

Merton, Whitman, Berry

Frederick Smock

While reading Thomas Merton's 'Wisdom', it occurred to me that perhaps these lines have some poetic correspondences. Merton's poem reads, in its entirety:

*I studied it and it taught me nothing.
I learned it and soon forgot everything else:
Having forgotten, I was burdened with knowledge –
The insupportable knowledge of nothing.*

*How sweet my life would be, if I were wise!
Wisdom is well known
When it is no longer seen or thought of.
Only then is understanding bearable.*

Clearly, in Merton's view, knowledge is not, in itself, wisdom. Less clearly, wisdom exists beyond the knowable. So, of what does he speak? Any direct approach to wisdom—enlightenment?—might seem bound to fail. Perhaps one must seek to 'tell the truth/but tell it slant', as Emily Dickinson suggested. Somehow, indirection seems to be called for. The indirection of poetry? Yet perhaps not even this will work. You will note that Merton's poem ends on a chord of wishfulness, plus paradox.

Well. In the realm of correspondences, Merton's poem sent me to Walt Whitman's 'When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer'. This poem reads, in its entirety:

*When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*

Whitman, too, exults in the mysterious ways of the universe, which remain beyond human reason. And he does not want to trade the experience of these mysteries for their explana-

tion. 'Mystery', I suppose, means an enlightened form of not-knowing. Of ignorance, even.

Well. Whitman's poem sent me to Wendell Berry's 'Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front', and the lines that read:

*Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.*

It might seem strange for a learned man like Wendell Berry to praise ignorance, until we remember the context out of which (and against which) he writes—that of the murderous agricultural, military and social technologies of the twentieth century. His 'Manifesto' is a smart, cranky litany of ways to subvert the dominant paradigm:

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.*

Another of Berry's poems, 'To the Unseeable Animal', carries as its epigram a comment that his daughter made when she was still quite young: 'I hope there's an animal somewhere that nobody has ever seen. And I hope nobody ever sees it.' It is a prescient comment. And we can understand why her father liked that observation, and also why he shares that hope.

Merton was certainly well informed about mankind's destructive—and self-destructive—proclivities. He decided away his munitions stocks upon entering the monastery. He deplored the war in Vietnam. He wrote of the inhumanity of the modern military technologies—at the end of his poem 'Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces', he chastised:

*Do not think yourself better because you burn up
friends and enemies with long-range weapons without
ever seeing what you have done.*

And yet, as he wrote in his prologue to *No Man Is an Island*, 'No matter how ruined man and his world may seem to be, and no matter how terrible man's despair may become, as long as he continues to be a man his very humanity continues to tell him that life has a meaning.' All hope is not lost.

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