

October 12th, 2008  
Trinity College

Goya (Genesis 4, 1-11 and Romans 7, 18-25)

Our theme for the term is ‘God in the Nineteenth Century’.

Now many a doctoral thesis on a nineteenth century theme begins by telling you that to understand the nineteenth century, you need first to understand the eighteenth. The risk of infinite regress notwithstanding, I am going to follow the same approach here - by looking first at one of Goya’s etchings, from the collection known as Caprichos, and entitled ‘The Sleep of Reason produces Monsters’. It was drawn in 1796-7, and, as that date encourages us to think, seems to belong to the world of the eighteenth century, not the nineteenth. Indeed it often serves as an illustration on the cover of books to do with that most quintessentially of eighteenth century notions and ideals, the Enlightenment.

In his little essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’, Immanuel Kant, writing some ten years before Goya produced that print, had asked and answered his question with the assertion that Enlightenment is the emergence of the individual from the self-incurred minority which consists in the refusal to make use of one’s own understanding and intellect. Have courage to use your own intellect or reason! That says Kant, is the motto of enlightenment - and, is also its creed, we might say. It is not as if using your own intellect was simply a good

in itself - like doing a crossword. The faith of the Enlightenment, its creed, was just that using your own reason or intellect would dispel darkness and bring light - as Goya's pictures seems to suggest. 'The Sleep of Reason produces Monsters' - so if our sleeping man will only wake, and use his reason, these fantastic and vile creatures which surround him will depart. The owls, by the way, are, very plainly, not here images of wisdom as in much European mythology - but rather, as they were represented in the Spanish folklore of Goya's time, symbols of mindless stupidity. Bats - creatures of the night - are symbols of darkness and ignorance. These are the monsters which flap around our sleeping man, the assault on whom is watched - not by a grumpy cat, as you might suppose from a first glance - but a concerned lynx, who in that same folklore was held to be able to see through the thickest darkness and to tell truth from error. If only our sleeper will wake, and use his reason, he will peer lynx-like into the darkness, the darkness will recede, the monsters will be gone, and all will be left in light. Spain - to take the object of Goya's concern - will be saved from the assorted monsters who populate the other pictures in Los Caprichos: the self-seeking clergy, the asinine nobility, the superstitious and tyrannical Inquisition, the lecherous men who deserve the calculating women whom they marry; these creatures, as monstrous as the owls and the bats, will be gone when reason wakes.

Perhaps Goya never quite believed that simplest version of the Enlightenment creed, but that is certainly what the etching can serve

to suggest. What is clear, is that if that was Goya's creed at the end of the eighteenth century, it didn't survive very many years of the nineteenth. Why not? Why did Goya lose his Enlightenment faith, supposing he had ever held it? To answer that question, we should force ourselves to look at what is probably the most dreary painting attributed to him, known as 'The Allegory of Madrid'.

In 1810, Goya was commissioned by the town council of Madrid to paint a picture of 'our present sovereign', that present sovereign being, José I - Napoleon's brother, Joseph. Joseph had been imposed on Spain in 1808, after the intrigues and fallings out between the utterly hopeless father and son, Carlos IV and Ferdinand VII, had created a political vacuum which Napoleon was only too ready to exploit. Now Joseph was not to be present for sittings, so Goya conceived the picture to suit the absence - it could not be one of those huge and magnificent portraits which he accomplished with such panache for Carlos IV and his wife and family and ministers - but instead, the new king was to appear as a profile, as on a coin, copied from an engraving, in the frame held by the scantily clad angels on the right of the picture, to whom the slightly more adequately (but no less curiously attired) crowned maiden, signifying Madrid, points. (Or rather 'did point' - she now points to the words, 'Dos de Mayo'.) But if Joseph could not be present to be depicted in an authoritative, magisterial, pose, his dignity was to be asserted by the bits and pieces Goya threw in for the 15,000 reales he was paid - José's fame is trumpeted by another angel, and he is crowned with the

laurels of victory by yet another. There is even a contented dog, symbol of fidelity, to represent, one supposes, the good will of the burgers of Madrid.

But as you see, Miss Madrid does not point to José I at all - because in 1812, two years after Goya started this work, Napoleon's army was routed by Wellington at the battle of Salamanca, and Joseph and his court hastily decamped from Madrid. So, with new and further instructions, Goya painted over the king, and wrote in, as required, the single word 'Constitucion' - 'constitution', referring to the liberal constitution which the Cortes, the Spanish parliament, sitting in Cadiz, had ratified as the French king departed. The paint was barely dry however, when, the fortunes of war being what they are, Joseph reappeared in Madrid - and Goya was obliged to restore the profile, and obliterate the now impolitic celebration of the 'Constitucion'. Whereupon, José was expelled, for one last time, in 1813 - and Goya painted back in the word 'Constitucion'. And that was the end of Goya's involvement with the picture - but not the end of the story of the picture. The king who had been deposed by Joseph, Ferdinand VII, returned as king, and the Council of Madrid dutifully had his profile painted in, but not by Goya, who was presumably heartily sick of the whole business my now. Then, some thirty years later, out went Ferdinand, and in went 'Constitucion' again, as the liberals were back in power - only some thirty years after that, for the words you see, 'Dos de Mayo' (2<sup>nd</sup> of May), to go in; this being a reference to the hallowed day on which the people of Madrid

had offered brave and hopeless resistance to the onslaughts of Napoleon's army back in 1808. Thus Miss Madrid, with her understandably somewhat fixed smile, comes down to us pointing decorously to a now wholly uncontroversial medallion, making reference to a date 'whose patriotic significance everyone, liberal, democrat, monarchist, . . . reactionary, could venerate'.

The farcical burlesque of painting, repainting, overpainting and so on, is a gentle way of hinting at a story which Goya would himself tell in some of the most graphic, horrific and disturbing images of war which have ever been painted. For these comings and goings of kings and constitutions were played out not just in high political drama, of course, but in low brutality and violence. Very many of the etchings, in the collection known as 'the Disasters of War', through which Goya tells this story, are so appalling that were I to have distributed them this evening, there would surely have been complaints. Against the stark background of a war-torn landscape (that artillery shaped no-man's land which would become so familiar in the photographs of the battlefields of the Great War), women are raped, their babies thrown to one side. Captured soldiers are tortured. Dead bodies are abused and mutilated. And the corpses of those who have been dismembered and impaled on stakes or trees, are depicted as if in some surrealist junkyard of body parts. Look at the pictures for yourselves, if you wish, but for this evening let some of Goya's own pithy titles stand in for images too gruesome to be lightly glanced at -

‘unhappy mother’; ‘bury them and shut up’; ‘they are like wild animals’; and Goya’s most laconic and telling lament, ‘I saw it’.

Along with those titles, let me offer you not those frightful images from ‘the Disasters of War’, but the little chalk sketch of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, now in the British Museum, for which Wellington sat 1812. Goya did grand paintings of Wellington, all of them constrained, as is only to be expected, by the conventions as to how a victor should appear. At least one involved the ever resourceful Goya in painting out the face of Jose I, and putting the newly victorious, Wellington in his place. In that picture, and in others, the Goya meets the expectations of the genre - there are rearing horses, plenty of finery with sashes and medals, much swagger and bravado. But in the chalk drawing, he simply tells the truth, it seems to me. The shell-shocked Wellington bears the horror of war on his face. He could have come from the Somme, as much as from Salamanca. His face is tense and resolute, his expression drained, his eyes weary and empty. He is a man who has seen everything and is past being shocked. He has seen battles and there is nothing more to see. Goya might have borrowed that title from one of the etchings - ‘I saw it’.

I began with ‘The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters’, from the dying years of the eighteenth century. One way of interpreting that picture, was just to see it as expressing the great creed of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, that humankind will escape the monsters and horrors which haunt our daily existence, if

man's reason would only wake from its sleep. That picture of Wellington, and what stands behind it (the experience depicted in the Disasters of War, and farcically concealed in history of the Allegory of Madrid), tell us that that creed, if ever it had been believed, was not one which Goya could assent to now. Whatever humankind needed, it was not anything as simple as a wake-up call.

Think about waking up from sleep. We do it every day - some days slowly, some days unwillingly, some days with much groaning and moaning, but in the end, everyday, we rouse ourselves from sleep. Even in the quiet and uneventful life of a Cambridge don, it is probably not the major challenge of an average day. And of all the commands we give to one another, 'Wake up!' is one of the most simple and effective we ever issue. Unless the sleeper is really dead - or dead drunk, anyway - he or she will certainly wake on the word of command, if loudly spoken. What Goya's later pictures and drawings tells us, is just that the monsters which beset human existence are not ephemereal spirits which vanish as we open our eyes. They cannot be shaken off like the drowsiness of the early morning. Why? Because the darkness which besets us is not superficial and exterior, but deep and within. Goya's later work is haunted by monsters, not just by bats and owls, but by witches, lunatics, and cannibals - and these represent persisting and deep tendencies in human life. Darkness and monsters are not actually without, they are within. They do not stalk the land only while we sleep; they stalk the land even when we are wide awake.

And that of course, would be the creed - or rather the anti-creed, of the nineteenth century. For whereas for Voltaire and his contemporaries, it was the Lisbon earthquake of All Saints' day of 1755, in which perhaps 75,000 people or more may have died, which would be the great charge to be laid against God; in the nineteenth century (and indeed the twentieth) it would be horror at the reality of human evil which would press upon and seem to perplex religious belief. And no one would depict this evil with a more unflinching gaze than Goya.

There are two points with which to conclude, the second of which I will make by reference to our remaining picture.

The first point, of course, is that with his unflinching gaze fixed on the reality of human evil, Goya becomes thereby an authentic biblical exegete. There is nothing in his anthropology - his view of what it is to be human - which could not be found in the Old Testament or the New. 'Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him' (Genesis 4, 8), we were told in our first lesson. In our second, Paul declares 'For the good that I would do I do not do; but the evil which I would not, that I do. . . . I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.' Our humanity, according to these witnesses, is the poor, sordid thing of Goya's pictures. Evil is only too present with us. The discovery of the anti-creed of the nineteenth century, is in fact the recovery of the true voice of the Bible.

But Goya is an exegete in a second way, and this is where the fourth and final picture comes in. That picture, entitled 'The Third of May, depicts the events which occurred in Madrid in the spring of 1808 when Napoleon's brother Joseph was placed on the Spanish throne by French military force. The Second of the May - the words in the medallion and the subject of another great canvas by Goya - was a day of glorious resistance. The Third of May was a day of terrible retribution. What we see is an anonymous firing squad, going about its business in the pitch dark of the night, blacker than which no night has ever been painted. To the left of the picture, beneath that impenetrable sky, is the beginning of what will eventually be a heap of corpses, high enough in due course to rival the hill against which the executions occur. The blood of the dead and dying pours out on the bare earth. To the right there stretches off into the distance the queue of those awaiting their turn to die - the most prominent of whom stands head in hands, like one of the damned from Michaelangelo's Last Judgment.

There is in the middle however, a swarthy figure, eyes bulging in horror, who is illuminated, and illumines the scene. He is kneeling, but the gesture is undeniably Christ-like with the arms extended as on a cross. If we have any doubt about the identification, the man's right hand bears a wound in the palm - bloodless, to be sure, but a stigmata nonetheless.

What does this Christ-like figure do here for Goya? What is his role or point? And what does he do elsewhere when he appears, as he

does, in some of Goya's most moving later works - in his Self Portrait with Dr Arrieta, for example, where the sick Goya and his doctor are depicted in a pose unmistakably borrowed from a Renaissance pieta?

I mentioned Kant to begin with, so let me go back to him now. Kant in the rather typically dense formula he uses to sum up pages and pages of equally dense argument, declared once that God is a necessary postulate of the practical reason. This was Kant's way of saying that God is the necessary imagined horizon against which, towards which, we must live, if our lives are to take moral form. God is the being whose existence we must postulate, he says, in our commitment to, and our longing for, a renewed and transformed humanity.

Goya's Christ-like figure is the visual expression of that same longing for what lies beyond the horizon of barbarity which he paints elsewhere. He is the form of human being by which our lives must be directed if we are to find a way beyond the darkness of the night, and into light. The nightmares of our waking, not just our sleeping, lives, will only give way to better things as Christ takes form amongst us. The dreams of tyrants and oppressors, have been only too real, in Goya's day, as in our own. With this image, Goya bids us to dream and make real a different dream - a dream of resistance, solidarity, suffering and sacrifice, which alone will enlighten the world.