

Desmond  
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## CONTEMPLATION REVISITED

Thomas Merton says

May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh  
If I forget thee, contemplation!  
May language perish from my tongue  
If I do not remember thee, O Sion, city of vision,

Whose heights have windows finer than the firmament  
When night pours down her canticles  
And peace sings on the watchtowers like the stars  
of Job.

These are the last two stanzas of his version of the Waters of Babylon which, for some reason, I found quite striking when I read it a few weeks ago. I can even sit down and weep about it, in favourable circumstances. I always had a soft spot for Thomas Merton, especially since he electrocuted himself when plugging in his fan at siesta time in Bangkok. He blew his body that time, not his mind - at least not only. It somehow makes him seem like a man who was struck by lightning, now.

I am not unduly "religious" but I feel I know what he means when he goes on about "contemplation". Whatever he did, or believed in order to do so, does not seem <sup>to</sup> matter so much as contemplation itself, which we might define for the moment as knowledge undistorted by lies and unrestricted by cowardice - beholding the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

That is what must not be forgotten: the truth of prodig-

ious facts like my own death, all that nothing between the stars at night, photosynthesis, my birth (not to mention yours, whoever comes to read me now), Hundertwasser's radiant egg and glue and acrylic pictures, that each of us is alone, some of Fellini's scenes, that we were made to live together - my list would be different from yours, probably. The point is not the list, nor is it what is esoteric or "heightened awareness", etc., but the inescapable truth, that sets you free precisely when you fail to escape from it. The outrage of time passing, for instance, can seem altogether too much to bear until perhaps suddenly one day the sky opens for a moment, so to speak, and you see in the gap that this atrocious fact of ineluctable time makes all things well, not just well but excellent. It is discovered. What was covered up is uncovered.

Such discoveries are important to us. Even Aristotle said so, and a lot of our energy goes almost instinctively into finding or building or protecting those "windows finer than the firmament" through which they can be seen, lest they should ever be forgotten. Surely this is what Lucia Joyce was trying to do with her illuminated letters for the Book of Kells, and saint Anthony when he climbed wide awake into a tomb, and blazing Pascal when he wrote on a piece of paper dated 23 November 1654, "FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace," and stitched it into the lining of his coat.

To some extent such knowledge can be transmitted from person to person, and this leads to an important strategy for

keeping it alive, and one that every philosophy and religion seems to have tried in one way or another: banding together. Not only Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Christians, Marxists and Buddhists, but Jains, Pythagoreans, Oddballs, Maoists, Confucians, Presbyterians, Hippies, Trappists, Freudians, Freemasons, Impressionists and Hangers-on as well. Even prophets tend to stick together and set up prophecy schools, we are told. There is some logic in this. If you have seen something you look for others who have seen it or could see it too. Sanity is not statistical, but people need to communicate, maybe as much as they need to eat and drink. Non-communicants starve in one way or another, because we seem to have to do it, just as a blackbird has to sing.

Thus, to take an example that is well known, especially to Westerners, a few people felt that a Jewish political prisoner had sort of come back to life after his execution, in a very important way. Felt, what am I writing - they knew it, they had seen it, it was the all-determining fact, it was the paradigm shift of a lifetime. This Easter sense made them into a band of the enlightened, and it was a light to which others were susceptible as well. It was the right moment; Judaism was a bit stale, Roman politics were losing their grip, Greek philosophy was wearing thin. So these people who felt as if they had just had a sight-restoring operation successfully formed a community, then communities, of people who saw things the same way, or said they did, or thought they did, or ought to, or would if they persevered.

Lots of people joined and they had holy communion together. Since they had the key to happiness and peace it was

evidently their duty to pass it on to others. They got it worked out so well philosophically, poetically, psychologically and socially that they were relatively successful in spreading, over the centuries, though the movement had its ups and downs, of course.

Community played an important part in that process, to say the least. It is hard to imagine how an insight, even a strong one, at least of that kind, could have taken such a hold without it. Who would have copied out the story again and again, and sung the songs about it and rung the bells about it at the right time in the day, the week, the month, the year, the century, if not the Brothers of Saint Patrick and the Callesantine Sisters and all the rest? Nothing short of a full-scale, full-time propaganda operation could have had such far-reaching results.

On the whole, it could be argued that this was a good thing, in many ways. It did form a kind of universe of discourse, after all, which perhaps made it possible over several generations for individuals at certain moments in their lives to see what seemed to be the whole truth and have ways in which to express it, which, as we have argued, is important. Also, an advantage this set-up had over some of the other totalitarianisms was that its primary and ultimate reference point was God, which is by definition indefinable.

God, the Dominant, the Alpha and Omega, the Hidden, the Unknown, dieser dunkle Macht, the all and no-thing and so on ad infinitum (another important attribute) was supposed to be in charge of these communities, and though this could not be defined it was to some extent definite, if only in terms of

what it was not. It was not the world, or money, or even the Church, or the State, or any person, or the community, or its leaders - no, no, it was God. You learnt that in the novitiate. As long as you were clear about it you could be a sane, healthy human being. Even Brother Lawrence, obediently peeling potatoes in the kitchen, tapping his foot to Gregorian pop music, was a free man as long as he could keep it straight in his head that he belonged in the most sacred sense to God, not to the monastery, that they were two completely different things, indeed they were as opposite as two things can be.

As soon as he forgot that he only gave his body to the monastery so he could give his soul to God he started turning into a moron. To give your soul to a group of men is a particularly perverse way to commit suicide - slow and painful too. To believe in some befuddled way that this crew is somehow God or "the corporate Messiah" would obviously be a frustrating business at the best of times, which can only lead to lunacy when taken at all seriously.

This of course happened to the monasteries and convents in various horrible ways, as Christendom rolled along, and because it happened within a deliberately rigged environment of consciousness it was very hard to change. A religious house manufactures its own brand of truth, and this in itself is almost inevitably a disastrous enterprise. Whoever challenges it from the inside is felt to be a mere apostate, whereas the outside challenger evidently does not understand. Not only that but if a member of a convent, for example, seriously

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questions what is going on she is liable to be sawing away... at the branch she is sitting on, because she feels she needs this universe of discourse, weird though it may have become, as well as this board and keep, just in order to survive. Both psychologically and economically, the cards are stacked against her. Consequently, such communities can get curiouser and curiouser without anyone having the heart to say so, or even realize.

It took Martin Luther several centuries of hesitation to work up enough courage to observe publicly that he thought, as far as he could make out, there was something screwy about the whole situation. Were people better off when he got those 95 good points off his chest at last? Definitely. Quite apart from the truth of them, the spectacle of someone actually saying what he singular really and seriously thought was marvellous, was a revolution in itself. People were free again, at least while they were in the process of liberating themselves from all the flapdoodle with which the bishops, abbots and other officials, brothers and sisters were trying to keep them hypnotized.

It seems to be a law of freedom movements, however, that they begin without delay to solidify the new great leaders' thoughts on the meaning of life and politics and God, getting out of one box only to shut themselves into another as quickly as possible. Often it is narrower and more uncomfortable than the one they were in before.

During the uprising they say, "Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me", or words to that effect. But after a little while they forget about that - they forget contemplation,

to use the idiom we started with - and you hear them saying in all sorts of dreary ways, "Not the wind, not the wind, but the group it once blew through". Often, as in the case of the communist movement, which was supposed to be the final answer to all this lying, and the sects with their jazzier but more feeble-minded good news, all that has happened is that they have changed from one diet of brainwashing to another - a hopelessly unbalanced and deficient one, that makes them madder and more miserable than ever.

They start with a hunger and thirst for the truth but at this point in their history they bore each other to death trying to remember what is "our wisdom" about things. Exhausted, they either drag themselves away in confused silence or go on repeating various kinds of rot to each other for old times' sake. "After all", they say, "What would I do if I wasn't the slave of the Group? Who would I talk to, if not the people to whom I have given my soul? And what would I say? And what would I live on?" They are tethered to it. Their bones burn, ravens eat their flesh, language perishes from their tongue. By trying to make and keep their own communion holy they have lost the blessing of communication.

It is time to remember thee, contemplation, city of vision. It is time for a discovery. Friedensreich Hundertwasser, an Austrian artist, talked about this kind of situation recently. English is not his first language, nor is language his first medium, but the following remark is full of promising suggestions as to what might be done:

A structure of lies collapses.

One only has to make light and the nightmare disappears like as if you open your eyes and one is no longer in the dark.

There are painters, thank God, who go their own way, imperturbable, strong and free.

They spread the good and the beautiful.

They have an aura like a dark glowing.

They are our hope.

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