



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



A Monk-Poet

by Father Ralph Wright, OSB

A.E.Housman in his lecture on The Name and Nature of Poetry seemed to suggest that if he went to a pub, had a cheese sandwich and a pint of beer, and then went for a walk on, say Hampstead Heath or the hills of Ludlow, where the beer had gone bubbling down, the poetry would come bubbling up. It may have worked for him, but Father Ralph's experience is different. He describes it here. Ed.]

When people ask me if I am a poet I sometimes answer that I *have been*. The most fundamental fact in my experience of writing poetry has always been the gratuitous and unexpected “happening” of a poem. Although there have been several occasions in my life when I have hoped to e-voke or pro-voke the ‘happening’ of a poem, I have not personally had any success in this “planned” kind of way. In this, for me at least, the process differs from that employed by at least some novelists. One hears of Graham Greene sitting down in the morning, writing for a couple of hours and then in the evening reviewing, rewriting, correcting or perfecting what he had written in the morning. Poetry has not happened in that way for me.

On the other hand I have found hymn writing, whether composing original hymns or translating from Latin, a task that I could achieve through planning. I would create a hymn-writing-friendly environment, go to that place at a planned time, then just sit down and write. It has frequently happened that the eventual success of the “work” was unconnected with the “friendliness” of the environment. Of several hymns that I wrote for ICEL back in 1978 starting in the Berkeley University Library in Oakland, California, the translation that proved most successful was written on the Greyhound bus returning to Missouri.

If this is by way of a brief and preliminary observation about my experience of poetry and hymn writing; how does the monk part fit in? Well, it is simply a monk who is doing it. The monk is one who, in the case of St Louis Abbey, is attempting to be faithfully living the Rule of St Benedict, written some 1500 years ago, as it is now interpreted through the Constitutions of the English Benedictine Congregation, to which St Louis Abbey belongs, and through the Customary of St Louis Abbey itself. The Customary gives the nitty-gritty details of how we expect ourselves and our brethren to obey the Rule in our day-by-day lives as monks. The Abbot, of course, is the one who puts the fire under the pot from time to time in his chapters. He alerts us to those specific areas of our life in the abbey that currently seem, through laxity, to need our attention—which strings on the violin need to be tightened if we are to bring our life back into tune. St Benedict envisaged the monastic life as one, continuous, patient, expectant attempt to live our lives in harmony with the will of God, keeping in mind Jesus' own statement that he came not to do his own will but the will of ‘the one who sent me’ (Jn.6:38). We, as monks, attempt to follow in his footsteps. We believe that the will of our “Father in heaven” is revealed through faithful observance of the Rule as revealed *to* us in the way described above and as interpreted *by* us moment by moment in the ever-varied and ever-changing events of each monastic day.



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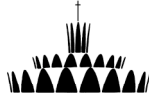
Bearing these ideas in mind we might say that the ‘Monastic Way’ echoes the ‘Poetic Way’. A poem is always, in my experience, a blend of the expected and the unexpected. Metre, Rhyme, Beat, Consonance, Assonance, Metaphor, Simile—all are blends of repetition and variety, of rule and exception, of evoking through a figure of speech something *other* than what one is literally talking about. A successful poem “comes off” because in some mysterious way the overall effect achieves a resolution and a unity; an experience is shared with the reader that is both mysterious and revelatory. It leads the reader into mystery or wonder, and awakens part of his human experience that perhaps he had barely recognized before.

In monastic life the monk, through his life according to the Rule, experiences the same kind of blend. Praying alone, praying in choir; reading alone, listening to reading in choir; working alone, working with people; recreating alone, recreating in community—all are regulated by the Rule as articulated through the schedule of the monastery blended with the individual monk’s personal schedule. Each day becomes a poem—a poem of predictabilities and surprises; man proposing, God disposing. And every day and every hour and every minute and every second remain unique and unrepeatable. Each poem, too, that is successful is a new ‘word’ or, as T.S. Eliot put it ‘a raid on the inarticulate.’

At Ampleforth from 1959 to 1962 I wrote maybe half a dozen poems and a few hymn translations. While I was at St Benet’s Hall, Oxford reading Classics from 1962 to 1966 a few more came and I had my first poems published in *The Tablet*. Between 1966 and 1970 I was in Fribourg, Switzerland studying Theology. Not many poems came during those years. After my arrival in St Louis in 1970 poetry, encouraged by Fr Austin Rennick, became a regular occurrence—it continues to be so today. Over the years I have grown more able to diagnose the symptoms of an approaching poem in the same way, perhaps, that one can detect the approach of a snowstorm in winter—a certain kind of hush; and animals and birds seeming to hunker down or disappear. But sometimes the diagnosis is false and no poem arrives. At others the event is totally unpredictable. I have told the story of one such ‘unpredictable’ poem far too many times but perhaps it bears repetition here, since it is a perfect instance of what I am describing. A poem came to me when I was doing marathon preparation running at 4.00 a.m. one morning. Not wanting to miss the poem or mess up my careful “running program”, I captured it by stopping by at St John’s Mercy Emergency Room (I happened to be jogging past the hospital at the time) and asking the surprised nurse on duty for a pen and paper. This particular poem has turned out to be perhaps the most important of my life. It expresses the insight that God’s unique love for every human being he has ever created is best analogized with spousal imagery: this is what it *means* when we say that each person is *unique* and that God in Jesus would have died for each person even if that person had been the only one he had created. This is what it means to say that God’s love for each is unconditional and absolute.

From All Eternity

from all eternity
You chose me



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



as if to be
your only spouse
in time
may I choose You
to be mine

In this case it was a whole poem that came suddenly out of the blue and at an inappropriate time. But there have been many times when a line or even a word has come during the praying of a psalm at Matins and I have had to act, expeditiously but discreetly, to capture it. Sometimes I have slunk (used here in a transitive sense!) my black diary out from my pants' hip pocket under my all-covering cowl, have felt my way to the pen at the back, have opened what I hoped would be a blank page and have scratched the crucial words on what I hoped would be blank paper. Later in the day I would examine the book, attempt to locate the entry and, if legible, transcribe the words into a safer place. Perhaps this kind of event illustrates the flexibility dimension of the monk-poet in his attempt to blend Rule and 'inspiration.' Fr Austin told me in the early 70s that I should treat my poetic gift seriously and not regard it as purely recreational. If it is God speaking then I should, he seemed to suggest, turn my "head-set" on. It may be presumptuous for me to think that it is always God but I try to turn on any way! I remember one night when I had flu I dreamt that I had just written a great song and was singing it in some kind of musical group. The words were very vivid and I woke up with them ringing in my mind. I was just too heavy with flu medication to get out of bed and write them down. When I woke up next morning they were totally gone.

I am very grateful indeed to the Lord for this gift that has brought agony as well as intense delight. Sometimes I think of Dylan Thomas' felicitous phrase "the momentary peace that is a poem." Clearly the monk-poet's life is no different from that of the monk-historian, monk-preacher, monk-math-man, monk-photographer, monk-painter, monk-juggler, monk-stained-glass-artist, monk-cook, monk-exegete etc etc—each has its own blend of order and chaos, toil and delight and in each the monk tries to do the Lord's will and to serve his neighbors, especially his monastic brothers, with gentleness and humility. He hopes they will put up with the particular batch of eccentricities that he exhibits which are, at times, part of his frailty and sinfulness and perhaps, at times, part of his gift.