Dan Berrigan's Lyrical Memoir

Patricia Schnapp

As I walk patiently through life
poems follow close[1]

The legendary Dan Berrigan SJ is widely known for his passionate commitment to resisting war and the machinery of war. Millions of Americans above a certain age would identify him—though perhaps in different words—as a peace activist. He is also, however, an inspired educator, a prolific writer, and, above all, a superb poet. Happily, he has continued to write poetry into his elder years. And, while he published a lively autobiography, *To Dwell in Peace*, over twenty years ago, he has also given us a parallel record of his remarkable life—a lyrical memoir, of sorts—through the poetry that has sprung from him in all seasons.

Not surprisingly, his early poetry reflects his great admiration for the fellow Jesuit Berrigan calls the 'angel of poetry'. In a tribute titled 'Homage to Gerard Manley Hopkins', Berrigan captures much of Hopkins' imagery in the lines:

The being you saw,
a windhovering bird,
a savior set free –
chevalier, dauphin
Christ our Lord –

death downed, like a moon
when sun makes day.

What you took seriously...
stars, springtime,
a candle indoors,
kingfishers,
dragonflies,
all beseeching
'O speak for us!' – you laid on each
the strange searching stigma of imagination.[2]

Yet, despite similarities between Berrigan's early poetry and that of his admired predecessor, there's a striking difference. We find out little about Hopkins from his stanzas. To a rare degree, however, the poetry of Berrigan echoes the trajectory of his life, migrating from youthful lyricism to verses pulsing with protests of war and resistance to the forces of death. Consider these lines:

Supersonic time
that noses the ether
like a hell hound
on mercy and bombing missions
bore me here
dropped me like a dud

I sit in the town stocks
for ten thousand years
a judge's or butcher's scrawl
GUILTY around my neck.

On a park bench in Japan
a man's shadow sits
after the bomb's wink
ten thousand years[3]

Berrigan is writing about a prison conviction he received—but also tying his 'crime' to the bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in World War II. Though never losing their biblical and religious roots, then, over the years Berrigan's poems increasingly reflected his political and social engagement. Acts of civil disobedience have punctuated Berrigan's life, with their roots in the call of Vatican II to engage in the issues of our time. Berrigan was especially influenced after the Council by theologian Karl Rahner[4] and convinced of the Church's necessary involvement in the world and its needs. His resistance to the draft during the Vietnam War, and later to the arms race, resulted so often in arrests and prison sentences that Berrigan was once dubbed a 'holy outlaw'.[5] And, while not everyone has applauded all his actions, none can deny his critical role as a consciousness-raising prophet critiquing the country's growing militarism. Many consider him an 'apostle of peace', the title of a collection of essays honoring Berrigan on his seventy-fifth birthday.

Berrigan's social conscience was awakened, however, long before the influential documents of Vatican II were written. He was a young Jesuit when he read, in 1945, about the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. It became for him the 'trumpet of doom', the watershed event in his consciousness. A book by Ronald Knox, *God and the Atom*, confirmed his sense that the U.S. had had a more humane alternative—dropping the bomb on some uninhabited Pacific island as a visible show of force, an alternative that might have spared the lives of hundreds of thousands.[6] This crucial dropping of an atomic bomb on an inhabited city arises in many of his poems thereafter, as in 'A Pittsburgh Beggar Reminds Me of the Dead of Hiroshima':

> I stood and shook like ague –
> Hiroshima, Nagasaki –
> the ungentle names of my memory's youth,
> the blue remembered hills
> tipping like hell's buckets all their
> hot afterbirth on me.[7]

Many conversations, much prayer, and much reflection in the coming years convinced him that he was in the minority in his moral revulsion at U.S. action in Hiroshima, which he thought signaled the 'normalizing of mass murder'.[8] Violence seemed to be built into the genetic code, he believed, and some rationale for the next war would always be found—and blessed by the Church. It was *nonviolence* that required 'discipline and instruction, and was under perennial assault'.[9] Nuclear weapons had become, he believed, our new idols.

Berrigan first found his voice and authority teaching in the classroom at

Brooklyn Preparatory School between 1954-57.[10] From his earliest years, he had been writing poetry, though not the conventional rimed poetry his father had dabbled in and often read to the family. Instead, Berrigan's early work was influenced, perhaps inevitably, not just by Hopkins, but by Frost, Pound, and Eliot,[11] major poetic voices of the time. It reflected always, however, his immersion in the Scriptures and the lives of the saints. Soon, at the urging of a young editor familiar with his work, he published his first book of poetry, *Time Without Number*. It won the prestigious Lamont Poetry Award in 1957 and was also nominated for the National Book Award.[12] Some fifty books of prose and poetry would follow.

His early work, not surprisingly, reflected with lyrical brilliance his religious imagination, and often was a response to the natural world and its rhythms. So we find such phrases as 'night sits kenneled in me',[13] or 'the rose is its own credential',[14] or we read of stars 'blossoming momentarily in hedges'.[15] So, in a rhapsodic psalm like 'I Am Renewed', he acknowledges his joy in and reliance on Christ in radiant lines:

> My hollow breast takes heart at hearing Him
> sing like a star above its broken roof.
>
> My feet clear gardens in the greying snow:
> my winters die for mention of His name.[16]

This early poetry in *Time Without Number* is as yet without the political content that will come. The exquisite poem 'Exaltavit Humiles', in fact, is markedly indebted to the poetry of Hopkins and transcends the unsettling realities forever blurted in the headlines:

> All things despised, capricious, cranky,
> have an hour of morning. Sumac jostled
> by shouldering oaks to the forest edge – how it burns
> clearer than they. And cobweb, no more than an afterthought,
> trembles at dawn like new-hammered silver.[17]

Over the next several years, Berrigan's chaplaincy of the Young Catholic Workers, as well as his friendship with Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton,[18] the ongoing influence of his beloved brother Philip, and the pacifism of Dr King and Gandhi, collectively helped to develop and shape his social conscience.[19] He became increasingly attuned to the social dimension of Christ's teaching, and this was reflected in his writing. In the late fifties, Berrigan joined the theology department of LeMoyne College in Syracuse. Along with his teaching, he led retreats, lectured, and offered poetry readings. He began

a community of socially involved students, whom he mentored and with whom he lived and provided liturgy.[20]

Then came the turbulent and heady sixties. The heyday of the Civil Rights movement converged with the summoning of Vatican II, with its clarion call to *aggiornamento*, or 'updating' the Church in various ways, and finally to the publication of its rich and challenging documents. Each of these historic milestones, which addressed issues in the political and social as well as the religious realm, also made their indelible mark on Berrigan. He and his brother Philip marched in Selma.[21] His 'A Civil Rights Demonstration' captures his doubt of this action's efficacy:

> That morning I weighed
> like a Dickens brat
> no expectations. Would I march
> capped in bells like Christ's fool or Christ?[22]

At the same time, the war drums were sounding over military action in Vietnam. The issues of justice and war, violence and pacifism, and 'reading the signs of the times' could not be ignored.

A sabbatical in 1964 allowed Berrigan to travel to Eastern Europe, where he met with groups in more danger of Cold War weaponry than he was.[23] This increased his sense of the imminent danger of the U.S.'s nuclear arsenal. Arriving home, he was assigned to help edit the *Jesuit Mission* magazine,[24] but an event intended originally as a punitive exile by Berrigan's superior ended up, ironically, radicalizing him and strengthening his resolve to be involved in 'the peace that does justice'.[25]

A young Catholic Worker had immolated himself before the United Nations building in protest at the Vietnam War, and Berrigan was forbidden to issue a public statement about it. While he complied with his superior's command, he did agree to speak at the memorial service held at the Catholic Worker House, and word went abroad. He was peremptorily sent to Latin America for an indeterminate length of time with a series of restrictive stipulations.[26] The experience opened Berrigan's eyes to a Church in which many of the hierarchy lived in privilege, wielding great power, while a majority of the people eked out their existence in severe poverty. He witnessed the impact on the poor of giant U.S. companies that, in collusion with greedy government officials, dominated land policies that displaced many. He saw that those working for the rights of the poor—even priests and nuns—were labeled 'communists' and hunted down. Berrigan was heartened, however, by the vibrancy of many biblically alert Christians living with the poor and forming lively base communities, and he returned to the States energized and enlightened.[27]

In the sixties, as Vietnam heated up, more of Berrigan's poetry addressed the conflict. Of it, he later said that the 'war was to turn my life around'.[28]

> If I were Pablo Neruda
> or William Blake
> I could bear, and be eloquent
>
> an American name in the world
> where men perish
> in our two murderous hands...[29]

Invited in 1967 to become a staff member of United Religious Work at Cornell University and be responsible for campus activism, Berrigan soon found himself immersed in an explosion of anti-war activism, including vigils, sit-ins, picketing, political drama, and participation with students in a national rally at the Pentagon to protest the war.[30] He also made a brief visit to Hanoi to help repatriate three American pilots being released. While there, he experienced the terror of hearing American bombers overhead. He became increasingly committed, along with his brother Philip, to pacifism and war resistance.[31] Soon after, at the initiative of Philip, Berrigan participated in burning draft records in Catonsville, Maryland, an act of civil disobedience that marked a turning point, leading to a number of arrests and incarcerations.[32] From this experience came his play *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, a powerful indictment of the seemingly endless war:

> So I went to Catonsville
> and burned some papers because
> the burning of children
> is inhuman and unbearable...
> I knew at length
> I could not announce the gospel
> from a pedestal
> I must act as a Christian
> sharing the risks and burdens and anguish
> of those whose lives were placed
> in the breach by us...[33]

Berrigan had begun a correspondence with Thomas Merton around the time of Merton's ordination in 1947.[34] It became a friendship Berrigan describes as 'precious',[35] and it included Berrigan's participation in an ecumenical retreat Merton gave at Gethsemani.[36] In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton speaks of Berrigan as 'an altogether winning and warm intelligence and

a man who, I think, has more than anyone I have ever met the true wide-ranging and simple heart of the Jesuit: zeal, compassion, understanding, and uninhibited religious freedom'.[37] Merton continues, 'Just seeing him restores one's hope in the Church'.[38]

Over the next several years, the two engaged in many discussions about not just spirituality, but social engagement in the issues of the day. Their walks and praying together and sharing of liturgy intensified Berrigan's sense of the needed connection between contemplation and action.[39]

The friendship continued till Merton's death in 1968, though the latter temporarily distanced himself from Berrigan after the Catonsville action, seeing the burning of draft files as too close to an act of violence.[40] Many shared his repugnance for this form of protest. Berrigan, however, didn't waver. In a statement during the trial, he said simply: 'Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise'.[41] Later, Merton changed his mind about their actions and praised both of the Berrigans for their integrity in opposing 'a futile and immoral war'[42] to the point of being jailed for protest.[43] Dan's fellow poet Denise Levertov also praised his commitment to live his beliefs, calling Berrigan the 'bold hero' of the nonviolent movement.[44]

Catonsville, and the prison sentence that followed, proved to be another powerful epiphany in Berrigan's life. He later said, with typical passion, that Catonsville had lit up the dark places of the heart 'where courage and risk and hope were awaiting a signal, a dawn'.[45] He compared this new fire to a new Pentecost, flaring up in those who were despairing that nothing could be done. 'Indeed', he wrote, 'something could be done, and was. And would be'.[46]

And yet, there was discouragement. Berrigan seems to be struggling, as Dr King was when he wrote 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', with the indifference and inaction of many—especially Catholics—who, it seemed, should have been on the front lines themselves for these life and death issues, these very moral issues. In the poem of 'False Gods, Real Men', after he and his brother Philip had been arrested and jailed several times, he wrote:

What it all means is – what remains.
My brother and I stand like the fences
of abandoned farms, changed times
too loosely webbed against
deicide homicide
A really powerful blow,
would bring us down like scarecrows.
Nature, knowing this, finding us mildly useful

indulging also
her backhanded love of freakishness
allows us to stand.[47]

And, with characteristic wit, he concluded his poem 'The Trouble with Our State' with these lines:

the trouble with our state
with our state of soul...
was
Civil
obedience.[48]

During these difficult years, Berrigan was strengthened in his work for peace by participating in the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation in Paris and by his friendship with Thich Nhat Hanh, a friendship that continues.[49]

Berrigan's resistance to the machinery of death climaxed dramatically in 1980, during a great national debate about the arms race. Taking as their biblical mantra 'Swords into Plowshares', eight persons, including Dan and Phil Berrigan, entered the General Electric nuclear factory in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. There, they damaged two unarmed warheads and threw their own blood on them.[50] This action electrified the nation and led, of course, to eventual convictions and sentencing. Berrigan was later to write that, while 'the story is told in detail elsewhere', he wanted to stress the 'spiritual preparation' the Plowshares group had agreed on, including months of reflection and prayer and discussion—ultimately, a crucial process.[51]

In poetry ever more elliptical but always dashed with his innate lyricism, Berrigan wrote—and wrote.

The iron cells –
row on row of rose trellised
mansions, bridal chambers!

Curses, vans, keys, guards – behold
the imperial lions of our vast acres!

And when hammers come down
and our years are tossed to four winds –

why flowers blind the eye, the saints
pelt us with flowers![52]

A rich compilation of Berrigan's work, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–1997,* was published in 1998. It was edited by Berrigan's friend and fellow Jesuit, John Dear. In its introduction, Ross Labrie observes that, although Henry Thoreau didn't think he could both live his life and utter it, Daniel Berrigan has managed, 'to a remarkable extent', to do both.[53] The poem 'Tulips in the Prison Yard', for instance, intertwines Berrigan's contemplative love of the beautiful with his chronicling of ugly social realities. Addressing the tulips, he writes:

> Yeats, Wordsworth would look once
> breathe deeply, sharpen their quills,
> with a flourish pluck you from time.
> But.
> You are jailhouse blooms, you wear bravery with a difference.
> You are born here will die here;
> Making you, by excess of suffering
> And transfiguration of suffering, ours.[54]

Berrigan continues in the poem to ask if prisoners who pass by and see the tulips are reminded of their families, these prisoners who 'pass and pass; shades of men, pre-men,/khaki ghosts'.[55] And he ends the poem by thanking the tulips, which stand against 'the whips/of ignorant furies'.[56] For, he concludes,

> Dawn may be, man may be
> or
> spelling it out in the hand's palm
> of a blind mute
>
> *God is fire, is love.*[57]

Here, the thrill of seeing these vibrant blooms conflates with his compassion for his fellow inmates, and the tulips finally are symbols of God present among them, God in whom they can trust that their present misery is not the final chapter.

Elizabeth Bartelme, editor and friend of Berrigan, has been among many who have noted that Berrigan's poetic voice, ranging from 'lyrical to apocalyptic',[58] encompasses both his absorption with the beauty of the world and his revulsion at the horrors some people have done to others in it.[59] It is this vast range in tone that, in part, gives Berrigan's work its singularity and distinction. For Berrigan's poetry echoes his life. The young, idealistic priest immersed himself in a culture increasingly driven by the false god of militarism, and he committed himself to illumining its idolatry and redirecting it to the gospel of Jesus, a gospel of peace. And from this priest has sprung poetry that was also his prayer and his diary, a record of turbulent times and as yet unvanquished idols.

One tiptoes into Berrigan's poetry the way one tiptoes into the Gospels—prepared to be either delighted and comforted or disturbed and challenged. What one *can* expect, however, is to be lifted up, like Dorothy, far above Kansas, into the swirling realm of Berrigan's passionate, kaleidoscopic, peace-seeking heart.

Notes

1. Daniel Berrigan, 'This book', *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957-97,* ed. John Dear (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), p.417.
2. 'Homage to Gerard Manley Hopkins', ibid., pp.319–20.
3. 'Guilty', ibid., p.123.
4. Ross Labrie, Introduction, ibid., p.xix.
5. Daniel Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p.252. 'Holy Outlaw' is the title of a documentary by Lee Lockwood filmed in 1970.
6. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, p.252.
7. 'A Pittsburgh Beggar Reminds Me of the Dead of Hiroshima', *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.62.
8. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, p.108.
9. ibid., p.109.
10. ibid., p.138.
11. ibid., p.96.
12. Introduction, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.xxii.
13. 'Each Day Writes', ibid., p.3.
14. 'Credentials', ibid., p.3.
15. 'Stars Almost Escape Us', ibid., p.4.
16. ibid., p.5.
17. ibid., p.9.
18. Introduction, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.xx.
19. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, p.144.
20. ibid., pp.145–50.
21. John Dear, 'An Introduction, of Sorts', *Apostle of Peace: Essays in Honor of Daniel Berrigan*, ed. John Dear (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p.5.
22. 'A Civil Rights Demonstration', *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.102.
23. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, p.156.
24. ibid., p.151.
25. Introduction, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, pp.xxv–xxvi.

26. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, pp.179–82.
27. ibid., p.184.
28. ibid., p.166.
29. Daniel Berrigan and Adrianna Amari, 'My Name', *Prayer for the Morning Headlines: On the Sanctity of Life and Death* (Baltimore: Apprentice House, 2007), p.94.
30. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, pp.204-07.
31. ibid., pp.211-14.
32. ibid., pp.216-40.
33. Daniel Berrigan, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p.92.
34. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, p.107.
35. Phone interview, March 12, 2011.
36. Introduction, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.xx.
37. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1965), p.229.
38. ibid.
39. Introduction, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.xxi.
40. ibid.
41. *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, p.92.
42. Introduction, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.xxi.
43. ibid.
44. 'Living What You Believe', *Apostle of Peace*, p.103.
45. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, p.221.
46. ibid.
47. *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.91.
48. 'The Trouble with our State', ibid., p.239.
49. 'Walking with Father Dan', *Apostle of Peace*, p.99.
50. *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, p.290.
51. ibid., p.291.
52. 'Swords into Plowshares', *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.359.
53. Introduction, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957–97*, p.xxx.
54. ibid., p.149.
55. ibid.
56. ibid.
57. ibid., p.150.
58. 'A Poet for Difficult Times', *Apostle of Peace*, p.108.
59. ibid.

Patricia Schnapp RSM is an Associate Professor in literature and composition at Siena Heights University in Adrian, Michigan.