

The Mysticism of Merriment<sup>1</sup>  
April 5, 1964

Man has always believed that he lived on the borderline of a strange and shinning country, that just over the crest lies how green a valley. Only a short way, and one shall come upon a flowing land of promise, a happy, honey land, of which one may, even now, catch rare visions, as on “a midsummer night’s dream.” Echoes come from there, echoes of “joyous song” and “the sound of melody,” as though the “very floods clap their hands,” and “the hills sing for joy together.” And where is this realm of merriment? Always, always, just beyond where we are, just over the border, in the strange and shinning country of God.

As we said, men has always believe in it, believed that this mysterious land of merriment is there, so near, and, by some magic or some mystique or some maneuver, may be entered in.

a. For the simple folk of whatever time, it is a dream of fairyland, of elfin creatures dancing in the glen, or gods upon Olympus, and some magic will take you there.

b. For the sophisticated, especially of our own time, it may be the beckoning vision of ultimate prosperity, the coming classless society of abundance, with all things for all men the very universe a space-age supermarket in which to jet about in joy, and of course, some government and science will take us there by some by some nuclear mystique.

c. In the meantime, if we are impatient with fairytale + sci. Fiction – certain cool cats, hot beatles, and other slightly sub humans firmly believe short sorties may be taken to the promised land, to far out dream land by playing it gone, real gone, kid, with a little liquor, drugs, airplane glue or what have you on the bongo, combo, come to the Congo, babydoll. I must say, however, if one is looking for that strange and shinning country, the green valley in which men have always believed, this is a particularly sad way of trying to get there. It may be a short trip to insanity or premature senility. Besides, there is little sillier than a middle aging beatnik still prowling around in his pad looking for the promised land.

At least (d) for the ancient Jew of the Exodus, this promised land, this green valley of delight, it was a real land, just across the border from slavery, a free land, “flowing with milk and honey,” a rich soil wanting to be tilled, grassed waiting to fatten herds, the land of Canaan, God’s own country, to be conquered by hard and happy work. So it happened.

But as you recall, that land never quite lived up its promise. The prophets were disappointed. It wasn’t long after they crossed over into Jordan that the land lost its shinning. Jeremiah had hoped that this valley of the Lord would echo with “the voices of those who made merry,” and “the dance of the merrymakers.” (30:19 34:4) and for a while it was almost so, for “Judah and Israel,” says the Old Testament, “were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drink and were happy.” (I K 4:20)

But they soon forgot that the source of all their delight was in the law of the Lord. They forgot how wise an old man Moses really was. Did they think morals were invented to make men + women miserable? Moses had taught them that it is quite the opposite – that it is impossible to be merry and to be immoral. It’s the virtues that make men and women glad. The vices are all sad. That’s the reason good is good and bad is bad. For evil really isn’t any fun. A country of broken commandments is a

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broken country. Try breaking the commands of Moses one by one: try holding nothing sacred, neither God nor family, try taking killing lightly, try not minding adultery, try taking stealing lightly, try laughing at lying, try making greed look gracious. What happens? Very simply, all the joy has gone from living. Moses was right; it's always the virtues that make life look up and laugh, that give a land real promise.

So, no matter how fertile the soil is, no valley is green when men hate the Lord their God with even a small part of their heart or soul or mind, when they hate him by hating their neighbor, because, at heart, they hate themselves. When this happens, as Isaiah used to say, "the mirth of the harp is stilled," and "all joy has reached its eventide," and the promise of the land is dark. (24:8, 11)

But you know something? The vision of a kingdom of "joyous song," when life is "melody" and "the hills sing for joy together," (Ps. 98) this vision of life at the end of the rainbow – does not die easily. No matter what, there will be a few prophets and psalmists who will not – who simply will not give up their belief in the promised land. So a few wise men of Israel began to say that if it lay not in their day in Palestine, then it was to be in another "day of the Lord", just around the next corner of God.

And in the fifth place - that corner was turned, say the Christians, with the coming of Christ, that he ushers us across the border into the strange and shining country called the Kingdom of God. It's no dream, says the New Testament, no hallucination either, not economic utopia, nor one secluded spot. It's wherever one is, and it's God's realm, and life there is very good. It's the Kingdom of heaven.

No one can make us believe it is really there. No one can force us to live in it.

The best proof that such a Kingdom actually is at hand is that, now and again, one sees those who seem to live there, as though on any Durham street, they yet dwell in some green valley of God, and the gentle laughter of their days, their grace, their courage and merriment makes one wish to join them.

They live in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the same joyous abandon of the 1<sup>st</sup> century disciples, those merry mysteries, who so loved the Lord of life, they were not afraid to live or to die, singing in jails at midnight or mending their nets in peace. In the midst of "hatred," "wrath," "strife," they had – the Christians – and they still have about them an atmosphere of "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance," (Gal 5:20, 22-23) and, unexpectedly enough, it rings true.

In these Christians' way of life, one sees the ancient dreams realized. They have moved over into the land of promise. For them, the Kingdom of God is no longer beyond the distant hills but very much present. They have found the end of that elusive rainbow.

As to whether you and I belong among these Christians, I suppose only God can say.

God only knows how very much we would like to.