

THE SCHOOL RETREAT

We the infants are in retreat from Herod's slaughter
Dancing to a different Piper's tune.
We seek enlightenment in the hermits' Dreamtime school
An unconscious-formed communion in a shadowed, safe and sacred space.

Our newfound teacher stands with playground bell and wand in hand
Signalling playtime's end and lesson's start, though
no board, no book, no chalk, no dusty talk
But a simple silence, icon-lit and concentrated thought.

Thus our linguist of the silent heart gives each child power to pronounce
And through this unearthly psycho-talk the therapeutic cure begets.
Look! From the child's unmasked memory an animated archetype arrives
An alchemist, a non-dogmatic catalyst.

In this kindergarten's pregnant earth, sown winter-wheat begins to grow,
We know not how, but through defensive boundaries firmly set in love
Projecting oats are plucked and obsessive weeds transferred to safer soil.
Even Eden's ancient snake denied, slithers from rotting humus into the Light.

Now, our Sun-soaked harvest time is here and our burgeoning fruit falls scythed
Our swift schooling-time is over. But no retreating. No surrender!
Face Herod's onslaught, love to this enemy render.
So no more playing the black-capped judge or you yourself will be begrudged.

Exposition

Title

The School Retreat is literally seen as an infants' school and as a retreat from the outside world into a kindergarten implying the Garden of Eden which we symbolically re-enter and receive a second chance.

Verse 1

The retreatants are in the position of 'infants' as compared to the 'adult' guides. 'Herod's slaughter' symbolises the 'way of the world', our aggressive culture and the dismissive 'Oh! You meditate. How nice.' The Piper is Jesus, Lord of the dance. The Pied Piper led Hamelin's infants into the dark mountain which could be compared to the unconscious, an Aboriginal Dreamtime or a re-creative space. Meditation's mysterious ability to create community is also alluded to.

Verse 2

The 'teacher' is the Retreat Leader with the meditation singing bowl or 'playground bell'. The 'wand' is the bell's striking-stick and represents the power of the magical 'alchemist' of verse 3. The outdoor 'playground' is where

the retreatants do their meditation walking whilst the 'lesson' is the indoor, interior, silent meditation.

Verse 3

The Retreat's guidance/therapy sessions are represented here. The guide/Leader/therapist is the 'linguist' who speaks the language of the psyche which is like magic to the child, hence the guide becomes the 'archetype', in the child's mind, of the healing, transformational 'alchemist/catalyst'. Therapists do not instruct, hence, they are 'non-dogmatic' giving the child room to grow. Therapists are also catalysts for growth but remain themselves unchanged, secure in their own maturity. There is a humorous play on dog and cat.

Verse 4

The 'sown winter-wheat' is the seed of personal growth planted in the psyche through both guidance and meditation sessions but also unmatured seeds from childhood. Winter is the dark season, dark in the sense of incomprehensible as in 'we know not how'. The next lines include the language of the talking cure: defence, boundaries, projection, obsession, transference and denial. 'Eden' refers not only to original sin and to some of the inherited bogeymen within the collective unconscious but also to any wound received from our culture or upbringing. The 'rotting humus' is particular sin, as well as the poor self-image many individuals suffer from. More fancifully, 'rotting humus' which sounds like 'rotting human', meaning 'rotting flesh', implies sin to be a by-product of woundedness and of course wounds can rot and eventually kill us. The slithering snake is shown emerging from the detritus of humanity like a scavenging demon which has feasted on the human carcass. The Light is Jesus' healing but also the conscious light of day where the snakes/demons/wounds are seen, acknowledged and integrated with a greater self-knowing compassion.

Verse 5

'Sun-soaked' is our absorption of Jesus' light, which ripens the Spirit's fruits. 'Scythe' is time itself, which inevitably ends our retreat and eventually life itself. 'No surrender!' is ironic in that we usually say we need to surrender to God but here it means not surrendering - to hate's temptation. Rendering love to Herod refers once more not only to the slaughter of 'the way of the world' but also to Caesar's coin, mammon, and our need to show compassion to the world beyond ourself. In the old days English judges passing the death sentence would put a black cloth on their head which here symbolises the spiritual death we condemn ourselves to if we refuse to follow Jesus' instruction to 'judge not'.