Remembering Noel Rowe

(20th June 1951 – 11th July 2007)

Noel, you were never one for getting dressed up unless, of course, it was for the stage. Even here, your favourite piece was playing Lear running around in rags in the midst of the storm. You never forgot you were a “farmer’s boy from the edge of town”.¹

Too many religious people, you once complained, “lose contact with their earth”

¹ This was Noel’s description of his alter-ego, Bluthorpe, in “Bluthorpe finds it hard to introduce himself”, Next to Nothing (Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004), 75.
trying to escape what the poet Yeats called “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart”.  

In your life and poetry, your message was this:  
If we are to experience redemption, healing, forgiveness, love,  
we must first know our own heart with all its fears, hurts and wounds  
as well as our feelings and gifts: “we must know our own name”.  
We need to descend into the messiness of human life and discover there our nothingness before God.  

Almost thirty years ago, you wrote a prayer I still pray today:  

“Lord, let me know  
my own nothingness,  
the surprise and emptiness  
of love given and received.  
Only then will I  
surrender to your heart  
and leave you free  
to redeem a people  
with an unexpected depth,  
humility and tenderness  
by Father, Son and Spirit”.  

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2 Taken from Noel’s reflection on “Poverty and Love” in Wings and Fire (Sydney: Marist Fathers, 1984), 13.  
3 Noel’s reflection on “How You Hear: Annunciation” in Wings and Fire, 7.  
4 Written by Noel at the time of his ordination, Wings and Fire, 14.
When you died, I found myself sending an email to mutual friends in which I said: “Noel was a professed Marist for twenty years, but I’ll be telling them Monday, he was a Marist his entire life”.

Not so long ago you said to me, without sentimentality: “You know, I still have a Marist heart”. It was your particular insight into Mary’s poverty of heart, what you called her “nothingness before God”, that inspired your series of Magnificat poems.

You learnt from Mary that the God of Jesus is revealed in silence, suffering and surrender: “I want to give God back to mystery” you recently wrote. In saying this, you were tapping into the spirituality of the “hidden God” of Isaiah and the “unseen God” of Paul.

Or in the words of Meister Eckhart, we need to “let God be God”. You knew this was the lesson Mary learnt at Calvary so poignantly expressed in your “Crucifixion” poem.

You understood Jesus’ crucifixion as the divine self-emptying where all our notions of God are turned on their head. You saw this too in Mary’s Magnificat vision where the mighty are cast down and the poor raised up.

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5 “Poetry, Theology and Emptiness” in Australian eJournal of Theology Issue 5 (August 2005) [AEJT 5].

6 “Truly, you are a God who lies hidden” (Isaiah 45:15); “He (Christ) is the image of the unseen God” (Colossians 1:15f.).

7 Meister Eckhart was a medieval Dominican mystic.

8 Next to Nothing, 33.

9 “Poetry, Theology and Emptiness”.

3 Gerard Hall: Remembering Noel Rowe (1951-2007)
You captured this same movement of “divine reversal” in your Resurrection poem through playful, irreverent images of Cana’s newly-weds, Lazarus, Zacchaeus and the thief revealing that “the structure of the real is mercy”.10

“Sacred irreverence”, you continued, “is a gift to those found free in the spirit”. You also saw a convergence between what you named the poor heart of Mary and the empty heart of Buddhism.11 For you, Buddhism and Catholicism were not competing doctrines but intersecting stories pointing towards the divine mystery in which love and emptiness are counterpoised in the at-once doubting and believing heart.12

In your poetry you have left us a monument13 of your profound depth of soul, exceptional talent with words, playfulness with metaphors, attentiveness to the spiritual heights

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10 Next to Nothing, 34.
11 “Poetry, Theology and Emptiness”.
12 Noel expressed it this way: “Buddhism and Catholicism, at least in my story, are not enemies: they sit side by side in the ‘house of no known address’, talking about what they cannot say. I suspect they tell each other stories, but that may be because I think the process of believing is very like the process of participating in stories. I do not think they are overly concerned with disputed truths and territories. They grow in truth by sharing what they have: stories are, in that sense, reminders that the glory of God is her generosity, which is also her nothingness.” See his “Poetry, Theology and Emptiness”.
13 The final stanzas are dependent on my review of Noel’s “Next to Nothing” in AEJT 5.
and depths of contemporary experience, sharpness of insight and love for irony.

More than this, in your words and life, and in your dying too, you displayed an unshakable courage to explore the margins between meaning and futility, emptiness and love, life and death, humanity and divinity, the ordinary and the sacred.

Your poetry ranges across a myriad of topics, people and places with wry humour, unnerving honesty, sharp intelligence, genuine compassion and the gift to say the unexpected.

Your poetry arose from the depth of your encounter with life. As we pray for you today, let us also learn from you to empty ourselves of illusion and embrace life's ambiguities where, despite the darkness, there are fleeting glimpses of light.

You challenge us to enter life’s mystery where one’s experiences—however banal, negative or life-threatening—all count.
This is, after all, the journey of the mystics—and the simple folk.
You would have us all believe (again) in the message of
    Mary’s Magnificat and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:
it is to the little ones the kingdom of God belongs.

Noel, may you enjoy the language of heaven.

**Gerard Hall SM**

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**Addendum** ¹⁴

**Noel Rowe** (20ᵗʰ June 1951 - 11ᵗʰ July 2007)

¹⁴ **Poems**: Noel Rowe, *Next to Nothing*;
**Commentary**: Noel Rowe “Poetry, Theology and Emptiness” in *AEJT 5*.

6 **Gerard Hall: Remembering Noel Rowe (1951-2007)**
Crucifixion

This is one of Noel’s *Magnificat* poems in which he traces the feelings of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at their last meal together before Jesus’ crucifixion. Noel wrote of this as follows:

*The poem had its beginnings in a desire to crack the blue-veiled imagery that had solidified around Mary of Nazareth. I found a way to do that when I imagined that when she agreed to be the mother of her saviour, she had no memory of his first smile, his first words, his first steps, but when she knew he was about to be crucified she did have such memories. Knowing him differently, loving him differently, and embodying that difference, she had somehow to ratify a Fiat made before her body knew him.*

Last night, when the bread went from my hand to his, it was bruised, and still he carried the scent of the broken jar, the sinner’s nard. When, to take his wine, he bent his shoulders forward, I was afraid to ask, did he wish, now, I had refused?

*     *     *     *     *     *

Annunciation

This is another *Magnificat* poem in which Noel presents the angel as someone who enters deeply into an ordinary moment, someone who might almost go unnoticed, a messenger of a God who is tactful and graceful.

The angel did not draw attention to himself. He came in. So quietly I could hear
my blood beating on the shore of absolute beauty. There was fear, yes, but also

faith among familiar things:
light, just letting go the wooden chair,

the breeze, at the doorway, waiting to come in where, at the table, I prepared a meal,

my knife cutting through the hard skin of vegetable, hitting wood, and the noise

outside of children playing with their dog, throwing him a bone. Then all these sounds dropped out of hearing. The breeze drew back, let silence come in first,

and my heart, my heart, was wanting him, reaching out, and taking hold of smooth-muscled fire.

And it was done. I heard the children laugh and saw the dog catch the scarred bone.

*     *     *     *     *     *

Resurrection

Also from Noel’s series of Magnificat poems, Resurrection is dedicated to his former teacher, theologian James Esler SM. Noel states:

In it Mary is talking back to Simeon, remembering how he had predicted pain, but wanting to add that there had also been fun. This piece was inspired partly by a notion that comedy and mercy have in
common a principle of unexpected reversal that is very like Mary’s vision of the mighty cast down and the lowly raised up. I had at the time been reading some of Shakespeare’s comedies and John Paul II’s encyclical “On the Mercy of God”. I remember being very struck by the pope’s comment that:

‘The true and proper meaning of mercy does not consist only in looking, however penetratingly and compassionately, at moral, physical or material evil: Mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man.’

Whether or not I understood this correctly, it helped me hear what I needed for the poem, something like a chuckle in Mary’s voice.

Yes, Simeon, there was sorrow, but much fun too, when he set about making contradiction.

I should have known: for when the glorias first were sung, it was to celebrate my son, born among the dung.

Ever since, I’ve been hearing heaven’s laughter. Cana’s newly-weds, absorbed in what was coming after,

did not even notice how the water changed its mind. The Pharisees got a holy shock as a man born blind

told them if they didn’t get a hold on their desires,
so taken up with Christ, they’d land themselves among his followers.

Sacred irreverence. It is a gift to those found free in the spirit. Even Zacchaeus found it in himself, up a tree,

and Lazarus, sauntering around in his shroud. There was a time too when, expecting stones, a crowd

got instead some bread and fish. I heard a thief steal his way back to paradise. The structure of the real

is mercy. Having seen so many reversals, I should have known he would test his muscles

on the stone, and walk away from the dazed grave, leaving its mouth open and amazed.

* * * * *

On This Winter Morning

Noel explains the inspiration and dedication of this poem as follows:

A year after writing ‘Magnificat’, I was visiting Stephen Fahey, a friend from seminary days who had become a Buddhist. He showed me some paintings he had done as a form of meditative practice, in particular one that he said was a healing mantra. When I remarked that it seemed like a pattern of slender outlines, he said: ‘Beauty can be appreciated only by the empty heart’…. That may well have been the moment I became involved in a
conversation between the Christian poor heart and the Buddhist empty heart.

On this winter morning, your bare shoulders shawled by wind, you walk among your backyard plants and talk about the healing mantra you have drawn as prayer.

I think about your Buddhist way of art, its tiny, kindling lines, then remember what you said years ago: “Beauty can be appreciated only by the empty heart.”

Now, on the back step, where the sun is settling down like monks to meditation, we see your first orchids flowering.

Sunshine and saffron in the shape of tongues. Yet we recognise, where each orchid has its crimson break, an old relation, almost friend, keeping hold: desire’s wound and way for being wise.

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<th>We must locate God’s mercy not in the enormity of his redemptive plan, but in the fragility of his surrender to us; not in the strangeness of his forgiveness, but in the familiarity of his compassion; not in his transcendence, but in his immanence. Mercy is something more immediate &amp; creative than benign forgetfulness</th>
<th>My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour, for he has looked upon his servant in her nothingness... (Luke 1: 46-48)</th>
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11  Gerard Hall: Remembering Noel Rowe (1951-2007)
Noel Rowe (1951-2007)

[Written for The Eagle Newsletter]

Noel Rowe arrived in the world at Macksville on 20th June 1951, the second of Jack and May’s six children. Noel spent his early years on the family dairy farm and attended the local Catholic school where he excelled and won a diocesan scholarship to attend Woodlawn College at the beginning of 1964. In his six years as a student at Woodlawn, Noel consistently outshone his classmates in academic, debating, acting and other cultural pursuits. But let it not be said that Noel was no athlete: he was a keen tennis player, a determined winger for his football team and a ‘give it everything kind-of-bloke’ at the annual athletic carnival. Secretly, in those days, he was also writing poetry.

Following High School, Noel spent the next twenty years of his life as a Marist, three of these back on the staff of Woodlawn (1978-80) where, among other things, he taught Senior English & Religion (with witty classroom repartee), directed the Pastoral Care Program, introduced a Leadership Program for his beloved Year 12s (he liked to call them ‘kiddies’ to annoy them!), acted in Year 7 Musicals (Oliver, Tom Sawyer, Smike), directed plays such as Murder in the Cathedral, led Carroll House to at-least minor victories, and co-edited The Eagle.

On his farewell from Woodlawn in 1980, the following tribute was made:

“Noel Rowe, the priest at Woodlawn, preached sermons that were listened to, gave leadership courses which were
responded to, but most of all he believed in the individual goodness of people even when they failed to see it themselves. His contribution to Woodlawn has been precisely in his teaching us the ‘lessons of the heart’.”

Noel pursued academic and literary studies at the University of Sydney where he was awarded the University Medal in 1984 and a PhD in 1989. During these years he assisted in pastoral duties at St Patrick’s Marist Church in Sydney and taught at the Catholic Theological Union, Hunters Hill. In the early nineties, Noel became a tenured lecturer at Sydney University in Australian Literature. Even after leaving the Marists, Noel continued to teach at Sydney’s Aquinas Academy especially in the area of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. He has an impressive record of scholarly articles on Australian poetry and the relationship between theology, literature and ethics.

For many years, Noel was co-editor of Southerly. Throughout this time, he continued with his first love, the writing of poetry, for which he received a number of prestigious awards and the invitation to read his poems at international festivals, most recently in Rotterdam and Jerusalem (2005-06). Some of these poems explore Marist themes, such as his series of Magnificat poems; others explore the intersecting points between the Catholic and Buddhist stories; then there are his Bluthorpe poems, full of irony, wit and insight into the issues of our time, at once personal and political.

Becoming ill in 2005, Noel wrote his final book of poems, Touching the Hem, as a meditation on his experience with cancer, his desire for healing, his relationship with family, friends and the earth . . . These poems are really prayers that
explore the meaning of faith in the margins between emptiness and love, humanity and divinity, the ordinary and the sacred, life and death. Noel had recently written that he “wants to give God back to mystery”. Consistently, throughout this poetry, he returns to the theme of Mary’s *Magnificat* – or what he liked to call her “nothingness before God”.

Noel entered the final mystery of his ‘nothingness before God’ on 11th July 2007 (having ‘organized’ family and close friends to visit on the days before). He enjoyed the thought of having two farewells (he never lost his sense of fun, even as we all knew his death was approaching). The first requiem (16th July) was at Villa Maria, Hunters Hill, where Noel began his Marist life in the seventies; the second was at St Patrick’s Macksville (30th July), where Noel began his earthly life. These occasions were attended by family and friends including colleagues and students from Sydney University, Marists and Mercies, Buddhists and Woodlawners.

Poignant tributes were interspersed with the reading of some of Noel’s poems reminding us again of a person of exceptional talent who had truly lived “the lessons of the heart”. We pray that Noel, who shared with us his brilliance with words and his love for the earth, will now enjoy the language of heaven and the love of Father, Son and Spirit.

Gerard Hall SM
16 July 2007
Though I grow old and – God forbid – eminent, bald, and wise,
O Lord, let me not forget
the feel of mud between my toes.
O Lord, let me not forget
the lessons of the heart
and let me never cease from incarnation.

From Noel Rowe’s “Lessons of the Heart” (1976)

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**Recommended Reading – Noel Rowe’s Collected Poems & Essays**

*A Cool and Shaded Heart: Collected Poems*  
(Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2008).

*Ethical Investigations: Essays on Australian Literature and Politics*  
(Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2008).