

VI “Sweeter than Honey”

In Racine’s tragedy of *Athalie* the chorus of Jewish girls sing an ode about the original giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, which has the remarkable refrain *ô charmante loi* (Act I, scene iv). Of course it will not do—it will border on the comic—to translate this “oh charming Law”. *Charming* in English has come to be a tepid and even patronising word; we use it of a pretty cottage, of a book that is something less than great or a woman who is something less than beautiful. How we should translate *charmante* I don’t know; “enchanting?”—“delightful?”—“beautiful?” None of them quite fits. What is, however, certain is that Racine (a mighty poet and steeped in the Bible) is here coming nearer than any modern writer I know to a feeling very characteristic of certain Psalms. And it is a feeling which I at first found utterly bewildering.

“More to be desired are they than gold, yea than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (19, 10). One can well understand this being said of God’s mercies, God’s visitations, His attributes. But what the poet is actually talking about is God’s law, His commands; His “rulings” as Dr. Moffatt well translates in verse 9 (for “judgements” here plainly means decisions about conduct).⁵⁵ What is being compared to gold and honey is those “statutes” (in the Latin version “decrees”) which, we are told, “rejoice the heart” (8). For the whole poem is about the Law, not about “judgement” in the sense to which Chapter I was devoted.

This was to me at first very mysterious. “Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery”—I can understand that a man can, and must, respect these “statutes”, and try to obey them, and assent to them in his heart. But it is very hard to find how they could be, so to speak, delicious, how they exhilarate. If this is difficult at any

time, it is doubly so when obedience to either is opposed to some strong, and perhaps *in itself* innocent, desire. A man held back by his unfortunate previous marriage to some lunatic or criminal who never dies from some woman whom he faithfully loves, or a hungry man left alone, without money, in a shop filled with the smell and sight of new bread, roasting coffee, or fresh strawberries—can these find the prohibition of adultery or of theft at all like honey? They may obey, they may still respect the “statute”. But surely it could be more aptly compared to the dentist’s forceps or the front line than to anything enjoyable and sweet.

A fine Christian and a great scholar to whom I once put this question said he thought that the poets were referring to the satisfaction men felt in knowing they had obeyed the Law; in other words, to the “pleasures of a good conscience”. They would, on his view, be meaning something very ⁵⁶like what Wordsworth meant when he said we know nothing more beautiful than the “smile” on Duty’s face—her smile when her orders have been carried out. It is rash for me to differ from such a man, and his view certainly makes excellent sense. The difficulty is that the Psalmists never seem to me to say anything very like this.

In 1, 2 we are told that the good man’s “delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law will he exercise himself day and night”. To “exercise himself” in it apparently does not mean to obey it (though of course the good man will do that too) but to study it, as Dr. Moffatt says to “pore over it”. Of course “the Law” does not here mean simply the ten commandments, it means the whole complex legislation (religious, moral, civil, criminal and even constitutional) contained in *Leviticus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*. The man who “pores upon it” is obeying Joshua’s command (*Joshua* 1, 8), “the book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night.” This means, among other things, that the Law was a study or, as we should say, a “subject”; a thing on which there would be commentaries, lectures, and examinations. There were. Thus part (religiously, the least important part) of what an ancient Jew meant when he said he

“delighted in the Law” was very like what one of us would mean if he said that somebody “loved” history, or physics, or archaeology. This might imply a wholly innocent—though, of course, merely natural—delight in one’s favourite subject; or, on the other hand, the pleasures ⁵⁷of conceit, pride in one’s own learning and consequent contempt for the outsiders who don’t share it, or even a venal admiration for the studies which secure one’s own stipend and social position.

The danger of this second development is of course increased tenfold when the study in question is from the outset stamped as sacred. For then the danger of spiritual pride is added to that of mere ordinary pedantry and conceit. One is sometimes (not often) glad not to be a great theologian; one might so easily mistake it for being a good Christian. The temptations to which a great philologist or a great chemist is exposed are trivial in comparison. When the subject is sacred, proud and clever men may come to think that the outsiders who don’t know it are not merely inferior to them in skill but lower in God’s eyes; as the priests said (*John 7, 49*), “All that rabble who are not experts in the Torah are accursed.” And as this pride increases, the “subject” or study which confers such privilege will grow more and more complicated, the list of things forbidden will increase, till to get through a single day without supposed sin becomes like an elaborate step-dance, and this horrible network breeds self-righteousness in some and haunting anxiety in others. Meanwhile the “weightier matters of the Law”, righteousness itself, shrinks into insignificance under this vast overgrowth, so that the legalists strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.

Thus the Law, like the sacrifice, can take on a cancerous life of its own and work against the thing ⁵⁸for whose sake it existed. As Charles Williams wrote, “When the means are autonomous they are deadly.” This morbid condition of the Law contributed to—I do not suggest it is the sole or main cause of—St. Paul’s joyous sense of Christ as the Deliverer from Law. It is against this same morbid condition that Our Lord uttered some of His sternest words; it is

the sin, and simultaneously the punishment, of the Scribes and Pharisees. But that is not the side of the matter I want to stress here, nor does it by this time need stressing. I would rather let the Psalms show me again the good thing of which this bad thing is the corruption.

As everyone knows, the Psalm specially devoted to the Law is 119, the longest in the whole collection. And everyone has probably noticed that from the literary or technical point of view, it is the most formal and elaborate of them all. The technique consists in taking a series of words which are all, for purposes of this poem, more or less synonyms (*word, statutes, commandments, testimonies*, etc.), and ringing the changes on them through each of its eight-verse sections—which themselves correspond to the letters of the alphabet. (This may have given an ancient ear something of the same sort of pleasure we get from the Italian metre called the *Sestina*, where instead of rhymes we have the same end words repeated in varying orders in each stanza.) In other words, this poem is not, and does not pretend to be, a sudden outpouring of the heart like, say, Psalm 18. It is a pattern, a thing done like embroidery, stitch by stitch, through long, quiet hours, for love of the ⁵⁹subject and for the delight in leisurely, disciplined craftsmanship.

Now this, in itself, seems to me very important because it lets us into the mind and mood of the poet. We can guess at once that he felt about the Law somewhat as he felt about his poetry; both involved exact and loving conformity to an intricate pattern. This at once suggests an attitude from which the Pharisaic conception could later grow but which in itself, though not necessarily religious, is quite innocent. It will look like priggery or pedantry (or else like a neurotic fussiness) to those who cannot sympathise with it, but it need not be any of these things. It may be the delight in Order, the pleasure in getting a thing “just so”—as in dancing a minuet. Of course the poet is well aware that something incomparably more serious than a minuet is here in question. He is also aware that he is very unlikely, himself, to achieve this

perfection of discipline: "O that my ways *were* made so straight that I *might* keep thy statutes!" (5). At present they aren't, and he can't. But his effort to do so does not spring from servile fear. The Order of the Divine mind, embodied in the Divine Law, is beautiful. What should a man do but try to reproduce it, so far as possible, in his daily life? His "delight" is in those statutes (16); to study them is like finding treasure (14); they affect him like music, are his "songs" (54); they taste like honey (103); they are better than silver and gold (72). As one's eyes are more and more opened, one sees more and more in them, and it excites wonder (18).⁶⁰ This is not priggery nor even scrupulosity; it is the language of a man ravished by a moral beauty. If we cannot at all share his experience, we shall be the losers. Yet I cannot help fancying that a Chinese Christian—one whose own traditional culture had been the "schoolmaster to bring him to Christ"—would appreciate this Psalm more than most of us; for it is an old idea in that culture that life should above all things be ordered and that its order should reproduce a Divine order.

But there is something else to our purpose in this grave poem. On three occasions the poet asserts that the Law is "true" or "the truth" (86, 138, 142). We find the same in 111, 7, "all his commandments are true". (The word, I understand, could also be translated "faithful", or "sound"; what is, in the Hebrew sense, "true" is what "holds water", what doesn't "give way" or collapse.) A modern logician would say that the Law is a command and that to call a command "true" makes no sense; "The door is shut" may be true or false but "Shut the door" can't. But I think we all see pretty well what the Psalmists mean. They mean that in the Law you find the "real" or "correct" or stable, well-grounded, directions for living. The law answers the question "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?" (119, 9). It is like a lamp, a guide (105). There are many rival directions for living, as the Pagan cultures all round us show. When the poets call the directions or "rulings" of Jahweh "true" they are expressing the assurance that these, and not those others, are the "real" or ⁶¹"valid" or

unassailable ones; that they are based on the very nature of things and the very nature of God.

By this assurance they put themselves, implicitly, on the right side of a controversy which arose far later among Christians. There were in the eighteenth century terrible theologians who held that "God did not command certain things because they are right, but certain things are right because God Commanded them". To make the position perfectly clear, one of them even said that though God has, as it happens, commanded us to love Him and one another, He might equally well have commanded us to hate Him and one another, and hatred would then have been right. It was apparently a mere toss-up which He decided on. Such a view of course makes God a mere arbitrary tyrant. It would be better and less irreligious to believe in no God and to have no ethics than to have such an ethics and such a theology as this. The Jews of course never discuss this in abstract and philosophical terms. But at once, and completely, they assume the right view, knowing better than they know. They know that the Lord (not merely obedience to the Lord) is "righteous" and commands "righteousness" because He loves it (11, 8). He enjoins what is good because it is good, because He is good. Hence His laws have *emeth* "truth", intrinsic validity, rock-bottom reality, being rooted in His own nature, and are therefore as solid as that Nature which He has created. But the Psalmists themselves can say it best; "thy righteousness ⁶²standeth like the strong mountains, thy judgements are like the great deep" (36, 6).³¹ Their delight in the Law is a delight in having touched firmness; like the pedestrian's delight in feeling the hard road beneath his feet after a false short cut has long entangled him in muddy fields.

For there were other roads, which lacked "truth". The Jews had as their immediate neighbours, close to them in race as well as in position, Pagans of the worst kind, Pagans whose religion was marked by none of that beauty or (sometimes) wisdom which we can find among the Greeks. That background made the "beauty" or "sweetness" of the Law more visible; not least because these

neighbouring Paganisms were a constant temptation to the Jew and may in some of their externals have been not unlike his own religion. The temptation was to turn to those terrible rites in times of terror—when, for example, the Assyrians were pressing on. We who not so long ago waited daily for invasion by enemies, like the Assyrians, skilled and constant in systematic cruelty, know how they may have felt. They were tempted, since the Lord seemed deaf, to try those appalling deities who demanded so much more and might therefore perhaps give more in return. But when a Jew in some happier hour, or a better Jew even in that hour, looked at those worships—when he thought of sacred prostitution, sacred sodomy, and the babies thrown into the fire for Moloch—his own “Law” as he turned back to it must have shone with an extraordinary radiance. ⁶³Sweeter than honey; or if that metaphor does not suit us who have not such a sweet tooth as all ancient peoples (partly because we have plenty of sugar), let us say like mountain water, like fresh air after a dungeon, like sanity after a nightmare. But, once again, the best image is in a Psalm, the 19th.^[4]

I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world. Most readers will remember its structure; six verses about Nature, five about the Law, and four of personal prayer. The actual words supply no logical connection between the first and second movements. In this way its technique resembles that of the most modern poetry. A modern poet would pass with similar abruptness from one theme to another and leave you to find out the connecting link for yourself. But then he would possibly be doing this quite deliberately; he might have, though he chose to conceal, a perfectly clear and conscious link in his own mind which he could express to you in logical prose if he wanted to. I doubt if the ancient poet was like that. I think he felt, effortlessly and without reflecting on it, so close a connection, indeed (for his imagination) such an identity, between his first theme and his second that he passed from the one to the other without realising that he had made any transition. First he thinks of the sky; how, day after day, the pageantry we see there shows us

the splendour of its Creator. Then he thinks of the sun, the bridal joyousness of its rising, the unimaginable speed of its daily ⁶⁴voyage from east to west. Finally, of its heat; not of course the mild heats of our climate but the cloudless, blinding, tyrannous rays hammering the hills, searching every cranny. The key phrase on which the whole poem depends is “there is nothing hid from the heat thereof”. It pierces everywhere with its strong, clean ardour. Then at once, in verse 7 he is talking of something else, which hardly seems to him something else because it is so like the all-piercing, all-detecting sunshine. The Law is “undefiled”, the Law gives light, it is clean and everlasting, it is “sweet”. No one can improve on this and nothing can more fully admit us to the old Jewish feeling about the Law; luminous, severe, disinfected, exultant. One hardly needs to add that this poet is wholly free from self-righteousness and the last section is concerned with his “secret faults”. As he has felt the sun, perhaps in the desert, searching him out in every nook of shade where he attempted to hide from it, so he feels the Law searching out all the hiding-places of his soul.

In so far as this idea of the Law’s beauty, sweetness, or preciousness, arose from the contrast of the surrounding Paganisms, we may soon find occasion to recover it. Christians increasingly live on a spiritual island; new and rival ways of life surround it in all directions and their tides come further up the beach every time. None of these new ways is yet so filthy or cruel as some Semitic Paganism. But many of them ignore all individual rights and are already cruel enough. Some give morality a wholly new meaning which we cannot accept, some deny ⁶⁵its possibility. Perhaps we shall all learn, sharply enough, to value the clean air and “sweet reasonableness” of the Christian ethics which in a more Christian age we might have taken for granted. But of course, if we do, we shall then be exposed to the danger of priggery. We might come to “thank God that we are not as other men”. This introduces the greatest difficulty which the Psalms have raised in my mind.