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## Monet Refuses the Operation (Mark 8. 22-26)

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### Monet Refuses the Operation

Doctor, you say there are no haloes  
around the streetlights in Paris  
and what I see is an aberration  
caused by old age, an affliction.  
I tell you it has taken me all my life  
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
to soften and blur and finally banish  
the edges you regret I don't see,  
to learn that the line I called the horizon  
does not exist and sky and water,  
so long apart, are the same state of being.  
Fifty-four years before I could see  
Rouen cathedral is built  
of parallel shafts of sun,  
and now you want to restore  
my youthful errors: fixed  
notions of top and bottom,  
the illusion of three-dimensional space,  
wisteria separate  
from the bridge it covers.  
What can I say to convince you  
the Houses of Parliament dissolve  
night after night to become  
the fluid dream of the Thames?  
I will not return to a universe  
of objects that don't know each other,  
as if islands were not the lost children  
of one great continent. The world  
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
becomes water, lilies on water,  
above and below water,  
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
and white and cerulean lamps,  
small fists passing sunlight  
so quickly to one another  
that it would take long, streaming hair  
inside my brush to catch it.  
To paint the speed of light!

Our weighted shapes, these verticals,  
burn to mix with air  
and change our bones, skin, clothes  
to gases. Doctor,  
if only you could see  
how heaven pulls earth into its arms  
and how infinitely the heart expands  
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

*Lisel Mueller*<sup>1</sup>

You may have come across the notion of ‘poetic licence’. According to the Cambridge dictionary, poetic licence is when a writer changes facts or rules to make a story or poem ‘more interesting or effective’, or even, I would say, to touch a deeper truth. Lisel Mueller’s stunning poem, ‘Monet Refuses the Operation’, seems a wonderful instance of the gift and possibilities of this licence! For, by all the accounts I’ve read, 20<sup>th</sup> century French impressionist Claude Monet did not in fact celebrate or embrace his deteriorating sight. It’s true that he resisted the eye surgery proposed by his doctor, but not because he liked how his cataracts caused him to see. Rather, it was because he feared (rightly as it turned out) the risks of going under the knife.

Signs of Monet’s eye trouble had emerged early in 1908, when he began to complain ‘about discomfort in his right eye and gradually weakening vision in both eyes’. Cataracts, as many of you know, involve ‘a progressive opacity of the eye lens that filters colours. As a cataract progresses, whites become yellowish, greens become yellow-green and reds become orange. Blue and violet give way to red and yellow. Meanwhile, details fade, and contours become blurred’.<sup>2</sup> Art critic Christopher Michaut suggests ‘The first signs of the disease can be seen in the work Monet carried out in Venice in 1908’, and that ‘by observing the evolution of [Monet’s] work, we also witness the progress of his disease’.

In real life, by the time he was almost totally blind, Monet ultimately did have surgery in one eye in 1923. But it wasn’t entirely successful and it left him unhappily

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<sup>1</sup> *Second Language* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Michaut, ‘Painter’s Biggest Fear: The Blindness of Claude Monet’, 21 May 2024, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/through-the-eyes-of-claude-monet/>

dealing 'with visual and colour disturbances for the rest of his life'.<sup>3</sup> So what justifies our poet taking the licence she does with Monet's story?

Early in his career, Monet taught his students: 'When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have in front of you, a tree, a house, a field or whatever. Just think of this: here is a small square of blue, pink, an oval of green, a stripe of yellow, and paint them exactly as they appear to you, exact colours and shapes until they give you your naïve impression of the scene in front of you'.<sup>4</sup> Notice Monet didn't say paint things *as they are*; rather, he said, paint them *as they appear to you*. And it seems to me that Lisel Mueller is taking up Monet's admonition. For what appears to her, as she contemplates Monet's extraordinary paintings, is not the failure of the artist's plain sight but his breakthrough into a different kind of seeing. What she sees in his blurring of outlines and seeping of colour is an expression of – or perhaps a metaphor for – the breakthrough into unitive vision that is the fruit of self-dispossession and the loss of ego-ic mastery. And so, she imagines Monet embracing this vision and refusing the operation. 'Doctor, you say there are no haloes around the streetlights in Paris and what I see is an aberration caused by old age, an affliction. I tell you it has taken me all my life to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels, to soften and blur and finally banish the edges you regret I don't see, to learn that the line I called the horizon does not exist and sky and water, so long apart, are the same state of being'.

As Mueller depicts it, what Monet comes to see in his lost perception of distinctness is a more foundational unity, all things held in, suffused by – even comprised of – one light. On the first day of creation, according to the myth of Genesis, God said: 'Let there be light'. It's this one light at the origin of being that Monet's painting makes visible to those with eyes to see. 'Fifty four years', Mueller imagines Monet saying, 'before I could see Rouen cathedral is built of parallel shafts of sun, and now you want to restore my youthful errors: fixed notions of top and

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Markel, 'How Monet's artistic vision shone through ailing eyes', 18 November 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/how-monets-artistic-vision-shone-through-blurry-eyes>

<sup>4</sup> Michaut, 'Painter's Biggest Fear'.

bottom, the illusion of three-dimensional space, wisteria separate from the bridge it covers'?

For this unitive vision is not available to the flattened perception of 'normal' sight; nor is it one we can be convinced of by argument. Referring to another sequence of Monet's paintings, the poem goes on: 'What can I say to convince you the Houses of Parliament dissolve night after night to become the fluid dream of the Thames?' You can't be argued into it. But once you've seen the world like this – nothing ever looks the same again. 'I will not return to a universe of objects that don't know each other', our poet imagines Monet saying; 'the world is flux, and light becomes what it touches, becomes water, lilies on water, above and below water, becomes lilac and mauve and yellow and white and cerulean lamps'. And for the artist to catch this light, this flux, this one irradiated reality takes not only talent and skill but participation in the flux itself – 'long, streaming hair inside my brush to paint the speed of light!'

For those artists and mystics who experience it, this vision is, quite literally, transfiguring – a piercing of the surface level of reality to see the eternity of light in and through all things. Just as Thomas Merton, in that famous moment on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, suddenly saw the 'secret beauty of the hearts' of those around him, each one 'blazing with the invisible light of heaven', and knew that he was not and could never be separate from any of them.<sup>5</sup>

And yet ... this vision of what it means truly to see seems in tension with the strange little story we just heard of Jesus restoring the blind man's sight at Bethsaida. For in this text, fuller or truer vision seems connected not with realising the unity in being of a world in flux, but with the increasingly sharp discrimination of difference. In the story, this movement of differentiation appears first in the way Jesus acts to heal. Usually, say the commentators, Jesus heals people in the midst of the crowd, in the presence of others. But on this occasion, he's said to have taken the blind man 'by the hand and led him out of the village' (Mark 8. 23), separating

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1995), pp.156-158.

him from the collective. He puts saliva on his eyes and lays hands on him, and then asks if he can see anything. ‘The man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking”’ (8. 24).

Could this be a perception, like the one celebrated in our poem, of the inter-being of objects – wisteria no longer separate from the bridge it covers, humanity no longer differentiated from the larger life of the world? Well, apparently not! In the biblical text at least, this arboreal vision signifies that the healing is incomplete, the blind man’s sight still distorted. ‘Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly’. Which suggests he saw everything as simply itself, separately and apart; a suggestion reinforced by the instruction that he remain himself apart. Jesus ‘sent him away to his home, saying “Do not even go into the village”’ (8.26).

In the context of the gospel, the most convincing interpretation of this enigmatic passage is that it concerns the time it sometimes takes to learn to see things fully. Immediately prior to this story is an account of the disciples’ obtuseness, their failure to recognise what Jesus is about; immediately after it, Jesus foretells his suffering and death. Thus, Bonnie Thurston suggests: ‘The gradual restoration of this blind man’s sight is intended to suggest the gradual opening of the disciples’ eyes, their slow coming to “see”, to understand the nature of Jesus’ messiahship and their own discipleship’.<sup>6</sup> But still the question remains, what does it mean to ‘see’ the world aright? What is really involved in healing, recovering or deepening our sight?

From the perspective of Mueller’s Monet, as we’ve seen, fuller sight is about seeing through or beyond our usual subject-object dichotomy to realise that all things are transparent to the invisible light of heaven. ‘Our weighted shapes, these verticals, burn to mix with air and change our bones, skin, clothes to gases’. But from the perspective of the blind man of Bethsaida, fuller sight seems connected with more clearly apprehending the particularity and singularity, even the density of each instant, recognising things in their distinction from other things, seeing how each

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<sup>6</sup> Bonnie Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), p.98.

mortal thing (as Gerard Manly Hopkins puts it) ‘does one thing and the same’ and is called to express that which it uniquely is: ‘Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells, Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*’.<sup>7</sup>

So at the level of ideas, these two accounts of coming to truer vision seem contradictory. But are they? Some of you will remember how in Merton’s experience, when he suddenly sees his oneness with those around him and is liberated from what he calls a ‘dream of separateness’, he simultaneously realises the loveability of ‘all these people’ in their humanity, their absurd particularity. This testimony suggests that when our perception is no longer refracted through the prism of our ego, as we become more able to let things and people be without imposing our pre-determined categories on them, the more the world appears as it is. And just as light is both wave and particle, so we may realise, according to Martin Laird, that ‘unity and particularity are not separate or rivalrous but of a piece’.<sup>8</sup>

Laird writes: ‘When we are unselfed of [egoic] self, we realise what has always been true; we are one in the groundless ground of God’. Yet, ‘This does not mean that everything becomes some sort of blob. Far from it: all particular forms of life are fully what they are created to be’.<sup>9</sup> This, he says, ‘is the paradox at the core of luminous mind’, of a mind flooded with the light of the God who (as Jesus teaches) simultaneously draws all things into one while numbering each hair on our heads, each field mouse and sparrow. Laurence Freeman too says that a truly unitive vision enhances rather than diminishes our capacity to differentiate, to do justice to the distinctive forms of life of the world.<sup>10</sup> How is that? Because at the heart of this unitive vision is love. A self-dispossessing love that delights in generating and honouring otherness even while abiding as the inmost life of all.

So how do we learn to see this way, this holistically? Or come to know, as our poem puts it, ‘how heaven pulls earth into its arms’, while simultaneously attending

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<sup>7</sup> Gerard Manly Hopkins, ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Laird, *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation and Liberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.167.

<sup>9</sup> Laird, *An Ocean of Light*, p.149.

<sup>10</sup> Laurence Freeman, *First Sight: The Experience of Faith* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.88.

to the singular appearing of each oval of green and stripe of yellow and the radical distinctiveness of every one? According to the wisdom of our tradition, the full flowering of this vision is gift; we cannot force it to happen. But its precondition has to do with ceding ego-ic control, being dispossessed of old ways of seeing and knowing. This is the poverty, sometimes born of suffering, which allows the heart infinitely to expand 'to claim this world', and so come to see it (in the words of another poet) as 'thing and spirit both: the real world: evident, invisible'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Marie Howe, 'Once or Twice or Three Times I Saw Something' in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), p.40.