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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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WHEN ALL ELSE SEEMS TO FAIL,

"SEE THE BEAUTY!"

On our regular walk to & along the ocean last night, I said to Loree, "As war seems more & more probable, I'm praying harder & harder against it." She (as the kids say) went something like this: Remember the times we were with Frank Laubach, how he encouraged prayer not against but for? And I remembered of him not only that but the great & radiant beauty of his being shining in his craggy old face, the face of a man whom 96 governments invited to teach their peoples to read....I'm in self-contradiction when I pray for peace, for I believe (1) that Saddam's expansionist effort must fail in Kuwait as it failed in Iran, & (2) that only the destruction of his mischief-making powers (chemical, biological, nuclear) will clip his wings. But I'm clear that our need for **inner beauty**, my need for it, our country's need for it, the world's need for it, is unambiguous; & that anyone, anywhere, anytime can make a start at it, a new start; & that any human achievement in its absence will be, or become, demonic.

1 "Just wait till spring!" said an nonagenarian to me an hour ago. "It's going to be sooo beautiful! Yesterday I planted 150 bulbs!" **Beauty transcends time.** It's of the mind, of the soul. It's when we capture it out of the past & our past, when we experience it here & now, when we anticipate it in & beyond time. It participates in eternity, for it is a creature, a gift, a grace from the Eternal. That old codger's health is so iffy he may not make it till spring, but no matter: his soul has already seen next spring's flowers--& the flowers beyond, for his faith in the eternal Benevolence is bright & beautiful.

2 The invitation to "SEE the beauty!" could summarize the contribution of the great Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, for whom--even more than were truth & goodness--beauty was the door to God. But the words are from a nine-year-old girl a sheaf of whose poems were given me by a counselee, her mother, in deep distress because her husband, the girl's father, spent all his free time on his yacht, away from the family. The poems are in my #211, & I reproduce here only the one in which the girl is appealing to her father. (In another poem: "God is my Father. /....My father is not my Daddy. / He is just borrowing me...." And in another, of her parents: "I am whatGodgave to them to borrow.") The poem: "GO! / Rush Rush Rush! / Can you **stop**? / God can! / YOU CAN TRY IT! / Sit down, stay a while. / He doesn't mind. / He made **peace**. / He made the green grass, / He made the sky. / Come on, stop and look. / See the beauty!" I don't know the $ cost of purchasing & maintaining that yacht, but I do know the invisible cost was that yacht's demand (in the sense that things we own own us) that that father neglect his child, a cost no thing has any right demanding. One hopes that (as in this Thinksheet's first line) all else did fail for that stupid man. If all else did fail, would it be a punishment from God? Of course. Would it be a blessing from God? Of course. "Punishment" & "blessing" would be the same reality from two coigns of vantage, viz, respectively, the divine righteousness-wrath & the divine love-mercy.

3 I'm eager to tell you a wondrous tale of beauty. (Yes, that's what got me going on this Thinksheet.) It's about a shy 21-year-old introvert who was embarrassed when handed a peacock-feather tickler at the 1896 Oktoberfest, that raucous annual Munich beer-chaos Loree & I experienced 75 years later. Far from tickling anybody (as the game was), he couldn't bear even to look at others doing it, so he just stared at the feather, in custodia occulorum. This five years later, in a letter: "The longer I carried it around with me, the more did the slenderness of its form occupy me, how it swayed on its elastic stalk, and the beauty of its head, out of which the 'peacockeye' looked at me dark and secretly. I felt as though I were seeing such a feather for the first time, and it seemed to me to contain a whole profusion of beauties which no one noticed but I. And out of this feeling the little poem came into being, which I dedicated at that time to a dear friend, a painter, of whom I knew that he too loved peacockfeathers," and whose gift and work enabled him to appreciate them (having "a much closer relationship to colors than we") more--"the harmony in the variety and the multitude of colors, all together on such a little spot....

"But do you know what was to me the main thing about it: that I once more saw that most people hold a thing in their hands in order to do something silly with it (as for example tickling each other with peacockfeathers), instead of looking well at each thing and instead of asking each thing about the beauty it possesses. So it comes that most people do not know at all how beautiful the world is and how much glory is manifest in the smallest things, in some flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, or a birchleaf. Grown people, who have affairs and cares and torment themselves with a lot of trifles, gradually lose entirely their eye for these riches, which children, if they are attentive and good, soon notice and love with all their heart. And yet it would be nicest if everybody would always remain in this respect like attentive and good children, simple and devout in feeling, and if they would not lose the ability to rejoice as sincerely in a birchleaf or a peacock's feather or the wings of a marsh heron as in a great mountain range or a magnificent palace. The small is no more small than the big--is big. A great and eternal beauty runs through the whole world, and it is justly spread over the small things and the large; for substantially and essentially there is no injustice upon the whole earth. Thus, dear Helmuth, all hangs together a little with the poem about the peacockfeather, in which I could but badly express what I meant. I was still very young then. But now I know it better with every year and am always better able to tell people that there is a great deal of beauty in the world--almost only beauty." (Excerpts from this letter of 26-year-old RMR appear on pp.236, M.D.Herter Norton, TRANSLATIONS FROM THE POETRY OF RAINER MARIA RILKE [W.W.Norton/38/62]. The peacockfeather poem, on p.27, speaks of his childhood experience of peacockfeathers & of his connecting them in his child-mind with stories "good little Grandmama / often read me of wishing-wands," & of his own dreaming that peacockfeathers are "love-tokens... / elves in cool night hand each other, / when children are all gone to sleep," & even of peacockfeathers' having "the crafty force of the divining rod-- / (so I) sought you in the summer grass." In almost every child's mind, I am convinced, fireflylike poetic connections stich the darkness; but it is the poet who brings into the light the garment stiched in the darkness within, in inner beauty-truth-goodness-faith-hope-love. Romantic poets like Rilke are masters of the poetry of beauty and love. There is a cost, of course: while you're staring at beauty, you aren't seeing injustice & other uglinesses. But this Thinksheet presupposes that many of my readers, lately, have been staring too much at what's wrong with the world & neglecting that looking that heals, refreshes, & so energizes the soul that it glows in the sin-darkened world. And it may be that justice, as is true of happiness, can be deeply got at only indirectly, by aiming at something of which it's a byproduct, something deeper than fairness, something not of society at all but of the soul. Of that profounder something, beauty is at least a component. Flannery O'Connor celebrated that something as indirectly as we must get at happiness (and justice?). A noncommercial raiser of peafowl, she often floats on a peafeather, though wryly she says (p.213, LETTERS..., ed. by Sally Fitzgerald, Vintage/79) "the word *beauty* never crosses my lips." But hear her in her poem, "The Peacock Roosts" (p.56): "The clown-faced peacock / Dragging sixty suns / Barely looks west where / The single one / Goes down in fire." She doesn't have to use the word! "Sixty suns"! Her inner beauty, rooted in a radiant Catholic faith, let her hard-edged mind draw hard-nosed sketches of the hard world, & do so without cynicism.

4 Some human beings become, for those near if not also far, emblems-models of certain virtues, cardinal (prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice) & theological (faith, hope, love), &/or certain values (beauty, truth, goodness). When these exemplary lives have the effect of directing their attenders to God, the biblical word for them is "holy ones" (Fr., "saints"), for they bridge like Jacob's ladder from the Holy One to the common ones. (For the technical sense of "saints," see Ken Woodward's MAKING SAINTS [S&S/90], which he reviewed in 12 Nov 90 NEWSWEEK, pp.80f: "The primary purpose of canonization is to provide contemporary examples of holiness for the edification and...emulation of the faithful.")....When I think of that nine-year-old unofficial saint pleading with her father, the KJV phrase "the beauty of holiness" springs to mind. And my Shakespeare-spouting father's quoting "He hath an inner beauty that makes me ugly." And....

MIDCAREER FESTIVAL, 9 Mar 73, from Willis....38 years ago tonight I passed from prematurity ("I never was sure before"), having passed five years earlier (age 12) from prepubescence. During the intervening five years, the chief spiritual influence in my life was the daily reading of the Gospels: Jesus my hero-guide-deliverer through the darknesses and across the chasms. Now, like you, I've arrived at presenility, which is the most sobering term for midcareer, premessianic joy being the most festival term.

For the formal devotion on this festival occasion, I have chosen prepubescence as the life-stage....literally, with the poem below; figuratively (but literally to "the child of the past within") with L.12.22-32. After I read the Scripture, please be in silence with the poem of a nine-year-old, preparing yourself to share on the following questions: (1) What's her father like? (2) What's her mother like? (3) What's her God like? You may or may not, then, want to relate this to the following quote from a favorite uncanonical saint of mine, Simone Weil (THE NEED FOR ROOTS, Beacon/51), which I happened on in my devotional reading this morning: "Amidst all the present forms of the malady of uprootedness, the uprootedness of culture is not the least alarming. The first consequence of this malady, equally affecting all spheres, is generally that, relations being cut, each thing is looked upon as an end in itself. Uprootedness breeds idolatry" (p.68f).

GO!

RUSH Rush Rush!

CAn you Stop?

God Can!

YOU CAN TOO TRY IT!

Sit down STAY A While.

He doesn't mind.

He made Peace.

He made: The Green Grass

He made the Sky.

come on Stop and look

See the BEAUTY

FURTHER CLUES from other of this child's poems, given me a few days ago: "Try and love a little." "Read Run Love/ Do some things/ Do It now/ Read Run/ STOP!/ BEAUTY LOVE TRUST Hope/ LOOK NOW!" "God is my Father/ What he gave us./ He gave us everything./ He is my Father,/ He made me./ It's no magic,/ It's no power./ He is LOVE trust + hope./ He helps us/ My father is not my Daddy/ He is just borrowing me:/ The end." "BEAUTY/ FLOWERS GRASS/ BEAUTY/ TREES WATER/ BEAUTY/ BUSHES LEAVES/ BEAUTY/ GIRLS BOYS/ BEAUTY/ MOM DAD/ BEAUTY/ SMILE/ BEAUTY/ GOD HEAVEN/ He did IT ALL IN SIX DAYS." "Once opon a time/ A girl named Mommy/ And a boy named Daddy./ Mom + Dad/ I love them/ I am whatGodgave to them to borrow./ THE B."

"Here is a prayer/ Fire water/ He made them all/ I am his child/ He is my father/ He gave my parents to me/ THE B."

"I love mommy/ She loves me/ I can tell/ ...I love Daddy.../ You try not to cry/ Some try not to lie."