

POETRY OF RESURRECTION: PETER SKRZYNECKI'S EASTER SUNDAY

Barry Spurr

Peter Skrzynecki's latest collection of poems, published in 1993, is focused (as its title indicates) on experiences and manifestations of resurrection - ranging from its doctrinal expression in the context, for example, of the Church's liturgy, to the heterodoxy of intimations of new life, as in the world of nature. John Coburn's illustration for the book's cover perfectly combines these aspects of the poems' subject matter - as the form of the Cross is revealed in a sprouting tree and the attendant birds are both those of nature and (in traditional symbolism) representative of the Holy Spirit. They also represent, here, the tongues of fire of the Spirit's festival at Pentecost, the celebration of the combination of spiritual and linguistic inspiration.

The book is divided into four sections - the first culminating in the title poem, 'Easter Sunday', the second ('Coronary') focusing on Skrzynecki's experience of triple by-pass surgery after a heart attack in 1988. Skrzynecki has told me that the collection of poems, as a whole, derives from this event and the deepening of his spirituality which it produced. The third section, 'The Five Lakes', concentrates on the work of contemporary Australian painters: Olsen, Coburn, Blackman, Whiteley and Dickerson; while the fourth closes with 'Deo Gratias', Skrzynecki's expression of thankfulness to God 'for the life I was given'.

Those who are familiar with Skrzynecki's poetry in earlier collections, such as *Immigrant Chronicle* (1975), will not be surprised by the emphasis on personal experience which opens the title poem of *Easter Sunday*:

I used to kneel and pray -

nor by its reminiscence of the poet's childhood and his religious devotion, nurtured at Blessed Peter Chanel's primary school in Regents Park, in Sydney's south-western suburbs:

with closed eyes and joined hands

imagining the Risen Christ
 in a dazzling white light of majesty:
 a vision that best fitted the description
 of what the Sisters of St Joseph taught at school.

Skrzynecki's is confessional poetry, but unlike Robert Lowell's, for example, it is generally kindly in its evocations of his upbringing and family. Indeed, *Easter Sunday* is confessional poetry in another, older sense. For Skrzynecki presents his childhood faith affirmatively, celebrating its growth into his adulthood, even as he retains that childlike simplicity commended in Scripture. In striking contrast to the modish inclination to satirise authorities from childhood, especially those in the Church, Skrzynecki happily praises the influence of the Josephite nuns and his glad acceptance of their teachings and religious example. Their vision of the 'Risen Christ' - 'in a dazzling white light of majesty' - lifts the language of the poem, in its first stanza, out of an ordinariness of utterance. The poetry, in other words, enacts the vision of resurrection it describes.

The centrality of Easter Sunday in the Church's calendar, of the resurrection in Christian faith and of the eucharist as the sacrament whereby the Christian participates in the risen life of Christ, are the orthodox teachings of the faith which Skrzynecki unaffectedly yet wholeheartedly affirms in the second stanza. He achieves a balance between their objective truth and his personal acceptance of them:

when precepts of love and doctrines
 converged at a point in the Mass
 and everything in my life made sense.

In association with these transcendental truths is Skrzynecki's attention to the works which faith produces: 'the striving to perfect one's thoughts and actions / without a hint of selfishness and malice'. And, thirdly, he praises the holiness of beauty, in the adornment of the church for the Easter mysteries:

an altar
 decorated in white cloth and flowers.

That now, in adulthood, he is kneeling 'in the same church', unobtrusively confirms the connection between his childhood and mature faith. As his prayer begins, he returns to the 'simplicity' of the

'trusting prayers' of the past. His explanation for this is that after his experience of life-threatening illness and recovery, a personal resurrection, he has in turn recovered the essential simplicity of God's abiding presence: 'through illness and glimpses of death'. This has brought him to the realisation that that spiritual truth transcends our mortality:

believing more in the mystery of the Resurrection
than in the heartbeats between each breath

even, paradoxically, as it is an ineffable, ultimately inexplicable phenomenon, while our physicality is the most real of our human experiences.

It is rare, indeed, for a modern poet, even of professedly Christian allegiance, to write in a language of such an unambiguously confessional nature. Yet it is Skrzynecki's skill to do so without even the suggestion of 'apology' for the faith. This is accomplished through the disarming honesty of the intimacy of his spiritual reflections.

In the sequence of poems, 'Coronary', 'After Mass' parallels and augments the occasion and meanings of 'Easter Sunday'. The initial image of the human subject of the poem is of one who, after Mass:

stays back by himself
in the church to pray for a while.

We are struck immediately by the similarity to and difference from 'Easter Sunday'. Mass has now ended, but also Skrzynecki speaks of himself in the detached third person:

to gather his thoughts together
before returning to the street.

This detachment not only brings an objectivity, almost an impersonality to this presentation - which is a welcome variation of the customarily subjective mode of Skrzynecki's poetry - but it introduces the theological paradox of the individual Christian's aloneness before God and his belonging to the Christian community, which is the very Body of Christ. The last two lines of the first stanza emphasise his isolation and anticipate its later embrace, but without annihilation of selfhood, in community:

a little startled by his own willingness
to stay withdrawn from human company.

This is poised writing, evaluatively speaking. That he is 'startled' does not necessarily imply that he is, or should be distressed by his solitude, and the emphasis on 'human company' indicates a differentiation between that terrestrial companionableness and transcendental intimacy with the divine.

In this time of meditation, his experience is visionary; in descriptive writing of lyrical beauty:

Light falls in golden parallels
through stained glass above the altar -

The 'stained glass' with its aesthetic loveliness also stands, here, for a translucency (our innocence and sinlessness) that has been impaired or soiled. 'Light', synonymous with God's grace, cleanses the fallen world, whose pains have been borne by the Redeemer, and:

washes the crucified body of Christ.

The poet's vision of the altar is supersensual - it 'shimmers with reflections' - but this transcendence of physicality and mortality does not negate the reality of the circumstances which required the Resurrection-event:

the sanctuary lamp burns like a red wound.

The lamp, symbolic of the risen Christ's presence in the tabernacle, also reminds the meditator of the bloody occasion of the Lord's passion. There is a personal subtext here, as in the 'Coronary' sequence at large, as Skrzynecki commemorates the deepening of his own spirituality on the occasion of the 'red wound' of his heart surgery. The title, 'Coronary', itself conflates the two meanings of, negatively, the thrombosis which coagulates into a lump the blood that should flow through the coronary arteries of the heart, and, positively, the corona, or crown, which - as the New Testament teaches - the redeemed shall wear in Heaven.

Like 'Easter Sunday', 'After Mass' is a poem that is not shy of revealing its writer's fidelity to the Church's traditional beliefs and pious practices. His meditation is assisted by the ordered sequence of

'mysteries' in the devotions of the rosary beads and the stations of the Cross on the walls of the church, which seem 'awfully close' (emphasising, again, the concentration on Christ's atoning death). His prayers are not easy, but his sense of the nearness of God is assured:

He feels himself invaded by an unearthly wordless calm.

The sequence of prayers which accompanies each mystery of the rosary is recalled: 'Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be'. He remembers these as 'his own childhood's prayers', and so, as in 'Easter Sunday', the inestimable value, for his spirituality, of recapturing that childhood simplicity is affirmed. It is not the recovery of dormant devotion, however, after a life-threatening crisis, but the intensification of a sustained conversation:

the practice of talking to God for forty years
can't die that easily, he thinks.

But time must intrude upon timelessness, in our world, in the poetry as in his life, through the repetition of 'Time' in the last stanza. His vision has been of holy light - as mystics have perceived it through the ages - but Skrzynecki gives it individual power and meaning in his worrying of the concept of 'stained glass' through which, necessarily, as it were, that heavenly light must be seen on earth. Implicitly, this is an affirmation of the peculiar value of the consecrated places of God, with their aesthetic beauties aiding devotion, and also of the ceremonies and sacraments of the faith, for their revelation of God's grace and love. The church is filled with 'a redeeming glow', the poet writes, in his closing image of resurrection.

The introduction, in the fourth stanza, of his wife and children, and the completion of his vision, in the last, in the recognition that the 'redeeming glow' is there both for himself 'and All Those who come to the next Mass' (and we note, in particular, the capitalisation) affirms his participation in the Christian family and the universality of God's love, without diminishing his individual experience of it.

In the sequence of poems dedicated to five Australian painters, in the section devoted to John Coburn, the fourth poem takes its title from the Book of Genesis: 'The Third Day: God Created the Earth'. In this work, and those that surround it, Skrzynecki reveals his mastery of evocative descriptive writing in verse.

The sense of elemental creation is conveyed in the dramatic

opening lines:

A burning sky and streams of light
that fall as water in waves of blue motion -

which is nonetheless complemented, in its power and majesty, by its impact on the third element, earth: 'softly touching', as the tenderness of God matches His might; and all is commended as the gift of life imparted 'from a descending sun'.

In this painterly poetry (of tribute to a painter), Skrzynecki focuses on:

gold and white, white and gold

as T.S. Eliot does in 'The Waste Land':

where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold

and for the same reason, but with more confidence in their meaning than Eliot, for whom, at that stage in his quest through the desert places of modern life, their symbolism was incomprehensible. For these are the liturgical colours of Easter Sunday, as Skrzynecki, in the way of typology, links the brilliant hues of that original day of creation, bringing order out of chaos, with the new life of redemption imparted to the fallen world by Christ:

perfect symbol of seasons and growth,
beginnings of tranquility and colour.

The fourth of the classical elements - air - is present in 'the chasm of black' which 'divides sky and space':

across which the beams leap
like reflections of a desert mirage.

The colour symbolism here contrasts with the bright luminosity before, and there is the suggestion, also, in the unfathomableness of a 'chasm', of terror as well as an inscrutable profundity. It could be representative of the potential for evil in the God-created dispensation,

which, storm-like, is seen to be:

unsettling and disturbing a flight of leaves
that belong to a candelabra.

(That grammatical slip, if it is not too pedantic to notice it, is a blemish on the poem, which, in its free verse form would not be spoilt, but indeed improved by the correction to 'candelabrum' - which I hope Skrzynecki will make in a future edition).

Yet the poem closes in imagery of powerful and expansive affirmation. The fire in the burning furnace of the earth's heart, 'beneath the soil', emerges to touch the waters on its surface and release them, 'like a chrism', the anointing oil - which, because of the same derivation from the Greek is another use of typology, anticipating the Christ, the anointed one. The result is new life and fertility:

two green shoots begin to rise
towards an unbroken and endless horizon

emblematic of boundless hope. Skrzynecki's vision of reciprocity and unity in nature's elements is, for that moment, reminiscent of Milton's similar celebration of prelapsarian nature in *Paradise Lost*.

Unlike that of 'Easter Sunday' and 'After Mass', the Christianity of this poem is implicit - in the liturgical colours and the reference to holy oil, used, for example, in the sacrament of unction. But the very presence of these references, indicates the poem's essential meaning as a typological celebration of the resurrection in terms of the creation of new life through God's grace.

In 'Deo Gratias' ('Thanks be to God'), the last poem in *Easter Sunday*, Skrzynecki uses a sequence of imperative verbs in the form of a series of petitions or prayers to God, beseeching His presence and assistance in his life. Unlike another poet of imperative address to the Almighty, John Donne, Skrzynecki is not asking for this grace out of the experience of its absence, but because of his gratitude for its persistence in his life:

Let me never forget the peace I find
when I come into your presence.

Again, that presence is found especially, for the poet, on consecrated

ground, which he clearly differentiates from the secularity around it:

when the world is left outside
the door of your house
and I can pray alone for a few minutes.

This expression of gratitude expands into a paean of praise to God for 'each day's many blessings'.

A recurring motif in *Easter Sunday*, as we have seen, is the childlike simplicity of faith. In the second petition, Skrzynecki asks:

May I never forget my childhood's wonders
and the miracles of each day....

These 'miracles' include the very recognition of God's presence and the speaker's utter dependence upon Him, like a child on a parent, 'from morning until night'. In its fervour, this faith has grown to a full maturity communicated here in three participles of absolute ecstasy, peace and humility, in contemplation of the divine:

Overwhelmed, silenced and humbled
by the creating power of your love.

This is not the first time, in this collection, that Skrzynecki - Wittgenstein-like - evokes a condition beyond words in which God is truly known.

In antithesis, in the penultimate stanza, the busy world is rebuked for its 'hurried plans and journeys', for its assaults upon the created order in 'its desire to possess the air we breathe', and in the inhumanity of man to man - the destruction of 'all human charity'. With regard to this turbulence, echoing Eliot's prayer in *Ash-Wednesday*, 'Teach us to sit still', Skrzynecki prays, more personally, in his next imperative:

teach me to stand still.

He would be encouraged again by:

the Light that entered my life
when I first spoke your Holy Name.

In a poem, which is also a prayer, it is suitable that the poet should emphasise the importance of language, for him, in his Christian faith, even as he also celebrates the scriptural stillness and silence in which God, in His own imperative, insists that He should be known.

Skrzynecki's emphasis on standing, in combination with his hope that he will see God's face at death, which close the poem, are figures of resurrection:

let me be able
to look you in the eyes when I die
and say, Thank you for the life I was given.

It is a personal thank-offering to God for the poet's survival after heart surgery and a larger praise of Him for the gift of life itself. Ultimately, however - like the collection as a whole - 'Deo Gratias' looks forward, with hope mixed with humility, to rebirth into eternal life.

It has been said that 'above all else', Skrzynecki's 'strengths as a poet', in this collection, derive from 'his alertness to the possibility of spiritual consolation in the world about him'.¹ While this is undoubtedly one of the features of the collection, to describe this alertness as its culmination seems to me to miss the two most surprising and disarming - and, so, the most important - features of *Easter Sunday*. As the poems that I have discussed reveal, Skrzynecki has had visions of the divine which are not merely spiritual possibilities (for him) but transcendental truths; and these have occurred, moreover, not in the unhallowed 'world about him', but precisely in the consecrated circumstances of holy places and in the rites and ceremonies of the Church. To water down these facts (or, worse, to deny their presence), which are so challenging to a secular civilisation and even to a modern Christianity which eschews such certainties and numinousness, is a disservice to the poet's achievement. His writing is the very contradiction of the orthodoxies of agnostic humanism and a desacralised Christianity. Skrzynecki is one who, as it were, has seen the face of God and lived, and who, as a poet, must communicate his vision through the medium of language. This is the essence of his achievement in the poetry of resurrection, which is also a poetry of the Resurrection, in *Easter Sunday*.

1. Ivor Indyk, blurb on *Easter Sunday*.