worn out theology of transcendence that can be stepped over like a fence." (Veling, 1999: 276).

Liberman's stories make clear, however, that the turn to the Otherness of God does not detract from, but rather intensifies a feeling for our humanity. As Levinas says, it is on earth that the spirit's adventure unfolds. It unfolds in many different ways, as many ways, perhaps, as there are human beings. So it is not possible to press human behaviour into one simple conformist mould. True to tradition, Liberman's stories are full of cranks and eccentrics like Gotteswill in *Messiah In Acland Street*. As one of his characters reflects:

"A heretic is a heretic only because he has not studied enough [he tells the narrator]. Study, however, is but the stuff of the mind. But love of humanity, that comes from the heart, from the soul." (p.60).

This is surely an important reminder for Christianity which has so often been associated with conformity and respectability.

Liberman's imagination, however, rejoices particularly in places like St Kilda,

home to what the more sober locals dubbed crazies, loonies, dropouts and oddballs. It was for this reason that I loved the area so; they gave colour, flavour and variety to turf that had, as far back as adolescence, been my home. Just that morning I had been engaged in fleshing out one such local, a jeweller, whose life's work it was to rewrite the Bible with the elimination of all reference to God (p.61).

The source of this delight in the eccentric derives no doubt from the understanding that ultimately it is not man but the mysterious God who is in charge and that the final responsibility lies with him. Though we may be responsible for others, ultimately we need to relax and learn to take what comes. This makes for the tragic sense we have been exploring. But it can also generate a delight in the range, variety and oddity of the human comedy and the quirky confidence expressed, for example, by Gotteswill when, predicting the disasters he sees as the prelude to the coming of the Messiah, he chides his interlocutor for lack of faith:

You are a modern and have explanations for everything. But however you wish to explain the workings behind what you saw, the reality is that it happened. It happened, while what you saw was only the part that, telling of your ancestors, might have meant most to you. (p.67).

The individual's task is to live out the life given him or her, not to explain it: "'If you will believe nothing else ... at least believe this: you have been chosen'" (p.69), that is, to live as he is fated to live.

There is no justice in this as we define justice: "No man, whatever he does, comes off lightly." (p.256). But the task is to survive. So in *The Promise* Shimen hears his father's spirit telling him from the dead: "To us, the highest value has always been the clinging to life, the greatest grief is its loss." (p.25). This, *The Messiah In Acland Street* implies, is the justification for Liberman's stories:

Many theories today are powder-puff tomorrow [Gotteswill tells the writer in this story]. What is constant in your work, though ... is how man stands always at the centre of your world, how it is in man that you place your highest trust, and how it is his sanctity that you prize, and his genius, his innate goodness, his diversity and his great potential In this ... you show more religion than a host of others who pray and beat their breasts before God but have no feeling for others, whom they hurt, cheat, malign and even kill (p.59-60).

Taking God to task for his treatment of his people is part of this. Even though "to you, none of this squares with God's all-knowingness, mercy and compassion", Gotteswill goes on, "all the same, in championing, as you do, his finest creation on earth, yours is the language of the most pious faith" (p.60).

That, I suspect, is why the Holocaust is so central to Liberman's work, the source of both faith and despair. The reasons for the despair are obvious and have been discussed already. But why should it engender a certain kind of faith? Perhaps it is because in the first place the disaster it represents mocks the confidence in reason and technology which led many Jews in the eighteenth century to throw in their lot with Enlightenment culture and reject the God of their ancestors. Stories like *Keinfreund's Golem* – the name is significant: putting his trust in his Golem, he has no friends, human or divine -- and *For the Good of All Mankind*, each in its own way, point to "the hell to pay" (p.181) when the mind owns no allegiance to anything outside itself. Even more clearly perhaps *The Luck of the Draw* draws the distinction between trust in a larger logic of things, a logic mysterious, tragic but ultimately divine, and trust in mere impersonal luck, in the history whose

logic is expressed in the couplet written on the back of the cheque Leo and Nora receive from the anonymous Chairman who awards them their "prize":

Fortune and misfortune by the same laws are made,

Life and death by the same rules are played.

What this leads to is clear in the image with which the story concludes; "the hissing of the pipes and the spreading of a thin mist from the vents, the astringent, bitter, cloying smell of gas." (p.146)

Its opposite is the kind of faith expressed by Shimen's father in *The Promise*, strong enough to be sustained even in the face of the Holocaust: "'A Jew may repudiate God but he will never himself be repudiated'" because, he believes, the bond between them is unbreakable: God has given his promise and that is irrevocable, whatever human beings may do. In this sense, therefore, "'God needs man as much as man needs him'". Not that this makes existence any more intelligible or less painful. What it does mean, however, is an unshakeable faith in human purpose and endurance: "'Until God's ultimate purpose becomes known, it is for men to create their own purposes. And for that, ... even now it may not be too late'". (p.26).

This represents a special kind of humanism, different from the identification of human history with Divine Providence characteristic of triumphalist Christian theology. But it is a belief which can bear the burden of the apparent atheism Shimen expresses. His experience has persuaded him

that there is none above, nor below, nor in the wings who directs dramas, comedies and farces down here. There is only us, we as ourselves, mortal men all, some of us wise, others less so, some *menschlich*, others brutish, some choosing well, others badly, some reaping justly what they have sown, and others shredded and dismembered, not by their own choosing but by the designs that others, with names like Amalek, Haman and Hitler, have cut for them. (p.26)

This confidence in humanity, then, can also be seen as the other side of the divine promise.

This confidence perhaps is why it is still possible to joke in the midst of disaster. So in *The Scar*, for instance, the Komiker Troupe perform their comedy routines outside the gates of a former concentration camp, now a transit camp for the survivors, and in front of the marble tablet which reads

Remember

The Six Million

In Sanctification of the Name.

As one of the survivors explains, however, this is a "'way of saying to the world," You wanted to crush us? Then look! See how we still go on!'" To which another adds:

Behind is behind, and ahead is ahead. We have lost many, we have lost much. From here on it is forward, to relearn to live, to work, and to enjoy as before. (p.100).

If a robust faith needs to listen to the objections to it raised by the history of our times, then Christians have much to learn from this confidence, above all, perhaps, from its honesty. Instead of an exaggerated belief in human perfectability it offers a realistic awareness of the dangerous possibilities of our freedom and the extent of our complicity with evil. But for this reason it also calls us to acknowledge in sorrowful love that, as Levinas reminds us, we are all held hostage by the face of the other or, in the words of Dostoevsky, that "each of us is guilty before everyone and for everyone, and I more than the others" – an insight, incidentally, which makes mockery of our Prime Minister's refusal to apologise to indigenous Australians and his rejection of what he calls "the Black Armband school of history", revealing in fact the essential atheism of this position.

As the Prime Minister's hesitation suggests, however, this sense of the paradoxical nature of human freedom also makes history much more complex, ambiguous and taxing. In contrast with the triumphalist position which sees history from the point of view of the "winners" as a story of "progress", the awareness of its underside, of the story of the victims of "progress", reminds us that, as Metz puts it, "to live ... truly [means] always to be at risk" (Metz, 1980: 96), living as we do in "a darkly speckled universe, enclosed in the process of history and in an evolving universe." (Metz, 1980: 6). In this view, God, the Creator beyond our understanding and control, is not just a comforting word but also a challenging one, abrasive even, posing more questions than answers. Indeed, to quote Metz again, the best short definition of "God" may well be "interruption", since his presence represents an invitation, an appellative and interpretive presence which shatters our complacencies. (Metz, 1980 :151).

That is why it is not only for Jewish people that

what was dismembered needs to be remembered ... [and] requests the gathering together of forgotten and denied fragments from dreams, memories, hints ... [which ask] us to bear witness to the shattered narratives of survivors" (Malpede, 1999: 518).

Christians too need to share in this re-rememberment, to place ourselves not only before those whose lives were so terribly dis-membered but also before a God who interrupts our complacencies by revealing that he, too, suffers with and in their presence. It is at least arguable that this may be the only way, in the midst of what Levinas has called "the magnificent funeral celebrations held in honour of a dead God" that we can keep alive today the memory of the paradoxical God of Biblical revelation.

But there is joy and tenderness in Liberman's stories also. Perhaps because of his deep sense of the "pain of things" he cherishes those wounded by life, like Marita in *St Kilda Madonna*, for instance. If God is "much more profligate with afflictions than with bounties" (p.58), then the afflicted, "the widow, the stranger and the beggar", may be specially close to him. Indeed since Jewish belief is that the presence of God also represents a distance from him, people like Marita are witness to this in a special way.

She is a shabby prostitute who replies to the advertisement of an artist who is looking for a model for a painting he is working on for a competition for a painting of motherhood. He chooses her not for her beauty but rather for the pain he senses in her, her "troubledness" and her stumbling confession, "I suppose I want to know that ... that I can still be more than I am." For him what is holy does not necessarily need to be perfect: he scorns 'religious beliefs and icons as the stuff of delusions, mass inculcation, superstitions and myths", questioning

where any edict had ever been carved in marble dictating that any Holy Mother and Child had to be well-nourished, rounded-out, flaxen-haired Florentine cherubs in ripe and rosy bloom. (p.8).

What draws him is her vulnerable humanity:

the concurrent perfect melding yet distinctive separateness of two presences, a mother's mute adoration and protectiveness of a reciprocally trusting child, the experiences she has known and the expectations of blessings conceivably in store, and, with all these, the shifts in her own life shuttling from one day to the next between bewilderment, fear and fragility, and between grit, resilience, defiance and hope! (p.4).

In this vision of wounded holiness, of her "entrapment and the divinity I had to raise her towards" (p.12) we catch a glimpse of the Shekhinah, the gentle loving presence of God as daughter, queen, bride and love, figured in Jewish prayer and in the Sabbath liturgy. There is also a moving account of a young man's feeling at his Bar Mitzvah in *To Be A Man* which expresses the continuing strength and warmth of a community of faith which has survived so many disasters and feels itself in exile in a new land which often seems "a wilderness void of God." (p.23) The faith and the hope, however, remain in the words of Joseph Zylberman, "a fellow exile sharing roof, potatoes and icy winters in our past Siberian kolkhoz days", addressed to the young man: 'That you survived at all is a miracle; that you reached manhood is a blessing your parents hoped for but dared not utter too loudly ... And so, how does it feel to be grown up?' (p.219). God may keep his distance. But it is the task of his people to keep on trying to keep the way open for his coming - and this, stories like *Pebbles for a Father* suggest, is perhaps the main reason for Liberman's writing.

It is also the reason why they are important for Christians also, reminding us of the times in which we live, times in which we should know, more perhaps than any other generation, what loss means, even if, for many of us, it is not physical loss but a loss of purpose and meaning. That so many of us refuse to explore or even accept this loss makes the work of writers like Liberman important for all of us, reminding us of those to whom the book is dedicated:

Those nearby whose voices were not

sufficiently listened to

while others more distant,

though clamouring too,

gained the greater attention.

This is also to remind us of the crucial task for any human being, to connect the world we inhabit with a reality not of this world but which remains our hope and promise.

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