

*Rows and flows of angel hair / And ice cream castles in the air / And feather canyons everywhere
/ I've looked at clouds that way.*

I recall a place on Graymoor Mountain, a kind of ledge shaded by sugar maple and hemlock trees that looked down from about nine hundred feet into a green, narrow valley situated in the Hudson Highlands north of New York City. Opposite Graymoor Mountain there ranged another tree-covered mountain named for the Osborn family who owned it. The Osborns were members of the old railroad aristocracy of the late 1800's. Their mansion or (I should say castle) stood high at the north end of their mountain overlooking West Point across the broad Hudson River. Once we seminarians hiked along the trail on that mountain and wandered into the private range of the castle – to see Mr. Osborn in smoking jacket and scarf standing on his veranda – looking like an older Citizen Kane. He was very gracious, invited us to sample his grapes nearby. The valley between Graymoor Mountain, upon which my old Franciscan order had built a friary and minor seminary and shrine to St. Anthony and an Inn for homeless men, was always quiet even though the Old Albany Post road still carried some traffic. You could hardly hear it from the ledge I speak of. The whole area seemed rather to be inhabited by the ghosts of the Revolutionary War. Entrenchments dug by the Continental Army to prevent the British from venturing north of Manhattan are still visible in the woods.

Way back in the 1940's during my free time from studies at the minor seminary I would sit on that ledge to meditate but without sufficient energy to evoke an apparition of the Virgin Mary. So what I usually did was simply contemplate the rich blue sky over the valley and the cumulus clouds, which tumbled upwards from one grand swelling of vapor after another toward their distant summits – so brilliantly white against the blue sky. They seemed to house within their shadowy folds some secret realm accessible only to biplane pilots who dared disappear into them. And of course, like those painted clouds designed to spiral upwards through the interior domes of Renaissance churches toward a vision of Christ enthroned among saints and angels, those Graymoor clouds also turned my thoughts toward heaven and the majesty of God.

I guess one thing that made such clouds back then seem so majestic was the absence of jet traffic leaving vapor trails so high that clouds ever since have seemed earthbound after all. Indeed, since those days of my teen reveries not only jet planes but so much else has happened in our world to deny clouds and trees and mountains and roses their power to image forth God's existence and presence and our own worth and destiny in this world. Faith, imagination have been forced to yield to the "facts of life" so much so that even Joni Mitchell in her song "Both Sides Now" has to say of clouds: *But now they only block the sun / They rain and snow on everyone / So many things I would have done / Clouds got in my way.*

Her one time experience of clouds as *rows and flows of angel hair* now seemed to be an illusion, even as many people nowadays find the story of the Bible and the existence of God and things like the ascension of Christ upon a cloud to be illusions – leaving us with the flat tonality of a Sergeant Friday or the nightly "news". And yet, despondent though she may have been over whatever in her experience made clouds depressing instead of – billowing sacraments of hope and beauty - her lament ends with a kind of preference for all those "illusions" of angel hair and feather canyons in the air: *I've looked at clouds from both sides now / From up and down, and still somehow / It's cloud illusions I recall - - - / I really don't know clouds at all.*