

Merton and the Changing Days
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One aspect of Merton's writing which tends to be neglected is his attention to the detail of weather.

In both The Sign of Jonas and A Vow of Conversation there is woven in to the text of his own growth and development descriptions of the particular day that place so much of his writing in context.

Merton manages to use these weather pointers to mark up the text in a sharp and immediate manner. Take for example the opening sentences of VOW:

Yesterday the year drew to a quiet curious end with an eclipse of the moon. The novices and I went out into the fierce zero cold and stood in the darkness of the garden while a last flake of light resisted for a long time the swallowing globe of dark.

There is a sense here of closure, of the year-end being marked by an event of significance. The silence of the group standing in this 'fierce zero cold' brings these men together into a unity with their environment.

That same phrase 'Zero cold' comes back again in the entry for 30th November 1964 in his description of the night in the woods around the hermitage:

Night. Zero cold. Frozen leaves crackling like glass under my feet on the path through the woods.

With an economy of words he invokes the experience of his walk back through the woods in the late Autumn night to his bed.

And further, for 14th January we find:

It is zero weather. The novitiate thermometer, which is quite conservative, registered ten above, both others were claiming that their thermometers were ten below. The snow is deep, it sparkles in the sun under the trees.

Earlier that month, 3rd January and a cheerful, encouraging start to the entry that day.

Warm wind. Bright sun. Melting snow. Water off the roof splashing in all the buckets around the hermitage.

In this direct and brief manner the day is described and a mood evoked. Although it is not directly pertinent to the rest of the detail in that entry, it realises the day in a way that would make the entry poorer without it. In a similar manner in JONAS he starts the entry for 3rd December in a factual way, terse way:

Rain. It is cold.

The extremes of weather that he experienced, especially in the time spent at the hermitage soon become apparent and with this experience the direct influence that living this close to the natural environment had on him.

Early in February 1964, an entry in VOW that discusses Sartre begins with six words that, almost in themselves, are a reflection of Sartre:

Cold wind, dark sky and sleet.

Later that month on the 11th, his reference to the weather takes him back to a recollection of his time in Cambridge, in England, a whole world away from Gethsemane, but not forgotten.

Today, brilliant snow, never so blinding. Pale bright blue sky such as I have sometimes seen in England on rare days in East Anglia. All the trees are heavy with snow and hills hang like white clouds in the sky.

The following month, with the Winter near its end and the prospect of Spring round the corner, the rain and winds of March constitute the opening paragraph for that entry - 10th March:

Heavy and steady rain with high winds for two days on end, and much rain before that. The Ohio Valley is probably flooded. Here, there is water everywhere. Streams come from everywhere and all night the air is full of the rushing of water and of wind.

Wonderful black skies hang over the woods and there is a great strong expectancy of spring in all the wet black trees. There is a yellow waterfall rushing over the new dam down at the waterworks.

His awareness of the experience beyond the walls of the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Ohio Valley flooding serves to emphasise what he is actually experiencing.

A March entry some seventeen years earlier in JONAS uses the record of the weather as a direct reflection of his own position at that time:

Last night it snowed again and there is a fairly thick blanket of snow on the ground and under the trees. The sky looks like lead and seems to promise more. It is about as dark as my own mind. I see nothing. I understand nothing. I am sorry for complaining and making a disturbance. All I want is to please God and to do His will.

And early the next month, on Good Friday, he records

It is raining. The best place to hide, this afternoon, was in church. It rained hard and you could hear the rain beating all over the long roof.

Just as the rigours of Winter, the cold and the wet are acutely presented in the entries already mentioned, so too are the problems of the Kentucky Summer.

Take for example this entry from JONAS, for 8th August 1947,

Hot, sticky weather. Prickly heat. Red lumps all over your neck and shoulders. Everything clammy. Paenitentiam agite! It is better than a hairshirt.

Or again, in VOW for 2nd August 1964:

It is very hot, steamy and clammy. The tropics have nothing we don't have here in summer except thicker vines and more spectacular snakes
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and the next day:

Hottest day yet. Sweat all over everything. It is difficult to get any work done.

The prefigurement of Autumn comes over in the entry towards the end of that month, for 24th August:

A wonderful sky all day, beginning with the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock at dawn. Scores of streaks and tiny blue-grey clouds flung like blotches all over it. Before my conference (on Liturgy and on a recent Reinhold article), deep clear blue sky with astonishing small luminous clouds, than which I never saw lighter and cleaner! Exhilarating coolness and airiness of these little clouds!

This movement from Summer into Autumn continues with the opening lines for 12th September.

This is everything that a September day ought to be. Brilliant blue sky, kind sun, cool wind in the pines.

and later in the same entry:

Tiny delicate fishbones of clouds in the sky. Harps of sound in the sweet trees, long shadows on the grass. The distant bottom land is flat, level and brown; plowed and harrowed.

Back in September of 1949, he recorded in JONAS for the first day of the month:

This morning, under a cobalt blue sky, summer having abruptly ended, I am beginning the Book of Job. It is not warm enough to sit for long in the shade of the cedars. The woods are crisply outlined in the sun and the clamour of distant crows is sharp in the air that no longer sizzles with locusts.

How much weaker it would have been to have started this entry: "I am beginning the Book of Job this morning"

The mention of 'summer having ended abruptly' reminds me of a journal entry by Newman in the autumn of 1826

"... after a most glorious Summer, there was a week of pouring rain, and then it was fine again and the sky as radiant as the week before. But the season was changed - the ground had been thoroughly chilled, and never recovered itself. Autumn had unequivocally set in, and the week of wet divided the two seasons, as by a river. And so I think I have now passed into my Autumn ..."
(Quoted in Kerr: Newman: A biography Pg 400)

The movement into Autumn is later reinforced when, Merton notes on 14th September:

There has been a legal change of seasons, and the monastic fast has begun today. It is cool again, and the leaves of the sycamores are already beginning to turn yellow and brown. We brought down our mattresses and blankets from our dormitory cells and spread them out in the bright September sun.

The rhythm of the seasons and the life of the community, neatly brought together in a few words.

The city dweller has come to ignore much of the day to day variation in weather and the passing of seasons. By and large, our activity of earning our living goes on irrespective of the changing patterns of weather. Only the

extremes get recognition or weather that is deemed to be unsuitable for our recreation. No more is this true than in our failure to notice the phases of the Moon.

Merton brought this into sharp focus at the end of 1964 when he wrote - 29th December: VOW

At last there is light again. First there were some stars here and there when I first got up at 2.15. Then a surprise. In an unexpected corner of the woods, the thin last slice of leftover moon, the last moon of 1964. The sun came up at 8.05. Our time is unnatural, as we are on Eastern Standard.

Then there was the extraordinary purity and stillness and calm of that moment of sunrise and renewal. Peace in the woods and the valley. Out there somewhere a heifer salutes the morning with enthusiastic lowing.

Just as the start of the year is marked by the moon's cycle, so too is its passing.

Merton 'saw' at a natural level in a manner that many of us have forgotten, or worse still, have never even experienced. He noticed the passing of the Seasons and that recognition infused his whole being, and truly affected him in the fullest sense.

May be that "seeing", that "affection" is the real beginning of prayer.

