

'To Credit Marvels': Thomas Merton's "Grace's House"

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Grace's House

On the summit: it stands on a fair summit
Prepared by winds: and solid smoke
Rolls from the chimney like a snow cloud.
Grace's house is secure.

No blade of grass is not counted,
No blade of grass forgotten on this hill.
Twelve flowers make a token garden.
There is no path to the summit—
No path drawn
To Grace's house.

All the curtains are arranged
Not for hiding but for seeing out.
In one window someone looks out and winks.
Two gnarled short
Fortified trees have knotholes
From which animals look out.
From behind a corner of Grace's house
Another creature peeks out.

Important: hidden in the foreground
Most carefully drawn
The dog smiles, his foreleg curled, his eye like an aster.
Nose and collar are made with great attention:
This dog is loved by Grace!

And there: the world!
Mailbox number 5
Is full of Valentines for Grace.
There is a name on the box, name of a family
Not yet ready to be written in language.

A spangled arrow there
Points from our Coney Island
To her green sun-hill.

Between our world and hers
Runs a sweet river:
(No, it is not the road,
It is the uncrossed crystal
Water between our ignorance and her truth.)

O paradise, O child's world!
Where all the grass lives
And all the animals are aware!
The huge sun, bigger than the house
Stands and streams with life in the east
While in the west a thunder cloud
Moves away forever.
No blade of grass is not blessed
On this archetypal hill,
This womb of mysteries.

I must not omit to mention a rabbit
And two birds, bathing in the stream
Which is no road, because

Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!

I CHOSE MY TITLE, 'To Credit Marvels' from one of the seminal poems in the work of Seamus Heaney. Not because, like Thomas Merton's 'Grace's House' it is inspired by a picture but because it suggests something important in the work of great poetry. In Heaney's career it marks the moment he begins to move from the death-centred earth to the freedom of the air, from the unredeemed physicality of nature to the secret places where deeper mysteries are at play. The journey from books whose titles reveal the journey: *Death of a Naturalist* to *The Spirit Level*. Remembering a painting of windmills and canals and the heaviness of earth and water he writes:

My silting hope. My lowlands of the mind.
Heaviness of being. And poetry
Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.
Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans

The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten,
Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.

Merton, too, is nearing fifty when 'Grace's House' is written and it is part of a collection of poetry, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* which include poems angry and apocalyptic "in the doldrums of what happens", but also poems which dance to fresh, bracing air. It is a vital collection for Merton. It opens the way for the final two poetic achievements of his life, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. In those works he finds a way to bring together all elements of his poetry and life and produce two sustained masterpieces whose importance is only slowly being recognised. The long kaleidoscope structures allowed him to bring into creative tension the land and the air, the weight of guilt and the freedom of grace, history and hope. In *Emblems of a Season Of Fury* we find several poems continuing Merton's explorations of the possibilities of anti-poetry which started with 'Original Child Bomb' (1962). These would include 'A Picture of Lee Ying', 'Chant to be used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces'. Generally it is accepted that Nicanor Parra is the founder of the Anti-Poem, but in a 1965 letter to him Merton says:

I am happy that you are thinking about maybe translating some poems of mine: you will find that before knowing your work I had written some antipoems.

Indeed the influence of the poetry of South America will play like pan music to much of *Emblems* and reach orchestral level in his *A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadro Concerning Giants*. There also you will find his *Hagia Sophia*. This central text in Merton's life is many ways another version of 'Grace's House'. The happy coincidence of Grace's name (Jung's 'synchronicity') echoes the feminine principle of God which is lingered on and explored in *Hagia Sophia*. The poems of wonder in *Emblems* include some of the abiding poems of Merton's career. As well as 'Grace's House' we have also 'Song for Nobody', 'Love Winter when the Plant says Nothing', 'The Fall' and, supremely, 'Night-Flowering Cactus'. They are all poems of Eden, poems that attempt to name the earth in fresh, childlike innocence. To cut through the metaphors and similes and say that we do exist in a redeemed world. If the anti-poetry is a powerful way of telling the hard truth about the "disgrace" of so many events in our history, those counterbalancing poems are efforts to speak the moments when redemption, grace, pours like rain on Kentucky woods. So many influences are at work

in giving Merton the freedom to write this new poetry. Obviously the draw of South America, also the enigmatic simplicity of Chuang Tzu and Merton's deep sympathy with the poetry of Louis Zukovsky. His later article on Zukovsky will be called 'The Paradise Ear' and it is a self-descriptive title also for the Merton of those poems.

The background of 'Grace's House' is simple. A letter from her father, a Quaker, includes a drawing by his five year old daughter, Grace. The first four verses are a quiet description of the drawing. Smoke rolls from the chimney, the blades of grass and the flowers are counted, the dog is caught with his foreleg curled. But even in those verses there are clues to something deeper. The girl's name in the title. The first phrase "On the summit" suggests some overview of creation. "No blade of grass is not counted" echoes with the phrase of Jesus Christ: "Not a hair of your head is not counted". Twelve flowers has its own biblical undertones in the sacred number. The final devastating line of the whole poem is already given in three lines of verse two: "There is no path to the summit—/No path drawn/ To Grace's house". Here it is merely descriptive. Later, finally it becomes prescriptive, theological.

Verse Five introduces the world: "And there: the World!" It is a world seemingly benign—it sends Valentines for Grace. But Valentine cards are only a game, a pretence. Indeed part of the advertising world which will be one of the *tesserae* that make the mosaic of Merton's later work. At the end of Verse Five we find ourselves somewhere radically different. It is the first clue to the Eden theme of the poem. "There is a name on the ox, name of a family/ Not yet ready to be written in language". It is the time before the Fall, before the command to name the earth, to give titles to the animals etc. Paradise will not be specifically mentioned until Verse Eight: "O Paradise, O child's world!" but it is now established. That phrase from Verse Eight will echo around the last years of Merton's life. His hermitage will become his own 'Grace's House' and there he will enter fully the Blakean age of Innocence before the mystery of life. His article on Zukovsky will say:

The speech of the child is paradise speech for it familiarly addresses all things, not yet knowing them as alien and anticipating nothing from them but joy...

'Grace's House' only very tentatively suggests the alien in the world beyond "this archetypal hill". The "spangled arrow" which "Points from our Coney Island/ To her green sun-hill" is a distant war-dance on other summits at the beginnings of the conquest of America, and Coney Island is the New York of *Lograire*. Indeed some of the geographical divisions of *Lograire* will emerge in Verse Eight. "The huge sun, bigger than the house/ Stands and streams with life in the east/ While in the west a thunder cloud/ Moves away forever". At once just a comment on the child's drawing, but it implicates his own movement towards the East and his long, lifelong, involvement in the critique of the "thunder clouds" of war and nuclear weaponry.

Verse Nine names the child-vision as "This womb of mysteries" and again there is a hint of the Christ image of the need for rebirth if we are to know God, to be aware of grace everywhere. This vital awareness is directly stated in the preceding verse: "And all the animals are aware". One is reminded of the Buddhist notion of "mindfulness" which would have such a profound influence on Thomas Merton. The final two verses gather up the two elements of the poem. More items from the drawing are placed: "I must not omit to mention a rabbit/ And two birds, bathing in the stream..." In every major poet (and I believe that from this collection on, Merton is that) every word chosen enters the magnetic field of attraction. They draw in other uses of those words and here we are feeling the pull of "the birds of appetite and paradise" and the birds which are his companions in the woods. The stream inevitably must be the Heraklitean river, that stream which is the very landscape of his entire life. His willingness to trust himself to a "river which is never crossed twice". 'Grace's House' develops this theme in its last lines: "And two birds, bathing in a stream/ Which is no road, because/ Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!".

This poem will have other effects. It will become the title poem of a German selection of his poetry (with an interesting introduction by Hans Urs von Balthasar). A choice which delighted Merton. It will also become the source of two letters (one to Grace's father, Elbert R. Sisson, and the other to Mark Van Doren) which will be among the 'Cold War Letters' (94 & 99). Some five years later in a letter to Grace herself, Merton will include a phrase which in turn will become the title of one of the Volumes of his Letters, "Road to Joy".

I would like to finish this reflection with that letter. It gives us the heart of the poem, it also reveals the heart of Merton, the reason we are here today, the reason he will continue to be one of the few who spoke the truth of our century out of his immersion in truths beyond this century, beyond time, out of the paradise eye and ear of one who recovered his childhood before the God who walked in Eden in the cool of the evening. The letter was written in May 1967.

Of course I remember you and your drawing. If I did not answer in a big hurry, it was because I have a lot of letters to answer and have a difficult time doing that. But I want especially to thank you for your note and for your new drawing which is very significant. I like the way you see all the little creatures tending towards a tree which is a sort of tree of life. I am glad you still draw things with love and I hope you will never lose that. But I hope that you and I together will secretly travel our own road to joy, which is mysteriously revealed to us without our exactly realising. When I say that, I don't want you to start thinking about it. You already know it without thinking about it.

So do we all, thanks to Thomas Merton. Thank You.