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 sitting 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.
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 pretense. 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...
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.