

Grace's House  
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Whilst delighted to receive my copy of the first issue of the Merton Journal I found I could still be dismayed by the same old things that always dismay and sadden me. I will give you a few examples. The 1995 ITMS Program organisers talk about being "swept up"; somebody else says "he sweeps us away". But there is no such place as "away" to be swept away to.

And in the 'Guidelines for forming a Chapter' the suggestions - and don't let me be misunderstood, they are very helpful suggestions - involve no doubt a flurry of faxes, telephone calls, tape recorders and so forth but appear to set aside no time for shared stillness or silent contemplation. The Fourth General Meeting sounds even more hectic! A short period of silence, if only five minutes, might help to remind us that silence is not something separate from busi-ness, but on the contrary, the place where it is grounded.

An example of this silence can be found in Pdraig Daly's delightful and accurate poem, Merton In Advent (cf Merton Journal Vol.1 No. 1 page 14). Again, the waiting, for me, is not waiting for something to come from somewhere else but rather waiting for the realisation that it is already here: waiting on God, rather than waiting for God (as if he were a kind of train that's hopelessly unreliable!).

Something the poet Elizabeth Bishop writes from Key West in 1940 comes to mind, perhaps the most severe thing I have come across her saying in her letters. She is describing the Key West 'season':

"I am utterly disgusted with 'social-conscious' conversation - by people who always seem to be completely unconscious of their surroundings and other people's personalities. I am going to take him to church to see if I can instil a little respect!"

Just the job for a poet, I say! The poet reminds us to come back to the present, to slow down. If we don't look for God in the present, we will never find Him. Or, to put it another way, for those like myself, who feel uncomfortable with a Christian vocabulary:

'unless we look for it in the present, we will never find it'.

It is from this 'home' of awareness that I have become a poet. Yes, a poet describes, but in describing we exalt and celebrate. Poetry is prayer, a special kind of prayer. It is a way of doubting. It comes to no conclusions, has no agenda. Far from being well behaved, like little girls in party dresses, good

poets, like good monks, are free and cool and subversive. Not unlike Muhamed Ali's ideal of a boxer, in fact, who:

"floats like a butterfly, stings like a bee".

Last year, Thomas Merton was the subject of a poem which won me a sort of fun prize - the writer of the best first lines of a poem written in 1993. The lines were:

"What are fields for?

To go long-jumping with you and Thomas Merton on".

I record this partly out of pride, it's true, but really because I want to share with you the thrill of solidarity I feel with Merton and it is from this perspective of fellow poet that I invite you to look more closely with me at one of his poems in particular, 'Grace's House'.

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, cosmic 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!

'Grace's House', a very simple poem of the 'middle years' was written in response to a drawing Grace's mother had sent Merton in 1962. It touched him deeply. No, deeply is the wrong word. Sweetly, directly, like a rag of innocent light. The poem begins:

"On the summit: it stands on a fair summit".

The most important thing to be established right away is the house and its position, 'secure', with 'solid' smoke. Here is a house to take refuge in, to shelter from homelessness - homelessness, of course, being a subject close to Merton's heart. (It is very touching to think of the child Grace helping him to feel part of her family, sharing it with him and showing him her drawings).

The second stanza moves on to the garden. It begins:

"No blade of grass is not counted,  
No blade of grass forgotten on this hill".

This always reminds me of the 'motto' I had written on the front of my notebook one year - 'no snowflake falls in the wrong place', the negative only serving to emphasise the epiphanic quality of each flake, each blade. The counting itself is like a blessing, an acknowledgement, a naming. Flannery O'Connor, the novelist and correspondent of Merton, describes her work as:

"the accurate naming of the things of God"

Merton honours this in Grace's drawing:

"No blade of grass is not blessed".

He goes on to describe the windows, their curtains:

"arranged not for hiding but for seeing out".

It reminds me of that wonderfully inspiring passage where Merton says:

"The night was never made to hide love. The night was made to send us to the stars. Being with God is not playing Hide and Seek. God's house, like Grace's, is an open house".

Czeslaw Milosz the Polish poet puts it this way:

"The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors and invisible guests come in and out at will".

Merton especially delights in a face that 'looks out and winks'. I love that wink for it seems to say 'don't wait, don't worry, just wink! God is here.' The cosmic joke. And the dog smiles, 'his eyes like an aster', the dog who is 'loved by Grace'. He is obviously a friend of the dog lying around happily in the poem of another American poet I mentioned earlier, Elizabeth Bishop. Let me quote the last stanza of her poem 'Filling Station' written about the same time as 'Grace's House':

'Somebody embroidered the dolly.  
Somebody waters the plant,  
or oils it, may be. Somebody

arranges the rows of cans  
so that they softly say:  
Esso - so -so so -so  
to high strung automobiles.  
Somebody loves us all".

The cellars in Grace's drawing, like the dolly at the garage, are drawn 'with great attention'. This is what Merton cherishes most of all, attention. To quote another, earlier poem I have always loved, "Three Postcards from the Monastery":

It is because the sun shines on the shallows  
like a cannonade ...  
because the cloudy sea hailing the cliffs  
as loud as promises,  
Saluting all the continent with foaming orchestras,  
raided the shore with tons of silver"

Describing, extolling, 'saluting', it all comes down to this - the silence Padraig Daly offers us so carefully at the end of his poem "Thomas Merton"

"And there is little you can send us out of your silence  
Except to say that it is".

The mailbox is full of what? Of 'valentines for Grace'. How Merton loves to see her being loved! And the drawing itself is a valentine for Merton - as everything is, once we learn to see it that way. The blades of grass, the snowflakes, all little nameless gifts.

But then, in the seventh of ten stanzas, we are introduced to the river, to the division between 'our' world and 'her' world, our ignorance and her truth, her Paradise, where 'all animals are aware'. It runs like Lethe or the Stream of Unknowing, sweet, uncrossed and crystal:

'the stream which is no road'.

The poem ends with the charming nursery - like image:

'I must not omit to mention a rabbit  
And two birds bathing'.

An image which makes us see vividly not only the order and innocence of Grace's world, but the world which is around us all, and which we are part of, but which, without the help of artists, of their 'rinsed eyes' as Seamus Heaney describes it, of artists such as Grace and Thomas Merton to bear witness to it.

For as Merton says in the line he closes with:

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

No road to find. No road to lose. I would suggest we are already there, the birds and the rabbits - I know it sounds very simple - bathing at our feet.

