

Inklings and Convergences among the “Janitors of Shadowland”

Review of

“White Gulls & Wild Birds”: Essays on C. S. Lewis,
Inklings and Friends & Thomas Merton

Edited by Ron Dart

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At the risk of sounding very much like the character Puddleglum in C. S. Lewis’ *The Silver Chair*, let me say that *“White Gulls & Wild Birds”* is not a very large book. For those seeking well-documented and cross-referenced comparisons and convergences of C. S. Lewis and Father Louis, OCSO (a.k.a. Thomas Merton), in all probability this work will take you in a different direction. If you were once enthralled by the busload of characters in Lewis’ *The Great Divorce* and its journey through darkness to light, you will find, as did I, that this is the book to tote on any journey “to there and back again” – with or without Master Bilbo Baggins. In my estimation, *“White Gulls & Wild Birds”* is like an apparition of Aslan that happens when “The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is morning . . . but the things that began to happen were so great and beautiful that . . .” (C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* 766). It becomes obvious that something has to be written and one facilitator/professor had the clarity of mind to tap into the resources before him and together they have produced this not-so-little book.

As a pastor and sometime teacher of adults I have often been aware that “gleanings” at the end of a course or sermon are very different among participants and worshippers from that which was intended from the lectern or pulpit. Thomas Groome, one of my professors at Boston College, once said (and here I paraphrase) that each of us walks a different path in life such that our journeys bring us to places where insights and sudden inklings break through. These are the “thin places between Heaven and Earth” where the soul opens and light flows in. The work that Ron Dart has tapped into in *“White Gulls & Wild Birds”* is one of those places. This is the result of process-learning that invites all the participants to own what they have experienced and to share what they have become as a learning community. It challenges the linkage of the intuitive and the rational. It takes us from the stasis of rational thought to a *praxis* of art and intuition; from experience to reflection and from conceptualization to experimentation; and back again to the experience.

Let me illustrate: in his introduction (1-7) to the essays framed by this book, Ron Dart not only reflects on his earlier years of study but includes experiences at Tintagel and Dartmoor National Park in the southwest of England. His images in the first paragraph opened for me sudden memories of a similar journey at about the same time, in 1976 when I stood beside my aunt doing dishes after

supper. She lived in Penrose Cottage, in the village of Rosnithan, Cornwall, near St. Kevern by the Sea, on a height of land overlooking the Manacle Rocks of the Lizard Point, not far from Penzance and Land's End. She began to sob deeply. Thinking that I had offended her, I asked what was happening. This marvellous woman, recently widowed by the death of my uncle Ernest (a survivor of the Dieppe raid in World War II), a woman who had raised two sons, one a professor of physics at Carlow in Ireland and the other a medical doctor, soon to be resident in Kent, haltingly expressed her disbelief in religion and the sentiment that I, a newly ordained priest, was throwing my life away and all for naught. We had suddenly entered the "shadow lands" between science and faith, between the logic of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis and the theologically contemplative approach in *The New Man* of Thomas Merton.

I did not have words to allay her fears that day, as Aunt Irene protested, "I tried prayer, and He didn't answer." The ideas would not fall into place until, as chance would have it, I read *Mere Christianity* and *The New Man* back-to-back, and discovered, as Ron Dart and his friends have suggested, that these mid-century authors were all of a piece and graced by innocence in a time of war. For both Lewis and Merton, their term "the New Man" describes the progress of faith and union with God. Lewis' Socratic methodology famously and publicly challenged the post-war era with his radio programs, saying:

Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. (*Mere Christianity* 188)

Merton seems to pick up this Promethean struggle in *The New Man* with a description of life's full meaning, saying: "True life . . . is not vegetative subsistence in one's own self, nor animal self-assertion and self-gratification. It is freedom transcending the self and subsisting in 'the other' by love. . . . The perfection of life is spiritual love. . . . Contemplation is the perfection of love and of knowledge" (*New Man* 13).

And so we turn to the various authors of "*White Gulls & Wild Birds*". Like finding the wardrobe in the attic, Stephen Dunning, in his chapter (8-16), introduces readers to their own journey with a consideration of the manner in which the work of "Inkling" Charles Williams enabled him to journey past the finitude and finality of his mother's objections concerning fantasy into the realms of believability. Many are the students who suffer through the assignments on Søren Kierkegaard or translations of Dante's *Divina Commedia* but Dunning, with the aid of the Inklings, recognizes their remarkable synchronicity and even the hand of Providence in his own life.

Katharine Bubel begins her chapter (17-26) with deeply personal experiences but finds a different kind of wardrobe or attic for us to climb through. In her discussion of *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, the book she pilfered profitably from her mother's library and turned into a Cairo Genizah like the room in which Solomon Schechter found the long-lost fragment of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, Bubel is able to revivify the oft-quoted *Hagia Sophia* as the Chokma of Hebrew Scriptures.

Her ability to wonder deeply is connected with her own affection for the parents who nurtured her appreciation of MacDonald, for surely, the love in MacDonald's marriage of fifty-plus years nurtured his own understanding that "The death that is in [us] shall be consumed. . . [and] all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed. And our God is a consuming fire" (22). This kind of insight would have been enough for the reader but (and it needs to be read in her words to be appreciated fully) her connection to Merton's "Fire Watch" and "Mercy within mercy within mercy" (25) is a remarkable example of divergent thinking becoming transformative reflection. Not only does she understand Merton's progression of thought but softly suggests the manner in which solitude and silence become pure communion. She is right to suggest a parallel between Diamond of *At the Back of the North Wind* and the "hard gem" (25) of Merton's suffering, and then to add as much about the squiggling worm that devoured the castor plant Jonah had come to depend on.

One of the endearing features of the *Chronicles of Narnia* is the ability of the children to move back and forth in time simply by passing through the door of the Wardrobe. Joy Steem brings this fantasy feature into play in her consideration of Madeleine L'Engle (27-33) by intertwining her own participation in a palliative care experience while listening to L'Engle's voice on an audiobook. Fantasy is a mechanism which breaks through the bounds of traditional religious terminology and other culturally restrictive mind-sets. This is the power of reflective observations which invite deeper assimilations of creativity subsequent to powerful personal experiences. "To be in a fantastic world is often to enter a realm where we are disburdened from intellectual-bound hesitations, assumptions, and prejudices; and, through L'Engle's fantastic world, I was invited into a deeper understanding of what it means to be on a path of spiritual development" (29). These insights work on many levels for they are prophetic, perceptive, intuitive and contemplatively graced but always having to "battle outside noise . . . a journey to peace in our hearts that our true selves need." Her insight is that "we are never truly and entirely without connection to someone" (31).

Others have commented (and the reference escapes me) that Merton's poetry and photographic art often depict windows and doors. They are symbols of the self between the interior and exterior silences we live every day. One can stand silently within, yet observe the world beyond or forsake the silence of solitude by stepping forth in the service of others. It is not simply a matter of character preference but a choice of being fully formed by sharing the spirit within. Matthew Steem (34-42) has linked his reflective observations to the on-going struggle of the true and false solitudes which challenge us all, for the regions where there is only life and therefore all that is not music is silence. On checking my own copy of *The Screwtape Letters*, which Steem quotes, I was delighted to find that we had highlighted the same text.

The final contributors to Puddleglum's "not a very large book" are those who complete the process of shared experiential learning. If David Kolb's theory is to hold true, the process of shared learning is cyclical in that our concrete experiences direct our reflective observations. These in turn focus on the abstract concepts that we own personally and which point us in a direction of applying what we have learned. Holding to the principle that it is possible to learn as much or more from our fellow students as we do from teachers and texts, eventually this brings us full circle to the question of how do I live all that I have learned. Jessica Lamb (43-48) was surprised to discover peaceful silence in the middle of a stream and a completely new transformative aspect of her life that was

so deep that “It was as if I had woken up for the first time” (45). Bill McGladdery (49-55), through the letters of C. S. Lewis, found not only the synchronicity of his own life and that of the famous author but also the power of expressing inner thoughts and feelings as a means of being more present to others. Wayne Northey (55-64), along with Daniel and Serena Klassen (65-71), discovered the value in reading those who are both intellectual and personally accessible. Heidi Rennert (72-77) was impressed by the compassion that others felt and Tyler Chamberlain (78-85) admits that the impact of Lewis was through his manner of dealing with profound intellectual matters. Together, all these generous and honest authors have introduced us to a treasure in our own culture, namely the place of truth and fantasy, of arts and letters, and of being personally present to others in our mutually conjoined journey on the bus. Job had his companions for the journey from darkness to light. From them he learned not only to hear their objections but also to hear the differences of the applications of faith and understanding. Ultimately, he had to learn, as Merton said in his final hours, to stand on his own feet.

This little book “*White Gulls & Wild Birds*” is indeed a very special work because those who ventured forth to write it have opened doors and windows of their hearts to the betterment of us all. Thomas Merton, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien and the Inklings have dared to make the world a better place by taking us on journeys of the inner and true self with the openness and joy of poetry and fantasy. It is there that we find our truth and God’s truth have become one.

Permit me one last extravagance: Tolkien was one of the principal collaborators in translation and literary revision of *The Jerusalem Bible* under the General Editor Alexander Jones. In chapter 38 of the Book of Job, Yahweh gives his answer from the heart of the tempest and in part says:

“Have you journeyed all the way to the sources of the sea,
 or walked where the Abyss is deepest?
 Have you been shown the gates of Death
 or met the janitors of Shadowland?
 Have you an inkling of the extent of the earth?
 Tell me all about it if you have.
 Which is the way to the home of the light,
 and where does the darkness live?”

And Job says: “My words have been frivolous: what can I reply?”