

DANIEL BERRIGAN

1921-

IN AN ELEGY FOR HIS FATHER, WRITTEN IN DANBURY FEDERAL Prison during Holy Week, 1971, Daniel Berrigan also sketched his own portrait, an outline of a complex and talented person under the influence of a somewhat distant parent. The poem describes his father's fierce shortcomings, as well as his rich legacy to six sons:

He exacted performance, promptitude,
deference to his moods
the family escutcheon stained with no shit.
The game was skillful (we never saw it so well
played
elsewhere), he was commonly considered
the epitome of a just man.
We sat on our perches blinking like six marmosets.
There were scenes worthy of Conrad;
the decks shuddering;
the world coming to an end. . . .

The expression on the face of the marmoset, a wide-eyed, unblinking creature, astonished by what's coming next, is recognizable as Daniel Berrigan's own. One has seen it in numerous photographs of him: at a demonstration, during a trial, from a pulpit, and at his arrest at Block Island after the months underground in 1970. It is a face that says, "Well, what do you know? Look what I've gotten myself in for this time: The Lord be praised."

An early poem conveys that sense of wonder and the singular manner that characterizes Father Berrigan. "Each day writes/ in my heart's core/ ineradicably, what it is to be man":

I tread my earth amazed: what land,
what skies are these, whose shifting weathers
now shrink my harvest to a stack of bones;
now weigh my life with glory?
Christ. . . your presence give
light to my eyeless mind, reason to my heart's
rhyme.

For all his public activities, as poet, teacher, theologian, war resister, liturgist, Daniel Berrigan is a surprisingly private person. Since his eighteenth year, his vocation as Jesuit and priest has been the center of his life.

Born in Virginia, Minnesota, on May 9, 1921, to an Irish railroad man with a flair for poetry and drama, and a devout but willful German woman, Daniel Berrigan attended parochial schools in Syracuse, New York, after his family moved to a farm near there in the 1920s. His entry into the Jesuits in 1939 preceded the later religious vocations of his older brother Jerome and his younger brother Philip after the Second World War. The confined, quasi-militarist regime of the Jesuits surprised Daniel, but he did well as a student and began publishing poems in national periodicals while still in college.

Soon after his ordination as a priest in 1942, he taught French and English in Jesuit high schools in New Jersey and in Brooklyn, before joining the theology department at Lemoyne College, East Syracuse, in 1957. On a sabbatical leave in 1964, he served as a parish priest in France, where he had studied previously; he admired the worker priest movement. In further travel at this time behind the Iron Curtain, he found the church persecuted, but clear about its religious mission. Back in the United States, where his brother Philip had become involved in the Civil Rights movement, Daniel co-founded several national organizations opposed to the war in Vietnam. Disciplined by the church hierarchy in New York for these and other activities, he was exiled to South America, which only deepened his resistance to

United States policies toward the Third World.

Returning home after six weeks, he became a controversial figure again by his acts of revolutionary nonviolence and through his influence on young people, former students and admirers who eventually followed him into jail for burning draft records. In the 1970s and 80s, Father Berrigan participated in numerous symbolic actions against the state, including the damaging of nuclear weapons systems, the subject of a film, *In the King of Prussia* (1982). He and his brother Philip have also been an inspiration for activists resisting the deployment of American nuclear missiles in Western Europe.

As a writer, Daniel Berrigan occupies a peculiar place in American letters. In spite of his honors, including the Lamont Poetry Prize in 1957, awarded to an outstanding first book by the Academy of American Poets, as well as the Meltzer, St. Thomas More, and Obie awards, he is seldom treated seriously as an artist by influential critics. Writing outside the prevailing manner (whichever one is dominant at the moment), he charts his own course as a poet. "Writing was as integral to his life in prison as counseling or rapping, or organizing, or listening to the anguish of a prison brother," Philip Berrigan wrote in the introduction to Daniel's *Prison Poems*.

Some readers regard Berrigan's perpetual testing of the boundaries of experience, his effrontery to good behavior, as mere personal ornerness. And, to be sure, there is a bit of the Modernist spirit, the impulse "to shake up the bourgeoisie," about his style.

Yet it is this quality of expecting the unexpected and his refusal to accept traditional boundaries that accounts in part for Daniel Berrigan's hold on people's attention. Faced, like Herman Melville's *Bartleby* with the inevitable (in Berrigan's case, obeying the law, paying war taxes, and tolerating America's policy of Mutually Assured Destruction—MAD), he "prefers not to."

As an artist and activist, Daniel Berrigan seems to promise, in typical American fashion, the unexpected, the impossible. Who else would leave a job at Cornell University (in 1968), fly to Hanoi to rescue three American flyers, return to a small suburb of Baltimore to burn draft records with homemade napalm, go through a long trial, and then, in costume to evade the FBI, slip underground? Narrowly escaping accidental death in prison, he embarked soon afterward on another series of nonviolent actions, smashing missile warheads and risking jail numerous times while out on appeal. This is attended, along the way, by an outpouring of poems, essays, letters to periodicals, an award-winning play, several films, numerous lectures, and religious retreats, a variety of jobs (an orderly in a cancer hospital, and teaching assignments at leading universities) and close associations with a multitude of friends, family, and fellow resisters in this country and Europe.

If, as Wordsworth said, "the child is father of the man," some insight into Daniel Berrigan is provided by the self-portrait mentioned earlier. Equally significant is the famous statement of the Catonsville Nine, beginning, "The violence stops here, and death stops here, this war stops here."

We shall beyond doubt be placed behind bars for some portion of our natural lives in consequence of our inability to live and die content in the plagued city, to say "peace, peace" when there is no peace, to keep the poor poor, the thirsty and hungry thirsty and hungry. 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.

The last statement—that he "could not do otherwise"—suggests that, unlike other figures in the history of American radicalism from Thomas Paine to Dorothy Day, who chose their fates, Ber-

rigan regards his as a given. Is this the reason for his rather "Zen" attitude toward it all?

In a nuclear age, Daniel Berrigan charts a new errand into the wilderness, a journey to Catonsville, attempting to turn "lights on in the house of the dead." Even now, in his mid-60s, he is a figure to watch with expectation. Where will his fate carry him next?

BY DANIEL BERRIGAN

Lights on in the House of the Dead: A Prison Diary. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1974.

Prison Poems. Greensboro, N.C.: Unicorn Press, 1973.

Selected and New Poems. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973.

No Bars to Manhood (especially "Open Sesame: My Life and Good Times.") Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970.

And many others.