

In Praise of Diversity

Phyllis McGinley, 1953

Since the ingenious earth began
 To shape itself from fire and rubble;
Since God invented man, and man
 At once fell to, inventing trouble,
One virtue, one subversive grace
Has chiefly vexed the human race.
One whimsical beatitude,
 Concocted for his gain and glory,
Has man most stoutly misconstrued
 Of all the primal category –
Counting no blessing, but a flaw,
That Difference is the mortal law.
Adam, perhaps, while toiling late,
 With life a book still strange to read in,
Saw his new world, how variegated,
 And mourned, “It was not so in Eden,”
Confusing thus from the beginning
Unlikeness with original sinning.
And still the sons of Adam’s clay
 Labor in person or by proxy
At altering to a common way
 The planet’s holy heterodoxy.
Till now, so dogged is the breed,
Almost it seems that they succeed.
One shrill, monotonous, level note
 The human orchestra’s reduced to.
Man casts his ballot, turns his coat,
 Gets born, gets buried as he used to,
Makes war, makes love – but with a kind
Of masked and universal mind.
His good has no nuances. He
 Doubts or believes with total passion.
Heretics choose for heresy
 Whatever’s the prevailing fashion.
Those wearing Tolerance for a label
Call other views intolerable.

“For or Against” ’s the only rule.
 Damned are the unconvinced, the floaters.
 Now all must go to public school,
 March with the League of Women Voters,
 Or else for safety get allied
 With a unanimous Other Side.

 There’s white, there’s black; no tint between.
 Truth is a plane that was a prism.
 All’s Blanshard that’s not Bishop Sheen.
 All’s treason that’s not patriotism.
 Faith, charity, hope – now all must fit
 One pattern or its opposite.

 Or so it seems. Yet who would dare
 Deny that nature planned it other,
 When every freckled thrush can wear
 A dapple various from his brother,
 When each pale snowflake in the storm
 Is false to some imagined norm?

 Recalling then what surely was
 The earliest bounty of Creation:
 That not a blade among the grass
 But flaunts its difference with elation,
 Let us devoutly take no blame
 If similar does not mean the same.

 And grateful for the wit to see
 Prospects through doors we cannot enter,
 Ah! Let us praise Diversity
 Which holds the world upon its center.
 Praise con amor’ or furioso
 The large, the little, and the soso.

 Rejoice that under cloud and star
 The planet’s more than Maine or Texas.
 Bless the delightful fact there are
 Twelve months, nine muses, and two sexes;
 And infinite in earth’s dominions
 Arts, climates, and opinions.

 Praise ice and ember, sand and rock,
 Tiger and dove and ends and sources;
 Space travelers, and who only walk
 Like mailmen round familiar courses;
 Praise vintage grapes and tavern Grappas,
 And bankers and Phi Beta Kappas;

Each in its moment justified,
 Praise knowledge, theory, second guesses;
That which must wither or abide;
 Prim men, and men like wildernesses;
And men of peace and men of mayhem
And pipers and the ones who pay 'em.
Praise the disheveled, praise the sleek;
 Austerity and hearts-and-flowers;
People who turn the other cheek
 And extroverts who take cold showers;
Saints we can name a holy day for
And infidels the saints can pray for.
Praise youth for pulling things apart,
 Toppling the idols, breaking leases;
Then from the upset apple-cart
 Praise oldsters picking up the pieces.
Praise wisdom, hard to be a friend to,
And folly one can condescend to.
Praise what conforms and what is odd,
 Remembering, if the weather worsens
Along the way, that even God
 Is said to be three separate Persons.
Then upright or upon the knee
Praise Him that by His courtesy,
For all our prejudice and pains,
Diverse His Creature still remains.