

THOMAS MERTON'S TREE OF LIFE:
THE GROWTH OF A RADICAL ECOLOGIST



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PREFACE

In February 1968, ten months before his tragic death in Bangkok, Thailand, Thomas Merton foresaw one of the most significant conflicts of the twenty-first century, that between “a *millennial* consciousness” and “an *ecological* consciousness.” The former he judged to be a further intensification of the dream of modernity as a climax to human history through the technological, economic and political engines of “progress.” Merton knew through his own critique of modernity that such an effort, marked by “commercialism, hubris, and cliché,” would most likely be conducted “by immolating our living earth, by careless and stupid exploitation for short-term commercial, military, or technological ends which will be paid for by irreplaceable loss in living species and natural resources” (W.F. 74).

The millennial consciousness, based as it is on anthropocentric triumphalism, is at odds with an ecological consciousness whose core principle is that “we belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members of that community the respect and honor due to them.” Merton reminds us that “we are not alone in this thing” and directs us as members of a living community to “bring the rest of the living with us” into whatever “new era” we fantasize. Merton praises Aldo Leopold for setting forth an ecological “Golden Rule” in his Land Ethic: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (W.F. 74).

The millennial consciousness could only prevail in the future if supported by an action plan dominated by “ecological irresponsibility.” Merton states bluntly that, according to “Leopold’s ‘ecological ethic,’ it would be ‘wrong’” (W.F. 75). We can avoid the occurrence of this “wrong” only by “a deepening of the ecological sense and by a corresponding restraint and wisdom in the way we treat the earth we live on and the other members of the ecological community with which we live” (W.F. 75). Merton notes that such an ecological consciousness is also present in Albert Schweitzer’s reverence-for-life ethic that holds that all of “life is sacred . . . that of plants and animals [as well as that of our] fellow man” (W.F.74).

As we shall see, Thomas Merton had developed an ecological consciousness and conscience well before that 1968 letter, including a nuanced biospiritual sensitivity to nature in her various modes of expression from individual living beings to ecological communities to the contours of places and the textures of weather. The aesthetic and contemplative arts feeding and expressing Merton's ecological consciousness include: the intuitive communion with Creation connected to "natural contemplation" (*theoria physike*), open and full awareness to the here and now (reflected also in Buddhist mindfulness), the soaring emotional and creative expressions of the poetic imagination. But as far as the health of the Earth and its many interconnected species and topographies, there definitely is a need for a critical analysis and prophetic insight that identifies the human and technologically driven social, economic and political institutions responsible for the unraveling of the loom of creation.

In the late 1950s Merton made what is known as his "turn toward the world," although signs of this impending turn were present earlier. Merton is drawn to an increasingly serious engagement with the important historical issues of his time. At a certain point, the monk begins to critically examine the values and principles embedded in the modern way of life and how they are manifest in the actions responsible for the increasing devastation of the natural world. Merton's life and works would for subsequent years increasingly bear these and other characteristics of *radical* ecology.

"So what?" the skeptic might object. Why should anyone in the twenty-first century listen to Thomas Merton? After all, what could a Cistercian monk who died in 1968, even one who was an influential intellectual and a literary figure, possibly contribute to a discussion of sustainability, alternative technologies, environmental policies, etc.? However, the question itself, focused on particular phenomena, skirts the deeper question: Do we have an increasingly destructive relationship to our home (*oikos*) primarily because of bad public policy and poor choices of technology? Or do the causes go much deeper and are their effects more pervasive than we care to admit? If the latter is the case, then what is required is a critical analysis of enough depth (root/*radix*) as to allow us to both identify the social roots of modernity's ecologically destructive

behavior and be moved by a post-critical, post-modern vision that both frees the mind from the lure of the conventional “produce-consume more” paradigm and allows the human on all levels to find a new integral relationship with the earth. Perhaps without such a deep radical eco-analysis, our attempts to deal with the symptoms of this malaise will, at best, lead to an endless round of “green solutions” that themselves end up creating new problems.

Radical ecologist Mick Smith quotes the words of Alasdair MacIntyre:

The ability to respond adequately to this kind of cultural need depends of course on whether those summoned possess intellectual and moral resources that transcend the immediate crisis, which enable them to say to the culture what the culture cannot say to itself. For if the crisis is so pervasive that it has invaded every aspect of our intellectual and moral lives, then what we take to be resources for the treatment of our condition may turn out themselves to be infected areas. (Smith, 14)

An examination of Thomas Merton’s spiritual as well as “intellectual and moral resources” will make it clear that one should listen to the words of Thomas Merton because the mind behind them and the spirit moving them allow him to grasp and appreciate deeply the fundamental causes of the cultural and ecological illnesses of his and of our times. But we will also gain a sense for the courage and wisdom displayed in Merton’s willingness, as MacIntyre states, “to say to the culture what the culture cannot say to itself.” Indeed, the success of radical ecologists rests on their ability to free themselves from the pervasive influence of modern economic and social structures, and to free their ideological paradigms from the control of modern thought and discourse. We would also agree with radical ecologist Mick Smith that even the “established forms” used to convey environmental thought, “insofar as they are representations and embodiments of modernity, will inevitably distort or exclude the values of critics who live or envisage a different form of life, an alternative ethos” (Smith, 25). One of those critics was Thomas Merton who stated: “One of the central issues in the prophetic life is that a person rocks the boat, not by telling slaves to be free, but by telling people who *think* they’re free that they’re slaves.” Unfortunately, that message is totally “unacceptable.” (S.O.C. 133).

From Roots to Fruit: Merton’s Tree of Life

As a guiding metaphor, the Tree of Life embodies and expresses the growing and greening

of Thomas Merton as a radical ecologist, suggesting more broadly the rhythm of a life (*bios*) taking in the warmth of sun, light of sky, nourishing richness of the earthy soil. The organic expressions of his thought (*logos*) are richly diverse yet energized by a wisdom (Sophia) whose multitude of written leaves play in the breeze (*pneuma*), whose beauty dances on blossoms of poems and poetics, whose nourishing fruits bear the substance of Merton's reflections. The young sapling, transplanted into the religious soil of a Kentucky monastery in 1941, bore on its bark and limbs the marks of France, England, Rome, Long Island, Manhattan, Bermuda, Cuba and New York State (East and West). Roots settling into the nourishing religious soil of the monastic community spread out seeking ecospiritual nourishment in and through the nearby earth community of living and existing beings. Fed by this new home (*oikos*), his trunk grew, limbs spread out, leaves burst forth, while colorful blossoms adorned the branches, and all beckoned forth ripe nourishing fruit. Merton's writings, especially his journals, letters and short poetic expressions witnessed to the hidden urges of an inquisitive mind and searching spirit seeking and opening to new sources of light and energy. While branches moved higher and wider in exploration, roots spread deeper and wider in grounding. Merton did not lose himself in new discoveries but used his own inner depths to locate a center and provide a base for integration, thus "uniting in himself" east and west, nature and culture, the human and divine.

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CHAPTER ONE

DEEP GEOGRAPHY: SINKING ROOTS

We follow the young monk as he sinks his roots into the nourishing communal and natural soil of Gethsemani and gradually settles into his new place. While the rhythm of prayer, work and study and the company of fellow monks help secure a central root for Merton, places and creatures in the fields and woods offer moments of saving grace and beckon him to the exploration of solitude. Merton's narratives witness to his sensual as well as spiritual opening to places and landscapes. Moments of epiphany helped contour a sacred geography: places as shaped and remembered by rich experiences of the sacred within the natural world. But yet there also appeared a more traditional understanding of the monastery as sacred space and its relation to land and sky in two transitional poems by Merton.

When the doors of the monastery of Gethsemani closed behind Thomas Merton in 1941, he imagined that his life of geographical exploration was over. He was both right and wrong. Another geography would now open itself to this inveterate traveller: one that focused his exploration on the nooks and crannies of a single good place. Merton had been a lover of nature and places and would continue to be so. Merton had been an explorer of his own inner terrain and would continue to be so. At Gethsemani these two geographies would dance with one another, embrace one another and enrich one another. Merton's notebooks would now become guidebooks, guidebooks to a deep geography in which the divine, human, and natural orders mutually revealed and dwelt in one other.

As his roots stretched into the religious and geographical soil of Gethsemani, Merton's inner life grew. At no time in his life had place, nature, and self formed such a dynamic trio in Merton's experience. Magical moments of hierophany and of inner opening contributed to this spiritual geography. Older unresolved questions on place and identity continued to plague him, but paradoxically even these struggles contributed to his sense of place. Merton's rich imagination drew his readers into a mythical landscape where the names of hollows and hills, the texture of walls and old buildings, the silence of cemeteries and the sounds of animals all bore witness to

a series of religious and aesthetic realizations. Merton was not a more or less passive recipient of graces emanating from certain sacred places, as had been his experience at cathedrals and monasteries and shrines in Europe when he was younger. This time, his senses and his awareness were on alert as he attuned himself to the possible emergence of sacred places and as he actively participated in identifying and even co-creating their sacred reality.

Finding Place, Sinking Roots

Thomas Merton entered the Abbey on December 10, 1941. On December 13, he was given the habit of a postulant, and the name, Frater (Brother) Louis. February 21, 1942 marked his entrance into the novitiate where he would be schooled in and tested by the Cistercian way of life. Merton soon found himself out in the woods swinging an axe. His old custom of using the woods for reflection and contemplation came up against the Trappist use of it for sweat and hard work. He was supposed to fling himself into the work with a “pure intention” of doing it for God and with an occasional prayer muttered between clinched teeth. Even so, the young monk was able to steal some admiring glances at the landscape and at the spire of the abbey surrounded by hills (S.S.M. 385). This vision of a monastery situated in a rural environment was to delight and comfort Merton for years to come. The occasion might be a return from a work assignment with the other monks. Merton recounts one such early experience:

And we came home in our long file over the hill past Nally’s house, with the whole blue valley spread out before us, and the monastery and all the barns and gardens standing amid the trees below us under a big blue sweep of Kentucky sky, with those white incomparable clouds. And I thought to myself: “Anybody who runs away from a place like this is crazy.” (S.S.M. 392)

In his early years at the monastery, Merton, like many other monks, spent a fair amount of time working in the fields and the woods. Such experiences, shaped by the turning seasons of the year, brought a rhythm to his life and work closely attuned to a rural agricultural life. He learned the lay of the land and the moods of Kentucky weather. Although much of his direct contact with nature during these early years was on work assignments with fellow monks, there were other times when he could contemplate the land and its changes at a more individual and reflective pace. These moments came during the “intervals” when the daily schedule did not dictate any

specific task. But the best of these reflective moments were in the early morning.

At first Merton spent the interval between four and five-thirty in the morning in the Church, writing verse. His Novice Master soon put a stop to that, encouraging the young monk to use the time for prayer or spiritual reading. In good weather Merton would go outside as dawn broke over the Kentucky hills. Sitting under a tree he would read and meditate and be drawn to the beauty of the landscape: “What shades of light and color fill the woods at May’s end. Such greens and blues as you never saw! And in the east the sun is a blaze of fire . . .” (S.S.M. 390).

For years to come Merton would use this morning time for reading works on the Psalms and the Song of Songs by such luminaries as Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory the Great and William of St. Thierry (S.S.M. 390). He found these dawn experiences especially delightful. The changing colors and patterns created by the rising sun captivated him. His literary “paintings” of this dawn atmosphere demonstrate his artistic sense for the diverse colors and details that make for such a unified scene:

The morning sky behind the new horsebarn was as splendid as his [Ruysbroeck’s] writing. A thousand small high clouds were flying majestically like ice-floes, all golden and crimson and saffron, with clean blue and aquamarine behind them, and shades of orange and red and mauve down by the surface of the land where the hills were just visible in a pearl haze and the ground was steel-white with frost--every blade of grass as stiff as wire. (S.J. 137)

Springtime, like dawn, meant renewal and the hope for resurrection. Signs of the gradual emergence of spring accompanied the sequence of feast days. On Easter Sunday, 1948 Merton notes that “all the apple trees came out in blossom Good Friday. It rained and got colder but today is very bright, with a pure, pure sky. The willow is full of green. Things are all in bud” (S.J. 99). By next Sunday, the first in April, he could see “the pale green flowers on the maples in the *préau* and all the shrubs in flower too.” Lambs were bleating and little pigs ran around on the hillsides, charging upon the teats of their mothers (S.J. 100-101). On April 25 he writes that “All the trees are full of small leaves just beginning to unfold and work themselves out into something. There are flowers in the ditches and along the edges of the woods . . .” (S.J. 102). By May 2, the trees were all clothed, the benches out “and a new summer has begun” (S.J. 103). On May 6, the Feast

of the Ascension, Brother Louis and Father Macarius blessed the fields and also “some calves who came running up and took a very active interest in everything. Then we blessed pigs, who showed some interest at first. The sheep showed no concern and the chickens ran away as soon as we approached. The rabbits stayed quiet until we threw holy water at them and then they all jumped” (S.J. 103).

The intensity and aesthetic sensitivity characterizing Merton’s love for the lighting of the day and the greening of the spring increased over the years, especially as he was awarded more time in the woods. Sometimes the beauty of the dawn accentuates the sacredness of a Feast, as with the Feast of St. John the Baptist in June 1948. Sitting outside in a cool breeze Merton could remark that “God talks in the trees.” The experience evoked a memory of that morning’s “clean dawn sky” when “there were some special clouds in the west over the woods, with a very perfect and delicate pink, against the deep blue. And a hawk was wheeling over the trees” (S.J. 107).

While Merton loved the light of dawn and the budding colors of Spring, he also had an appreciation for the starkness of winter landscapes. The infinite nuances available in even familiar landscapes offered multiform possibilities for affecting and reflecting one’s inner mood, climate, and temperament and one’s sense for the presence of God. In early January, 1950 he wrote that he loved “the strength of our woods in this bleak weather. And it *is* bleak weather.” Even so, “there is a warmth in it like the presence of God in aridity of spirit, when He comes closer to us than in consolation” (S.J. 263).

The Lure of the Silent Woods

Prior to 1949, Merton’s movements were largely restricted to an enclosure within the wider monastic enclosure (except, of course, for work in the fields and woods). This meant that the area he used for reading and reflection included a small grove of trees, the cemetery, the garden, and the inner court or garth (*préau*, in French). He took advantage of every opportunity to walk under the trees or along the wall of the cemetery on the west side of the abbey church (S.J. 22). There he would be “content looking at the low green wall of the woods that divides us from the rest of the universe and listening to the deep silence,” content because of God’s presence (S.J.

63).

The lure of the silent woods stirred his desire for more solitude and elicited fantasies of joining a more contemplative order. As he notes in a November 1947 letter to his Columbia University mentor Mark Van Doren, “What grows on me most is the desire for solitude – to vanish completely and go off into some desert and never be heard of again - & pray, & keep still. Sometimes the desire is a temptation . . . but otherwise it is a grace – and all I know about it is that I must have it undefined for the moment & that God will make the details & circumstances of it take shape in His own good time: and it probably won’t be a desert but something better” (R.J. 21-22). He then makes a statement that will act as a principle in his life through many struggles with Superiors, including some in Rome: “My vows of course always allow me to look for something higher—if I can persuade Rome that it is higher” (R.J. 22). The disagreement was not always over the interpretation of what is “higher” even when cast in that lofty rhetoric. In many cases it was over what was “better” for Merton, for Gethsemani, for the Order, for the Church, (even at times the Nation!) etc. But he would gradually move towards periods of increased solitude, even if such movements seemed erratic and, at times, just slow. Years later a hermitage in the woods near the monastery would be the place where his gradual immersion into the life of a hermit would bring him close to the aspirations expressed to his former teacher and friend. But would he be a hermit to “never be heard of again”? Hardly! Even after his death in Bangkok in 1968 as a travelling hermit, his published and unpublished material, much of the latter personal narrative (letters, journals, etc.) would even increase both the public’s understanding of him and through that, of his reputation. His body would return and rest at the modest Gethsemani cemetery.

In fact, for years, the monastery’s cemetery would be a favorite place for evening walks and reflections. Merton would pick out a sentence or passage from a book “and walk about the cemetery in peace, watching the sun go down behind the hills” (S.J. 54). Usually the places that Merton chose for reading and prayer would also serve for journal writing so that personal narrative would often interweave and grow out of a particular place with its “friends” (even bees!) that Merton made his readers aware of. In July 1950 he noted that “Here I sit surrounded by bees

and write in this book. The bees are happy and therefore they are silent. They are working in the delicate white flowers of the weeds among which I sit” (S.J. 203).

In March of 1950, on the Feast of St. Benedict, the revered founder of western monasticism, Merton sends out a religious directive encouraging “all living creatures” and his “brothers in this woods” to praise Christ, and without much pause or sign of dividing these observations from the whole mood of the passage, notes that he is “sitting on a pile of lumber by the ruins of the old horse-barn. There is a beautiful blue haze in the sky beyond the enclosure wall, eastward and over the brow of the hill” where there is going to be a new orchard (S.J. 292-293).

Frequently, when the monk’s attention is caught by an unusual object or movement or by a particularly arresting scene, he immediately records it in his journal. These entries provide readers with a series of brief glimpses into Merton’s world. They offer some insight into what the writer considers worth noting and also into the uniquely Mertonian perspective on or reaction to a time or place or event. One day in May, 1947 while sitting in the garden, feeling down because of a seemingly fruitless religious retreat and because of all of the projects to which he is committed, he touchingly notes: “The little locust tree by the corner of the wall has died and spilled all the fragments of its white flowers over the ground until that part of the garden looks like a picture by Seurat” (S.J. 49). One October evening while in the cemetery he invites the reader to appreciate with him that “Now a beautiful yellow rose bush at the edge of the cemetery has filled with flowers. They stand before me like something very precious in the late slanting sun before me as I write. The evening is very quiet” (S.J. 71). He is lifted from his lament when he is struck by the poignancy and aesthetic beauty of the arrangement of certain fallen rose petals; then, as the evening quiets his inner heart and mind, he senses the Presence of God (Ibid.).

At other times, an unexpected event could grab the writer’s attention and pull it away from his reflective reading and note-taking. For example, in the middle of a study of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of St. John, Merton stops and notes that “There is a small black lizard with a blue, metallic tail, scampering up the yellow wall of the church next to the niche where the

Little Flower, with a confidential and rather pathetic look in her eye offers me a rose” (S.J. 226). The writer’s eye for detail and conciseness join to inform us in one sentence of the presence of a particular creature (a lizard), its size (small) and color (black) and that of its tail (blue metallic), what it is doing (scampering), where (up a wall), the color of the wall (yellow) and its location (next to the niche with the statue of the Little Flower). On another time in the middle of writing a passage inspired not by a chapter of Scripture but by the beauty of the autumn hills and woods and how they are becoming saturated with his prayers, he notes with a touch of humor that he himself is being surveyed: “And a buzzard comes by and investigates me, but I am not dead yet” (S.J. 69). During an otherwise prosaic reflection on the Book of Josue, Merton demands our appreciative attention: “(Look, outside the window the sky is beginning to be very blue and the sun is dazzling on the white side of the Church! I love this corner of the upstairs Scriptorium . . .)” (S.J. 282).

One can find many similar examples in Merton’s narratives. They are signs of an “ecological personhood” highly attuned to and appreciative of the richness of the natural world and of the extraordinariness of ordinary beings and events. The very fact that Merton would interrupt a reflection and/or piece of writing in order to pay tribute, for example, to a scampering lizard or an investigating buzzard or a dazzling light is not without significance for an understanding of Merton’s unique aesthetic sensitivities and spiritual orientation. Nor is it without significance in the sense of our current need for both scientists and writers to shape new ecologically aware aesthetic, mental and moral habits through the arts, including narrative writings whereby the artist/writer draws readers into a unexpected but “eye-opening” experience of a scene or being or event and access to the writer’s own spiritual or heart felt response.

Sounds rather than sights would sometimes draw Merton’s attention, as when on a sunny but cool day, “The catbirds sing with crazy versatility above my head in the tree” (S.J. 51) or “on a windy sunny day one is bickering in a bush . . . and then squawking in a lamentable fashion” (E.S. 5/31/47). Then there are the crows that “swear pleasantly in the distance” (S.J. 188) or engage in “guttural cursing” (S.J. 275). Sometimes in one place--down in a cedar-filled hollow—he hears

“a great outcry of bluejays” while “yonder is one of the snipes that are always flying and ducking around St. Joseph’s hill.” In the midst of all of this noise and movement, Merton stands “reassured by the sweet, constant melody of my cardinals, who sing their less worldly tunes with no regard for any other sound on earth.” The bluejays soon stop their squawking, for their “tribulation rarely lasts very long” (S.J. 292). Later in the day, while reviewing the recently celebrated liturgy, he notes that he is under the sky and that the birds are now silent “except for some quiet bluebirds. But the frogs have begun singing their pleasure in all the waters and in the warm green places where the sunshine is wonderful.” Merton invites them to join their prayers with his: “Praise Christ, all you living creatures. For Him you and I were created. With every breath we love Him. My psalms fulfill your dim, unconscious song, O brothers in this wood” (Ibid). Years later, after having drawn more closely and humbly to birds, he would hesitate to “preach” to them:

Sermon to the birds: “Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: be what you are: be *birds*. Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!”
Reply: “Even this is one sermon too many!” (D.S. 220)

Sometimes a change in the monastic routine would provide a rare opportunity to experience the scene of farm and forests within a peculiar conjunction of sunlight, sounds and smells of a July late evening. This sparked a deep contemplative experience that made him acknowledge again the connection between the contour and mood of his inner state and the outer landscape (the conjunction of mindscape and landscape).

The low-slanting rays picked out the foliage of the trees and high-lighted a new wheatfield against the dark curtain of woods on the knobs, that were in shadow. It was very beautiful ... I looked at all this in great tranquility, with my soul and spirit quiet. For me landscape seems to be important for contemplation; anyway, I have no scruples about loving it. (S.J. 108-9)

Merton had an abiding affection for the farm animals who shared the land with the monks. He loved lambs, “those little black-legged things, jumping like toys on the green grass,” except when they appear on holy cards (S.J. 168). Also appearing in his early journals were sheep, mares, colts, pigs, milking cows, and bulls (of whom he admits “I was afraid”) (S.J. 316). Later, as he spent more time in the woods, deer, rabbits, snakes and scores of insects would make their presence known.

When the weather did not permit or when circumstances dictated otherwise, Merton would find alternative places to be alone and, preferably, to view the hills and fields. On a rainy December morning he hid in one of the alcoves behind the church, watching the sunrise “between the garage and the hog house” and “squinting out through the fine rain at branches of the whitewashed sycamores” (S.J. 139). During a rainy June afternoon he sat in a window of the Scriptorium looking out at “shorn sheep and lambs” who were standing motionless “in the downpour” (S.J. 199). In late fall, on the Feast of All Saints, he spent “the whole afternoon in the cubbyhole where it says ‘*sepultura fratrum*’ and watched the rain falling on the cemetery” (S.J. 131).

Even when he was ill in the infirmary, Merton would use its window as a vantage point from which to view the countryside. On March 19, 1948 even though he “celebrated” the first anniversary of his solemn profession in the infirmary, he was glad to get away from his writing responsibilities and the demands of the “bells,” and enter into a recollected state. Following prayer and meditation, he moved his table so it sat under the window. There he drank some wine smuggled in by Father Gerard in honor of St. Joseph’s feast day. He ate while “looking out of the window as the Carthusians do. The clouds flew, and the huts of the ducks were empty and the frogs sang in the beautiful green pond.” Sitting on the bed all afternoon he rediscovered contemplation, God, and himself, declaring it “one of the most wonderful days” he had ever known (S.J. 97). Note how the Carthusians slyly make their appearance when this special experience of contemplation, nature and solitude enters.

Merton’s spiritual life and the landscape wove themselves together as the seasons and years passed. In 1947 he could write that “This landscape is getting so saturated with my prayers and psalms and the books I read that it is becoming incomparably rich for me” (S.J. 60). As noted earlier, he admits that “for me landscape seems to be important for contemplation; anyway, I have no scruples about loving it”. He points out that even St. John of the Cross, hidden away in a church tower, had “one small window through which he could look out at the country” (S.J. 108-109). By 1948, Merton was no longer arguing with himself about the relative importance or

unimportance of nature to his own spiritual life. He considered it important. As a result, he began seeking experiences of the forests and hills that were more intimate than simply admiring them from a distance or even “saturating” them with his prayers. Eventually *he* would become saturated with nature. Merton was finally given permission to walk outside the enclosure at the end of October 1948 when the publisher Jay Laughlin visited him. Initially announcing that they were merely going to “stand on the hill behind Nally’s” they ventured further to the top of a knob from which they could look down at the monastery and across the valleys (S.J. 132-133).

The Struggle For Place

May of 1949 finds Merton again struggling, sometimes in desperate language, with the problem of how to remain at Gethsemani and still fulfill his dream to be a real contemplative, especially after his own writing skills (and, dare we say, love of writing) had brought on not only fame but also—more writing! He was also hearing of other reformist monks and priests that he admired who were being silenced or censored by their superiors. Merton was torn between the direction and ideals of his own spiritual development, on the one hand, and the official interpretation of the vow of obedience that presumed that God’s will was expressed through the directives of monastic superiors.

Yet, Merton was obviously troubled even by this seemingly orthodox position, perhaps because he was seeking to persuade himself of its validity. Two ideals were clashing, the one that reigned at Gethsemani and to which Merton was “officially” bound and his own developing set of ideals born from inner experience, thoughtful reading and temperament. “No wonder the Church sometimes looks inhuman to the people outside,” Merton notes. He fears that the trials that landed on silenced reformers “will probably land on me” (E.S. 5/1/49).

A month after his ordination in May, 1949, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, Merton received unexpected and good news: “Yesterday morning (Sunday) I went to Reverend Father and we were talking about solitude, and quite by surprise he gave me permission to go out of the enclosure into the woods by myself” (S.J. 201). During the early afternoon rest, he dreamt of going through the fields and out to the woods. Finally, after chanting None, he signed to Brother

Hugh to open the gates: a move of great symbolic as well as literal significance. He then describes the sequence of events:

First I stopped under an oak tree on top of the hill and Behind Nally's and sat there looking at the wide sweep of the valley and the miles of flat woods over toward the straight-line of the horizon where Rohan's Knob is.

As soon as I get away from people the Presence of God invades me . . . [and] it is when I am with people that I am lonely, and when I am alone I am no longer lonely. (S.J. 201).

On one level, this brings to mind the younger Merton who had hiked by himself through the hills of France, England, Germany, Italy and New York State. He was simultaneously a very social being and one who thrived when alone. Now, as a monk, he "belongs to" and is heavily engaged in a community. But, not surprisingly, he also needs solitude and the woods. He then remembers the view of the abbey from the hill.

Gethsemani looked beautiful from the hill. It made much more sense in its surroundings. We do not realize our own setting and we ought to: it is important to know where you are put on the face of the earth (E.S. 6/27/49).

Merton notes that the monastery itself lies "in a splendid solitude." No, "there is nothing to complain about from the point of view of geography." There are "miles and miles" of fields and woods and only "one or two" houses, neither closer than a mile. (Ibid.). While the monastery may well have been "in" a great solitude, there was no great solitude "in" the monastery. At that time, there were nearly two hundred monks living in the monastery, all basically confined to an enclosure within the enclosure. Merton complains that he and his fellow monks "jostle one another like a subway crowd and deafen ourselves with our own typewriters and tractors . . ." (E.S. 6/27/49). Looking around at the earth, sky, and woods, he pines, "if we only knew how to use this space and this area of sky and these free woods" (Ibid.). This was a frequent source of consternation for Merton. How could an Order with the contemplative life as its purported *raison d'être* ignore such a rich environment for enriching and developing such a life? His suspicion was that the monastic life had become so loaded down with "acts" and "observances" that the very sensitivities needed to recognize and appreciate what "these free woods" had to offer were being effectively deadened. His reflections under the oak came to an end when "the Spirit of God got hold of me and I started through the woods" (E.S. 6/27/49).

At certain points in Merton's journals, a noticeable shift to a more personal, vivid, and sensual language alerts the reader to the fact that something of significance to the monk is about to or has very recently occurred. Sometimes such a tone was the result of pent-up irritation or frustrated dreams; sometimes it was connected to a desire for more solitude in nature. Both were evident in his reflection on time spent in "a nice place beyond the field we call Hick's House" (E.S. 6/27/49).

It was quiet as the Garden of Eden. I sat on a high bank, under young pines, and looked over this glen . . .

And I thought – "Nobody ever comes here!" The marvelous quiet! The sweet scent of the woods – the clean stream, the peace, the inviolate solitude! And to think that no one pays any attention to it. It is there and we despise it, and we never taste anything like it with our fuss and our books and our sign-language and our tractors and our broken-down choir. (E.S. 6/27/49)

A love for and delight in listening to bird song along with a sense of its connection with the Biblical Paradise is a frequent theme in Merton's nature writings. Connected with that theme is his association of silence and solitude with attentive listening both to the "voice" of nature and the silent voice and felt presence of God (both within himself and at times within nature). Merton's own mute but attentive presence allows him to be wide-awake and widely aware of numerous sounds in nature. Against this backdrop, Merton's shock at the fact that "no one ever comes here" and "no one pays attention to it" also accuses the monastic authorities of spiritual negligence. Merton implies that such a place is of *religious* significance, it is a *holy* place and that monastic spirituality with its specific type of spiritual and mental discipline is made for such places. In fact, it brings with it a religious *memoria* of the "Garden of Eden." Not only do "we" ignore it, "we despise it," Merton says, perhaps alluding to the chain saws that cut down its trees and the tractors that plow up its soil. The irony is that "we never taste anything like it" amidst all of the supposedly religious protocols over which a lot of "fuss" is made. Concerns over the mechanics of monastic life deflect monks from the wider and deeper Life they should be living. These unflattering comparisons of the solitary life in nature ("inviolate solitude") with the "fuss" of the enclosed monastic life anticipates critical remarks that make their way into his writings during the transition to a life in the hermitage in the 1960s. Yet Merton was sincere in his desire

to have more monks “taste” something of the spiritual nourishment provided by these quiet woods.

Merton claims that one “moment of that quiet washed clean the deep, dark inward mirror of my soul.” He was completely bathed in a state of prayer that, while it might not have been totally pure because “so much natural exultation” was present in it, he was nevertheless, “consciously and definitely and swimmingly happy.” In fact, he was so happy that he wondered how he “ever stayed on the ground at all” (E.S. 6/27/49). This experience of his body feeling “light” or ecstatically lifted up as he walked alone in nature would occur at other times in his life.

This time, however, dark clouds suddenly gathered and looked so threatening that Merton sought shelter in a shed made for sheep. Nevertheless, even the onslaught of the billowing black clouds could not “make that glen less wonderful, less peaceful, less of a house of joy.” When rain failed to develop, the monk headed “home” the long way around so that no one would see him. He arrived just in time for Vespers (E.S. 6/27/49).

Merton knew that something significant had happened to him out there and wondered what light this whole episode might throw on his vocational struggles. He dreamt of starting “a sort of Carmelite Desert out there.” He was sure he would never be permitted “a one-man hermitage” but thought there might be the possibility of a retreat house with a staff where “one could go for a month at a time or even more and get in some real and solid contemplation.” Merton doubts that the General Chapter would approve such a thing because, as he sarcastically notes, “[f]or us, a retreat means only one thing: a more complete immersion in the community.” Not knowing what will happen to him, he must simply “wait with my tongue-tied existence hanging on the inscrutable will of God ” (E.S. 6/27/49). Interestingly, Merton’s final hermitage of the 1960s would be called Our Lady of Carmel and would itself start out as a place for interreligious dialogue and retreats.

Towards the end of this long reflection, Merton realizes that his experience of solitude might “have a luminously intelligible connection with the Mass” and his “identification with Christ in the Mass.” His prayer in the woods “was eminently the prayer of a priest . . .” This

connection, he felt, was “more than a poetic intuition” and possibly something that might be of “deeper significance.” And what might this significance be? Merton asks whether he might “end up as something of a hermit-priest, of a priest of the woods or the deserts or the hills, devoted to a Mass of pure adoration that would put all nature on my paten in the morning and praise God more explicitly with the birds?” (E.S. 6/27/49). This anticipation of Teilhard de Chardin’s “Mass Over the World” where all of creation is placed on the paten as the Body of Christ is fascinating given Merton’s eventual support for Teilhard as part of the ancient yet still present Wisdom tradition.

That wonderful last phrase, “praise God more explicitly with the birds,” foreshadows two important strands of Merton’s ecological spirituality: the human as priest celebrating *with* and *for* creation, and the image of the Cosmic Christ. These reflections take place on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, as he notes, and are at “the very heart” of that feast. Sacramentally, the Christ who will be met intimately under the form of bread and wine by Merton as priest is already present and experienced as the Cosmic Christ within the material forms of creation (E.S. 6/27/49). This Teilhardian expansion of the Mass to include all of creation anticipates by a decade Merton’s contact with the Jesuit priest/scientist’s work.

In reflections taking place two weeks before Merton’s ordination to the priesthood, he is perhaps anticipating further elements entering and enriching the development of his spiritual life connected with his becoming a priest. His inner geography is wrapped in darkness but alive with the presence of God. He remembers how, in his early days as a Novice, his prayer life had consisted largely of “acts” of prayer, including “thoughts, desires, words . . .” They soon became “inadequate.” What had nurtured his growth for the past seven years had been his “[r]esting in God, sleeping, so to speak, in His silence, remaining in His darkness . . .” Now Merton looks forward to further changes and deeper realizations. “Christ the High Priest is awakening in the depths of my soul in silence and majesty,” he exclaims (E.S. 5/15/49). The inner awakening of Christ as High Priest was already affecting his experience of and reflections on solitude and his modes of relationship with creation.

While it was Dom Fox who verbally gave permission to Merton to use the woods, the Abbot General, Dom Dominique had laid the groundwork during his recent Visitation. The Abbot General saw clearly that Merton was a writer, that his unique place in the Trappists was as a writer on the spiritual and monastic life and that he needed solitude for this. Although Merton appreciated the availability of a large quiet vault for prayer, reflection and writing, it was no substitute for the woods. Dom Dominique, who was interested in keeping this increasingly famous Trappist in the Order, told Merton that if he went to the Carthusians he was not as intelligent as the Abbot had thought. Merton admits to himself that he lives a rather “eccentric” life compared to other monks and that this new permission for time alone in the woods only accentuates that. He is willing to entertain the idea that perhaps he confused his strong desire for more solitude with a call to the Carthusians. For the time being, solitude and writing would take place within a Cistercian environment. Merton accepts it as the will of God (for the time being) and applauds his Superiors for knowing him so well. Yet, in typical Merton style, he leaves open the possibility that some time in the future there might be other indications that Gethsemani is not the place for him (E.S. 6/27/49).

This permission to use the woods began a new phase in Merton’s spiritual journey, one that would be intimately connected with his experience of the natural world. The opportunities for increased solitude and for communion with God within himself and within creation were to nurture his spiritual growth as well as provide a refuge during times of turmoil. Merton’s aesthetic sensitivities and spiritual resonance with nature were to deepen and develop. And so, through his prose and poetry and later photography, drawing, calligraphy, etc. natural places and places in nature (from toolshed to hermitage) stimulated, inspired and reflected this growth. The woods, hills, and hollows surrounding the monastery were to be inextricably bound with Merton’s identity as solitary, writer and spiritual master.

Blossoms: A Monastery as Sacred Center

In the symbolic universe of Merton’s early years at Gethsemani, the monastery gave coherence and served as a kind of sacred center to the surrounding geography and rural life.

This was an idea Merton understood from his years in France and to a less extent, England. The remnants of the Medieval world were everywhere and the monastery and in some cases the central village church or cathedral had the status of a sacred center and a sacred space from which the surroundings were sanctified. This can be seen not only in his autobiography but in his poetry written in the mid-1940s.

The Abbey of Clairvaux in France is the subject of two poems, “Clairvaux,” and “Clairvaux Prison,” published in *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946). We shall consider the first. Clairvaux is a sacred space that is also a center for the surrounding world.

Abbey, whose back is to the hills
whose backs are to the world,
Your inward look is ever resting
Upon your central garth and garden,
full of sun,
Your catch-light cloister.

There are at least four “circles” here: the world, the hills, the monastery (and its grounds), and the central garth and garden. This is a spiritual geography in which the highest value is located at the center and gradually diminishes as one moves outward from it. It is also a contemplative geography urging one to turn inward and remove the confusion or distraction of the outer world. Thus the monastery as symbol of place seems to differ from a village such as St. Antonin with the church at its center. In the latter case, sacred power originates in the Eucharistic center of the church and emanates outward. Here all energy is concentrated in a silent still center.

Merton claims that the “power” of humility draws and attracts because it is like a “mirror” or pool that reflects heaven. Heaven or Christ hides in the “heart” of the monastery and rests there “unseen by the grey, grasping, /Jealous, double-dealing world.”

The monastery is garlanded with “brotherlife” which grows in its “fruitful silence” and clings to its “safe walls.” St. Bernard through his wise Rule, prunes, interweaves and presses these vines that yield Christ’s burgundy. The monastic community epitomizes what a human community should be. In a section that resembles Blake’s description of the heavenly Jerusalem, Merton suggests that the very stones and their positioning are “the clearest image of the Builder’s

meaning.” The abbot is the keystone, as is Christ, “the center of the Maker’s mind and plan.”

Also appearing in the same 1946 collection with the Claivaux poems is “Rievaulx: St. Ailred.” This British monastery reflects and fits into the natural world but also provides a coherence and spiritual valorization to it.

Once when the white clouds praised you, Yorkshire,
Flying before the sun, flying before the eastern wind,
What greenness grew along the waters,
Flowering in the valleys of the purple moor.

Not only did the clouds praise Yorkshire in those days, “the strong sun blessed you, kind as Christ/Slaying the winter mist, delivering the blinded fells.” Into this setting came “saints” to “build a valley’s silence into bowers of permanent stone.” The monastery affirms and concentrates the silence of the surrounding woods and streams. It is not an intrusion but a human recapitulation of natural qualities.

The building of Rievaulx was the springtime of Yorkshire and as such the whole land blessed it. The wind came to the land “like a Messiah/Spending the thin scent of the russet heather,/Lauding the flowering gorse and the green broom.” The sky itself taught songs to Yorkshire when it was wed to Rievaulx who “raised her white cathedral in the wilderness/Arising in her strength and newness beautiful as Judith.”

The harmony of the monastery mirrors the external surroundings with its “new roof-beams, and smell of the curling bake-house smoke,” harmony also in “the barns and yards” and in “their various work.” The sun as it plays “in the amazing church / Melts all the rigor of those cowls as grey as stone.” And in the evening “the choirs fall down in Tidal waves / And thunder.” The monastery becomes a new Jerusalem, a blazing Sion “while the great psalms are flowering along the vaulted stones.”

The use of the term “harmony,” as we shall see, has its own rich meaning in ecological philosophy. Here it is associated with sacred space on a large scale, a space whose harmony is constituted by the arrangements of the parts of the building and even the monastery’s siting in relation to its surrounding geography (Merton will have similar comments in 1961 on the more

modest logoi of the siting of Shaker barns.) Years later (1965), he would speak of the harmonious ecology enveloping his hermitage:

I know there are trees here, I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of “place” a new configuration. (D.S. 33)

And, given the many moments and occasions of revelations of the sacred presence in and around the hermitage even involving animals and birds, one can glimpse something of the direction of intervening changes leading to this new configuration of place.

For the radical ecologist, “the most obvious way in which environmentalism has challenged modernism’s anthropic homogenization of space has been through a re-emphasis of the import of particular natural places in our lives...” (Smith, 212).

Narrative, through first or third person accounts of a character’s close association and interaction with “Place,” also reveals how Place helps shape the ecological character of personhood. Merton’s growing sensitivity to and appreciation of the times and moods of various places presents a radical contrast to a world which increasingly “feeds upon and empties out the differences between places [until] every place is remade into modernity’s own abstract image, reduced to mere coordinates within homogeneous space” (Smith, 208-209). In fact, the more time Merton spent within the natural community, the more subtle, sophisticated, and personal became his relationships.

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CHAPTER TWO

ECOPOETICS: 1940s

Poetic thinking is not merely a partial and special way of knowing and seeing the world. It is the natural landscape of our thought which the geography of our concepts presupposes. . . . To think ecologically is to think poetically. The poetic shows the way in which we dwell on earth. (Hwa Yol Jung, 160-1)

I. Experience of Nature, Sense of Place (Poems: 1940s)

The poetry that Thomas Merton created during his first decade at Gethsemani contained many colorful and passionate examples of writings based on experiences of nature and place. Often these rich experiences and images of the natural world pulsed with the contours of an inner landscape equally rich in color, tone and mood. Merton had an underlying belief that Creation expressed the creative process of the Creator while inspiring that of the human. Merton also believed that a sensitive and deep experience of both could vitalize the senses, expand and enrich the imagination and enhance the inner spirit of everyone. As for monks, it supported growth in the contemplative life through its nurturing of an appreciation for the Divine Presence, Creativity and even Play in nature.

Ecstatic Communion

Merton's contemplation of nature could move from a state of quiet communion to one of ecstatic flight. Two poems suggest and, indeed, celebrate such moments. They are songs of communion in two respects. First, they describe a mutual relationship between self and nature whereby nature's moods and qualities awaken an analogous interior climate. Second, after nature's "hands" have grasped and reshaped the soul, they open up and release it, sending it soaring towards an encounter with the divine.

This process is evident in Merton's "The Sowing of Meanings" from *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947). The occasion of the poem is a spring morning. A multitude of small buds cover the "somber branches" of trees like clouds. High above, birds wheel in circles, their cries wounding the listener with "bright arrows." Some deeper presence or meaning is at work here, just waiting to explode into consciousness:

The quiet air awaits one note,
One light, one ray and it will be the angels' spring:
One flash, one glance upon the shiny pond, and then
Asperges me! Sweet wilderness, and lo! We are redeemed!" (C.P. 188)

The timeless is about to break into time. Merton makes allusions to the gospel story of the angel who periodically would descend to stir the waters of a pond and heal the sick. He awaits the water of life, the transforming redemption.

This transforming power like a "grain of fire" smoulders "in the heart of every living essence," a "thought" of God too "vast for worlds/In seed and root and blade and flower."

Merton's shift from images of water to fire lends an additional sense of urgency to the moment. The fires press toward an explosion, a revelation.

Then every way we look, lo! rocks and trees
Pastures and hills and streams and birds and
firmament
And our own souls within us flash, and shower
us with light,
While the wild countryside, unknown, unvisited
of men,
Bears sheaves of clean, transforming fire. (C.P. 188)

There is a simultaneous explosion of divine fire and light flashing out of both "the wild countryside" and the "souls" of those prepared for the experience (one thinks of Herkleitos who Merton will read and write on in a decade or so later). The "wild" countryside, the "sweet wilderness" reveals its "everlasting secret/too terrible to bear." And the light that thus enflames the deepest part of the poet is planted (sown) "far down into the heart of darkness" which the poet "plunges after to discover flame" (C.P. 189). We note the poetic-spiritual ability of "wild" nature to transmit "light" and "fire" and of the poet touched by these to plunge down into his or her inner darkness within and there to "discover flame." Humans can touch and be touched by the light and fire within the countryside when they enter deep into their own inscape.

Compared to many of Merton's poems of this decade, "The Sowing of Meanings" has little conventional "religious" imagery. There are no saints or feast days. There are no convoluted analogies or extended metaphors linking natural objects or events with images from the Bible

or monastic practices or Catholic tradition. Furthermore, there is no exploration of the realm of personal impurity, of sin or guilt. The poem points forward in some ways to the more direct yet evocative style of Merton's later poems (reflecting the expansion and deepening of his spirituality).

The early-morning summer poem, "Song: Contemplation," also springs from the immediacy of experience. The soul's ecstatic journey is triggered by the hierophanous quality of the natural world. Perhaps Merton was out walking in the interval and gazing at the landscape. He calls it a "land alive with miracles!" and a "country wild with talent." The rising sun's rays, like "pleasant arrows" shoot the countryside with flames. The arrows strike the waters that clad everything like armor, creating a shimmering, dazzling scene. The poet asks this wild country, "Is there an hour in you that does not rouse our mind with songs?" (C.P.157).

For Merton, songs are heard throughout the land. When boughs "bend in the weak wind" they open to "those deep and purple galleries" where birds and their songs display the genius of their Creator. Yet even the seeming loudness of this choir quickly takes on a "timid vaudeville" volume when the poet realizes that "the earth is loud/With more." (Ibid. 158).

Merton senses the presence of "Christ and angels" everywhere in the forest. They inspire the groves with their coming and going, their flashing and vanishing. The poet is seized by wonder and lifted "half-mile-high into the air/to taste the silences of the inimitable hawk." But unlike the hawk, the soul does not sail high on the winds in order to scan the "map of prey" below. Yet, the soul can see that the flattened barns beneath are "brown as blood" as they grow out of "the wounded earth." White roads run across the land "livid as a whipcut scar" making the low world look "scourged with travelling." (C.P.158).

The soul has no need now for landed geography or the measured world of the everyday. The ordinary pleasures and consolations that are the rewards for "the workaday saints" are also left behind. Suddenly the poet is seized "in the talons of the terrible Dove, / the huge unwinding Spirit." He escapes the "drag of earth" and "the dizzy paw of gravity." He swims in a region that is far "beyond the track/Of thought and genius and of desire," and tramples "the white, appalling

stratosphere” (C.P. 159).

This poem outlines one way in which nature launches the soul and symbolizes its journey to the divine. At the first stage, one is struck by a particular event in nature. Here it is the dazzling sight of sunlight dancing across a dew-laden landscape and the sound of birds singing in the deeper recesses of the woods. At the second stage, wonder or awe grasps the soul while beneath the surface a spiritual reality reveals its presence. Nature and the soul are bound together by and in the immanent presence of Christ. In the third stage the growing intensity of this relationship lifts one toward a higher level of union symbolized by the air and the hawk. Then in the final stage the mind breaks free of all gravity and geographical context, rises above concepts and swims into “the white, appalling stratosphere.” The poetic experience itself is left behind (C.P. 159).

II. Poetic Resonance

The resonance created between nature and self can produce a poetic experience with spiritual significance even in less dramatic moments. There are times when weather--the heat of summer or the cold dampness of winter--elicits a corresponding mood in the soul. A poet of spiritual sensitivity will capture and deepen such experiences, cloaking them in a linguistic form that makes a similar experience possible for a reader or listener. Since there is a rich variety of potential feelings and emotions that can be stimulated, the texture of poetic responses can vary even under rather similar natural circumstances or events. If the responses reflect a monastic milieu in which one connects the occasion to a feast day or period in the liturgical calendar, additional rich allusions and creative images may arise.

Take, for example, mid-summer in Kentucky—a climatic condition that forces attention by many critters, including humans. The high humidity and intense heat simply drive themselves into one’s flesh and bones, sucking out one’s breath and turning every physical exertion into torture. “On a Day in August” (The Tears of the Blind Lion, 1949) begins:

These woods are too impersonal.
The deaf-dumb fields, waiting to be shaved of hay
Suffer the hours like an unexpected sea
While locusts fry their music in the sycamores. (C.P. 204)

Merton scans the sky for “The clean, white, saints” but sees only a few curdled clouds and a large bird that “hovers for carrion.” Nothing moves or changes as

Here we lie upon the earth
In the air of our dead grave
Dreaming some wind may come and kiss
ourselves in the red eyes
With a pennyworth of mercy for our
pepper shoulders . . .
And our souls are trying to crawl out
of our pores.
Our lives are seeping through each
part of us like vinegar.
A sad sour death is eating the roots
of our hair. (C.P. 205)

One can imagine Merton chuckling at these lines, as he was wont to do during his conferences when some particularly desperate condition of his own was recalled. The melodrama is sustained in the next stanza where he looks up to the “doors of sanitary winds” in the clouds, open to “vistas of those laundries where the clean saints dwell.” Alas, they are invisible to a diseased, dirty soul in “our slum.” In fact, it is so hot that the mind’s dream wanders away and is “drowned in the din of the crickets’ disconnected prayer” (C.P. 205).

The next stanza is filled with images of “unemployed goldenrods,” kids’ melted footprints in the tar road to Louisville where the “jagged heat” is being inhabited by “spooks.” Merton invokes St. Clair and the clouds themselves for a glorious thunderstorm to cool everything down. Then thoughts can “come bathing back to mind with a new life! Prayer will become our new discovery/When God and His bad earth once more make friends” (C.P. 206). Recurring images of heat or fire and water, run throughout the Tears volume. The poem “Senescente Mundo” forges a link between summer’s heat, “this murderous season,” and the apocalypse.

In the poem “An Invocation to St. Lucy,” from Figures (1947), Merton draws out the negative aspects of winter and uses them to depict a similar human state. He speaks of “We walkers in the murk and rain of flesh and sense,” for example. These walkers, lost in the foggy midnight of their “dead world’s winter solstice,” look for her (St. Lucy’s) “friendly star.” (C.P. 97)

Analogies are drawn between the cold hard ground and the stubborn will and between the

dim and cold December days and the soul's extinguishing of its own source of light and warmth. Lucy (lux, lucis, "light") is asked to bring light to those who sit in darkness (an echo of Advent longing) and whose eyes are dim (C.P. 98).

III. Poetic Contrasts

Nature can often give rise to images that contrast with the images that depict one's own interior state. Depression experienced during a beautiful spring morning may intensify one's state by making one even more aware of being isolated and self-absorbed. Similarly, one's feelings of warmth, optimism and good will may be intensified as one sits looking out at a snowy or even rainy day. A poet can use such contrasts to good effect. Merton will use such contrasts to examine his own spiritual condition. He will sometimes find nature's mood normative while his interior state is "out of season." Or he may find that nature's mood leads to a contrasting positive affirmation of his own spiritual state.

"The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart," from *Figures* (1947) is an example of a poem of contrasts and of the Mertonian use of traditional religious imagery (C.P. 175-177). This poem plays with images drawn from the feast day, the season, and the inner state of the poet. Merton contrasts the condition of nature where "all things that grow extend their arms and show the world Your love" with the hearts of humans that still "Bide in their January ice/And keep the stubborn winter of their fruitlessness." They are fruitless because they lack the faith of the grains of wheat and are afraid "to fall in the ground and die" (C.P. 176).

Wheat and vines become Eucharistic symbols of Christ's body and blood and the sun's heat symbolizes the blazing love of the Sacred Heart. The blood in the poet's veins longs for the fructifying warmth of Christ's love so that it might become "new love's vintage." The poet takes the lesson of the season to heart and vows: "This is the end of my old ways, dear Christ!" He hears the voice of Christ and is determined to "leave the frosts (that is: the fears) of my December." Yet there is suffering and death to be endured if this transformation is to be successful. His soul must experience tilling and planting if a new life is to spring forth. But it may be an awful planting, full of darkness and "furious waters," a "dark night" which both "eats and feeds me" (C.P. 176).

In the end, the poet, like the wheat, will trust in the life-giving powers of Christ's Heart. Through daily deaths and burials a vibrant transformation will occur. Through Christ there will be a rich harvest.

In "Evening: Zero Weather" from *Figures* (1947), the season is winter, just before the beginning of Lent. The poem is filled with images reflecting the stark, cold atmosphere of the season. Juxtaposed to these are images of an inner summer where the warmth of Christ reigns. The contrast is further heightened by the changing activities of the monks who transition from an afternoon of work out in the barren cold to Vespers in the choir, wrapped in their hoods.

This poem begins by setting the atmosphere of a stark winter scene:

Now the lone world is streaky as a wall of marble
With veins of clear and frozen snow.
There is no bird-song there, no hare's track
No badger working in the russet grass:
All the bare fields are silent as eternity. (C.P. 174)

Then attention is drawn to a line of hooded monks coming from the cow's barn exhaling "plumes of breath" and carrying "gleaming buckets" of milk. The ground is "like iron beneath our boot" and would, if struck by shovels, give off "full flakes of fire." Other monks arrive with axes under their arms and "eyes as clean as the cold sky." Bleeding fingers move their rosary beads and mark the Ave Marias. Before entering, they "shake the chips" out of their robes. When the threshold is crossed, the monks enter into a different mood as they now "go to hide in cowls as deep as clouds" (C.P.174).

One gets the image of white cowls enwrapping cold monks who bow low waiting for "your Vespers, Mother of God!" The monks now withdraw from the wintry weather as well as from all other external stimuli. They will remain in prayer even as outside the copper sunset lingers and then dies.

For we are sunken in the summer of our adoration,
And plunge down, down into the fathoms of our secret joy
That swims with indefinable fire. (C.P. 174)

The monks have entered into another season and "have found our Christ, our August/

Here in the zero days before Lent.” They beat the “lazy liturgy” as one would the harvested wheat that they bind into sheaves. They rise up upon the rhythm of the chants to enter “our blazing heaven by the doors of the Assumption” even though it is on the eve of Ash Wednesday (C.P. 175). The Assumption of Mary is, of course, celebrated in mid-August.

Overall this poem is quite effective in contrasting while holding in fruitful tension the external and internal “seasons.” One moves in from the winter and is drawn into a spiritual summer. One moves from silent fields bare of vegetation to wooden choir stalls filled with the sounds of the harvest. One moves from manual labor to spiritual work. One moves from Vespers on Maude Tuesday to the feast of the Assumption.

The general contrast between “Evening: Zero Weather” and “The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart” is further enriched by their own internal series of contrasts. “The Transformation” fills the outer world with a warm vibrancy of life symbolizing the power and love of God while contrasting that with the inner world of a monk still enclosed in a winter of the spirit. The spiritual challenge is to transform one’s self so as to bring his inner landscape and mood into harmony with the outer reality. In “Evening: Zero Weather,” it is nature, of course, that has entered a season of inactivity and rest while monks work and their spirits soar (C.P. 174-175).

But winter weather can also symbolize great peace, as in “Two States of Prayer.” The light of a December morning reveals a landscape that “like a white Cistercian, /Puts on the ample winter like a cowl.” Snow generously conceals “beneath the drifts as deep as quietude, /The ragged fences and the ravaged field” (C.P. 151). And although the farms are half buried in snow, the poet sees them as wearing white winter coats, warm within like sheep clothed in their white wool.

White cowls, wool, snow, and coats become positive images of warmth and of the merciful hiding of imperfections. The monk had analyzed his own imperfections during November’s Advent with the result that now, knee-deep “Christmas mercies” cover them. The seed, an image of hope, now enters. Within the seed, even though buried within the ground, “The virtual summer lives and sleeps.” Winter can be a time of “penitential peace/Outshining all the songs of June with radiant silences” (C.P. 151).

Not surprisingly, the winter imagery in “Two States of Prayer” and in “Evening: Zero Weather” evoke similar themes. In both there is the theme of inner warmth intensified by outer cold and the theme of “virtual summer.” In one poem summer lies within the seed, in the other it lives in the soul of the monk. “Home” also functions as an image of a refuge against outside threats. In “Evening: Zero Weather” the “whole herd is home in the long barn” and the monks file into their home. The latter “herd” of monks huddle together in choir and therein find warmth and security. In “Two States of Prayer” it is the half-buried farms that are “warm as sheep.”

IV. Rain and Reciprocity

The poem, “Song,” which opens *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949) plays with the images of rain, solitude and community. As is customary in Merton’s poems, and in a number of other writings, rain enhances solitude. Though seated in the open doorway of a shed, Merton at the same time wants to be part of the rain and to be seen by others as belonging to it. What Merton condemns is a state of mind or heart that makes one oblivious to the rain. The beginning lines of the poem are filled with rain images:

When rain, (sings light) rain has devoured my house
And wind wades through my trees,
The cedars fawn upon the storm with their huge paws. (C.P. 197)

Water is everywhere and dynamic. Especially striking are the images of wind wading through the trees and the needled limbs of the cedars like huge paws fawning upon the storm. The drama and tone quickly shift as they move to the poet sitting in the door of his shed, observing this “cyclone.” But “silence is louder” than all of the rain’s noises and out of this silence rise up the monk’s “pure and solitary songs.” While rain devours his house, the poet “eats” the air. Merton contrasts this interplay between the rain and the solitary monk/poet with the isolated condition of “the others” who sit in conference. The rain can only affect the windows, which shield “the others” from its life and meaning:

Their windows grieve, and soon frown
And glass begins to wrinkle with a multitude of water
Till I no longer see their speech
And they no longer know my theater. (C.P. 197)

“Their” conversations and “their” features go down into the deep “like submarines” submerged in “my” storm. Merton orchestrates a coup when he claims as his own the storm that submerges “the others.” This position is intensified in the next stanza where, in contrast to “the others” who seem unmoved by the storm, the poet and the rain join together in a creative moment.

But I drink rain, drink wind
Distinguish poems
Boiling up out of the cold frost:
Lift to the wind my eyes full of water,
My face and mind, to take their free refreshment. (C.P.197)

There is a creative interaction between the poet and the rain, but none between him and the community. Rather than engaging in a set of words unaffected by the rain, he drinks rain and wind (having already eaten air) and distinguishes “poems.” His eyes, face, and mind take their full refreshment. This moves towards a climax in the last stanza where the solitary, creative self reflects on its privileged state:

Thus I live on my own land, on my own island
And speak to god, my God, under the doorway
When rain (sings light) rain has devoured my house
And winds wade through my trees. (C.P., 197)

It is now my own land, and my own island. Slightly less possessive, it is my God, my house, and my trees. (This contrast of the solitary one and the community, of poems and statements coming from his sensitive relationship to nature, of an insensitive monastic community will play themselves out while adding other through the next twenty years).

Rain or hail appears again in the poem, “In the Rain and the Sun,” itself occasioned by an autumn storm. The lightning flashes, “Watch out for this peeled doorlight!” This “noonday dusk” has left spots on the walk: “Tall drops pelted the concrete with their jewelry.” The drops are “as blue as coal” until he plumbs “the shadows full of thunder.” The rains pound like surfs as the “wild seas amuse the world with water” (C.P. 214). The thunder roars like dogs and lions, and sings like “lions and whales!” (C.P. 214, 215). Merton liberally plays with an ecosystem of metaphorically connected sights and sounds from various natural and even human phenomena.

In the midst of it all, a monk with pen in hand, makes the Cistercian sign for water and makes the world sing with his verse. He asks Christ to “discover diamonds/ and sapphires in my verse.” Gradually the storm’s dogs and lions depart and “Adam and Eve walk down my coast.” The poet hangs “Thy rubies on these autumn trees, /On the bones of the homegoing thunder” (C.P. 215).

The fury of the storm contrasts with the quiet creativity of the “hermit” in his harbor. Here, again, Merton’s use of the personal “I” and “my” instead of his traditional collective “we,” provides a single, counter-focus to the pelting drops and winds.

I count the fragmentary rain...
I plumb the shadows full of thunder...
I dwell between cedars/And see...poplars bend
While I burn the sap of my pine house
For praise of the ocean sun...

Songs of the lions and whales!
With my pen between my fingers
Making the waterworld sing! . . .
While I burn the sap of my pine house
For praise of the ocean sun.

I have walked upon the whole days’ surf . . .
Sliding all over the sea I come
To the hap of a slippery harbor. . .

Adam and Eve walk down my coast
Praising the tears of the treasurer sun:
I hang Thy rubies on these autumn trees
On the bones of the homegoing thunder. (C.P. 215)

Even such personal poems as “Song: Contemplation” in the earlier volume *Figures*, uses the “we” to describe a personal ecstatic experience. But in this first volume following his autobiography, Merton begins to find, and is not afraid to identify with, his own voice. Slowly the poetic self begins to bubble out of the collective sea of the cenobitic self. Paradoxically, however, it was then that Merton stopped writing poems for nearly a decade.

V. Creatures As Teachers

Merton also wrote poems about animals and insects and what they can teach humans. An

example of this is “Natural History” from Figures. This September poem celebrates the wisdom present in the smallest of creatures and challenges humans to learn something from them by observing them with an open, creative imagination. This Franciscan-like homily contrasts the world of nature where its inhabitants follow the will of God with the human world that not only is frequently at odds with the divine, but also is too arrogant to learn from other creatures.

Merton begins his poem with a lovely and simple description of the setting that gave rise to his poetic reflections:

There is a grey wall, in places overhung
With the abundant surf of honeysuckle:
It is a place of shelter, full of sun.

There, in the middle of September, in the
vintner’s workdays . . .

The creeping things, in the wise diligence
of an ascetic season,
Have worked their small momentous wonder,
Prepared their winter’s sleep.

One learns of the mercy and providence of the Savior from these creatures. They do not consult calendars or timetables to decide when to come to this place. Nor do they consult with others to find directions to this particular wall, which will “all winter, never know the wind.” Rather, their natures hear the thought of God within them and obey Him. They hasten “To die here in this patch of sun” where they will spin their grey covering which matches the grey wall. Obeying God, they leave the pastures, grasses and flowers even though summer seems to go on forever. They leave that entire world of life to “seal themselves in silences and sleep,” like monks, hermits, recluses. With great zeal they work to rid themselves of their old lives so they can assume their cocoon.

As the poet walks, he ponders the mystery of how it is that all creatures obey the will of God, but humans “with all our minds and light” end up hard-hearted and faithless, clinging to our stubborn ways, slow to respond. Yes, Merton concludes, St. Theresa was right in seeing that “all creation teaches us some way of prayer.” For here in the easy sun, “everything that moves is

full of mystical theology.” Quite a profound statement by Merton with many subtle meanings and implications ecologically and theologically.

For Merton, the lesson to be learned from these cocooning creatures is simple. One must fight to free oneself of the old ways, to kill the Adam imprisoned within, and then “sleep a space, in the transforming Christ.” The metamorphosis of these creatures is a figure of the “scope and end” of spiritual metamorphosis. We humans should run

To our far sweeter figurative death,
When we can learn such ways to God from creeping things
And sanctity from a black and russet worm!

VI. Love Caught In the Sperm of the Seasons

Many of Merton’s poems during his first decade at Gethsemani weave together images of liturgical and natural time. Feast days, seasons such as Advent, Lent, and Easter, and unexpected events during these times were occasions for poetic expression.

Some of these poems were of the “devotional” type that Merton later abandons. There is one poem, however, which beautifully expresses Merton’s deep love of the seasons and seems rooted in an ecstatic joy over the presence of God experienced in and through this cycle. That poem is one of Merton’s few French poems, “Je Crois En L’Amour” (“I Believe in Love”), from *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949). The poet begins with a comparatively daring set of images:

I believe in the love
which sleeps and wakes up,
caught in the sperm of the seasons.

Love here is not some abstract universal force nor is it the act of the will. This love embodies itself in the rhythm and qualities of the seasons and is full of a fertile power that gives life. Merton continues,

When I breathe my spring on the fresh liturgical
peaks of the hills
seeing all the trees and the green corn,
the anxious essence of my being
awakens with gaping yawns.

The poet draws an analogy between the awakening of the world in spring and the

awakening of his own being. The sight of all the trees and corn from the “fresh” hills calls forth a response from his awakening soul, “and the adoration sounds like the legendary clocks/who ring their heavy chants in the womb of the ocean.” The poet’s own deep adoration blends with the cosmic chant. Merton is to develop this image along a slightly different line much later in his essay “Atlas and the Fat Man.”

The image of summer is wheat, but wheat that is flesh, a “gold flesh” that is stripped away by the “looming sun.” Yet this stripping away paradoxically increases life. For what remains is a purity, both of the wheat and of one’s self. The ascetical fire burns and one sweats away the superfluous, leaving a “skeletal praise.” The Eucharistic homologization of wheat and the body of Christ adds another layer of meaning to the symbols. And in the next stanza symbols of full vines and wine appear: a harvest time invitation to the great communal banquet where the wine of peace will be drunk. “O brothers, come with me,” the poet exclaims. “Drink the wine of Melchisedech/while all the giant mountains/dressed in the vines of Isaias/sing peace.”

Finally, reflecting on his own act of writing, Merton declares, “Poems are born because love is like this/in the hollow heart of a man.” This love, present in the seasons, lives in our hearts. Many of Merton’s seasonal poems reflect his heart’s being touched by that love “caught in the sperm of the seasons.”

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CHAPTER THREE

CONTEMPLATIVE BRANCHES

Blossom on Merton's Tree: "Everything That is, is Holy"

Seeds of Contemplation (1949) was the first popular work on spirituality by the famous autobiographer of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Interestingly, the first chapter in this important early work, titled "Everything That is, is Holy," is a poetic endorsement of the goodness and holiness of creation and its diverse members. At its beginning, *Seeds* argues for a concept of sainthood built upon the goodness of creation and the positive role that the development of an appreciation for the creative works of the Divine and of human artists can play in spiritual growth. Merton is trying to correct rather common misconceptions regarding the spiritual and contemplative life among many pious Catholics. The young convert, having boldly announced his own desire to become a saint, is careful to clarify his understanding of what that really means. He warns his readers not to think of a saint as a long-faced and gloomy ascetic, insensitive to the beauty of creation and incapable of delight in the diverse creatures of God. No genuine sanctity can grow in such arid soil, being incapable of nurturing the "seeds" sown by God in ordinary existence. Love for God does not mean an indifference to or hatred for the world. Rather, it is precisely because of their closeness to God that saints could truly appreciate all beings and persons (S.C. 20).

Merton insists that "the eyes of the saint make all beauty holy and the hands of the saint consecrate everything they touch to the glory of God . . ." (S.C. 21). For the rest of us who are not saints, he reminds us that

The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own self-hood . . . and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls. In His love we possess all things and enjoy fruition of them, finding Him in them all. (S.C. 22)

This being so, as we move about the world, everything we meet, everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling us, "purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven" (S.C. 22).

Unfortunately, if we remain imprisoned within our narrow selves, our relationships with creation and created beings will be perverse. All created beings are good; they reflect the goodness and beauty of God and, therefore, are meant to draw us to Him. But too often we act as if their only purpose is to serve our insatiable appetites and fulfill our every desire—a vocation they are incapable of fulfilling. Created beings are able to give us a certain fulfillment because their reality is rooted in and given by God and can lead us to the Reality that is God. Unfortunately, declares Merton, “Instead of worshipping God through His creation we are always trying to worship ourselves with creatures.” But since the narrow self is empty of reality, worship of it is synonymous with “the worship of nothing” which is “hell” (S.C. 23).

In this short chapter Merton touches on several themes that will remain a hallmark of his ecological spirituality. First is his artistic and theological praise for the intrinsic value, goodness and beauty of creation. Second, the existential or spiritual condition of the human subject shapes the perception of creation and his or her relationship to it. If we value nature only to the extent and degree it can fulfill our desires, it reflects us and not God. We use it as a means to worship ourselves. Third is Merton’s moral assertion that the responsibility of the person who is truly religious is to recognize the holiness of things and to use them respectfully.

Blossom: “Things in Their Identity”

The second chapter, “Things in Their Identity,” is a lovely meditation that elaborates on the above general themes. Merton emphasizes how each created being, in its individual identity with its imperfections and simply by being itself, gives glory to its Creator.

A tree gives glory to God first of all by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be, it is imitating an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree.

The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like Him. (S.C. 24)

Being true to itself, identical with itself, “This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do” (S.C. 24). (This passage might, when applied to Merton’s life as tree, be a short synopsis of this book).

Merton's respect for the full ontological status of a concrete being is rooted in the thought of the Franciscan philosopher Duns Scotus as well as in the poetry of the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins had found in Scotus the philosophical support for his own aesthetico-religious appreciation for the individual reality or situation. Under the influence of Scotus, Hopkins had developed his idea of "inscape." This intuitive, contemplative grasp of the inner "form" or character of a being is at the same time a connatural knowing of its unique identity. For, as Merton states,

The forms and individual characters of living and growing things and of inanimate things and of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God.

Their inscape is their sanctity. (S.C. 25)

Hence, by grasping the individual form or "inscape" of a reality, one comes to know the wisdom of God imprinted in a flower or tree or inanimate reality. The apprehension of the holiness of any particular being is enriched by a variety of factors such as the time of day or the season of the year or its relationship with other beings that affect and are affected by it. Thus Merton can exclaim that, "The special clumsy beauty of this particular colt on this April day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own Art, and it declares the glory of God" (S.C. 25). One cannot grasp or be grasped by the holiness of this colt by removing it from everything else that contributes to its shape, character, or beauty at that moment. In fact, it may well participate in a larger whole with its own "inscape," that is, "here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art" (S.C. 25).

In an analogous vein, the monk declares that, "The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints," and the "little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God" (S.C. 25). Each leaf is uniquely configured in its texture and veined patterns, and the bass and trout "hiding in the deep pools of the river are canonized by their beauty and their strength" (S.C.25). Another of the saints of God is "the great, gashed, half-naked mountain" the likes of which there is nothing else in the world. Nothing imitates God "in quite the same way. And that is its sanctity" (S.C.25,26). The fact that humans do not

note or value the yellow flowers or the clumsy colt makes no difference to their holiness or their sainthood. The loss is to the human's character.

Precisely because it is metaphorical, Merton's use of sainthood in reference to flowers, fish, colts, lakes and mountains is meant to underscore both *their* sanctity given by God with their being and our *call* to sanctity through the discovery of theirs. It also takes sainthood out of the realm of ecclesiastical privilege and definition (they are "canonized," not by a Pope but by the Creator) and makes it something "natural" to all beings, even if for human sanctity requires both grace and effort.

Likewise, declaring each being analogous to a work of art challenges us to develop aesthetic and religious sensitivities by which we can come to a certain intuitive grasp of the Artist. Through an appreciation for the beauty, holiness, and integrity of creation and created beings we not only are offered "gracefully" a chance to open our minds and hearts to a more intimate understanding of the Creator but in responding to this invitation we undergo our own transformation. We might also, as Merton then notes, be driven by the reality and integrity of a flower or a clumsy colt to look more deeply at our own reality and identity. "But what about you? What about me?" Merton asks. His reply is that just as flowers and trees can "find" their sanctity and identity in simply being what they were created to be, each human can discover his or her true identity. Thus, "for me sanctity consists in being myself and for you sanctity consists in being *your* self and that, in the last analysis, your sanctity will never be mine and mine will never be yours . . ." (S.C. 26).

This fundamental vocation or call to be ourselves is not superfluous to the question of our "salvation," "*since God alone possesses the secret of my identity*" (S.C. 27). Both hinge on our willingness to become our selves in and with God. "The secret of my full identity," says Merton, "is hidden in Him." Metaphorical "seeds" meant for our growth are planted in each situation and at every moment (Ibid.). Merton's model of spiritual growth requires an openness and sensitivity on the part of the individual to concrete place and time. That is, through each unique configuration of beings and events the nurturing powers (seeds) needed to transform the self are

made available.

For Merton, there is always a tension between the false self with its own image of what it should become and the true self whose full identity is hidden in God. My reality consists in the realization of my true self. My false self is unreal. “All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered” (S.C. 28). Thus, the more I strive to fulfill the self-image created by my ego, the more I move away from the way reality is oriented, ignoring and not respecting the integrity of creation and its relationship to the Creator. Instead of seeing and valuing natural beings for what they are, for their identity, my false identity distorts reality and turns them and their use totally into the service of my false self. The assistance they were intended to give me in my own search for God is then rendered inoperative.

Here we see Merton drawing upon St. Thomas’s contention that to the extent that the mind conforms to reality it knows the truth and through natural realities can come to an understanding of God and when aided by revelation we can name and praise God. In line with Merton’s “seeds,” St. Thomas notes that “the consideration of creatures is useful for building up our faith.” Willis Jenkins says that for Aquinas, God “uses creatures to slowly and progressively work in us the gifts of faith and charity. They ‘inflammé’ and ‘intoxicate’ us with passion for God’s goodness,” they teach us by their innumerable manifestations of goodness how to develop that desire and they “offer themselves” for use in acts of “naming, praising, and glorifying” by which God is known and by which we, with all creation, “come into God’s friendship” (E.G. 130).

While Merton would not argue with that, he would remind us that true “friendship” and especially friendship with God requires that I discover my own “reality” or real self and that I not approach either creation or Creator with my false self or ego. If I do, I will distort their reality, turning them into images of myself and towards self-worship and praise. Ecologically this can open the floodgates for the kind of self-justifying anthropocentric abuse visited on living and inanimate earth beings by us today. But Merton notes that, “His love in them is their intrinsic goodness. The value He sees in them is their value . . . all things reflect Him” (S.C. 32).

The moral necessity of recognizing the “intrinsic goodness” and value of other beings and indeed habitats, etc. will become a central part of environmental or ecological ethics.

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CHAPTER FOUR

EMERGING ECOPIETY: FORESTER AND FAMILY MAN

Ecopiety is a term of the late radical ecologist Hwa Yol Jung who uses it to pull together under a state of “sacramental coexistence” relationships of humans with other humans (homopiety) and with the natural world and its other-than-human beings (geopiety). We will examine Merton’s own deepening exercise of these two interrelated forms of spirituality in his role as a monk in relation to other monks (homopiety) and in relation to the natural world surrounding the monastery (geopiety). The experience of the Divine Presence in both lends the sacramental quality that Merton seeks. As we have seen, on a Sunday morning (June 27, 1947) at the end of a talk with his Abbot about the importance of solitude, Merton was given permission to go out of the enclosure and into the woods by himself (E.S. 6/27/47). He writes of his joy and religious excitement as he walked around and up a hill from which he saw the monastery in its proper place. He lamented that not many monks appreciated this patch of sky or “these free woods.” What happened next?

“Then the Spirit of God got hold of me and I started through the woods” (Ibid. 229). The sound of the birds and the stream and “the sweet scent of the woods” made this setting a self-enclosed Place, like the Garden of Eden.

One moment of that quiet washed clean the deep, dark inward mirror of my soul and everything inside was swamped in a prayer . . . To say I was happy is to say how far short the prayer was of perfection, but I was consciously and definitely and swimmingly happy, and I wonder how I ever stayed on the ground at all. (Ibid. 330)

On the one hand, Merton felt bad that the other monks could not experience these more wild places. On the other, he did not give up trying to encourage that experience.

The Horsebarn and Beyond

Perhaps due in part to Merton’s influence, and in part due to the overcrowded condition of the monastery (and his own commonsense), Abbot James Fox, on July 31, 1949 gave general permission for all professed monks to use the orchard and the area to the east of the church for a period of time on Sundays (and, probably, Feast Days), for walking and reading. On the day this

general permission was given, Merton “made a bee-line for the little grove of cedars that is behind the old horsebarn and crowded up against the far end of the enclosure wall and it was nice” (S.J. 210).

Sometimes simply going out to work in nature revived a type of spirituality that seemed absent when around the house and the church (S.J. 213). At other times, the reading of Scripture awakened in him “an immediate and inexpressible contact with the Living Word ...” All of nature seemed renewed with him and around him. “The sky seems to be a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and hills and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet” (Ibid. 215-216). Time in the hills on feast days gave him a chance for “really deep prayer.” In the woods Merton “was always recollected and in God’s presence ... and at peace and happy with Him,” but sometimes more obscurely when he was “in the hot choir . . .” (Ibid. 221).

The horsebarn and its environs became the new Place for Merton’s prayer and meditation. In November 1949 Merton wrote to Bob Lax:

I have manufactured a private boardwalk out behind the old horsebarn...and there I walk up and down and make up songs...It is about the only way I can pray but it is mildly pacifying and doesn’t disturb the cloud where God is. (R.J. 172)

By December 17, 1949 Merton had found a special place in which to read and pray. It was located “on the top floor of that barn building where the rabbits used to be.” Using a series of ladders he could reach a spot he liked under the roof of this garden house:

There is a chair and there is a beautiful small rectangular window which faces south over the valley – the outside orchard, St. Joseph’s field, the distant line of hills. It is the quietest and most hidden and most isolated place I have found in the whole enclosure--but not necessarily the warmest . . . Almost all activity makes me ill, but as soon as I am alone and silent and still again, I sink into deep peace, recollection and happiness. (S.J. 250)

This special place made Merton forget, temporarily, thoughts of other Religious Orders such as the Carthusians, and their offering of increased solitude. He was glad to be a Cistercian and to “sit in the top of a barn with more beautiful stove-pipes and strawberry boxes and lovelier old junk than a Carthusian ever saw, all alone and suspenso en el aire” (S.J. 251).

The year 1949 had been a year of great joy and spiritual exaltation as well as great pain and intense spiritual dryness. A few days before Christmas, perhaps as a reward for the year's struggles, Merton experienced a sudden deepening of internal freedom and solitude. He goes to great lengths to recreate the "time and place" of this increased "liberty."

I shall remember the time and place of this liberty and this neutrality which cannot be written down. These clouds low on the horizon, the outcrops of hard yellow rock in the road, the open gate, the perspective of fence-posts leading up the rise to the sky, and the big cedars tumbled and tousled by the wind. Standing on rock. Present. The reality of the present and of solitude divorced from past and future. To be collected and gathered up in clarity and silence and to belong to God and to be nobody else's business. (S.J. 252)

This experience should also be placed in the context of Merton's efforts to free himself from the many obligations placed upon him by others and by his own intellectual and literary enthusiasms. A few days earlier Merton had been wondering why he wore himself out reading, writing and talking so much and getting excited over relatively trivial matters. In addition to his own writing responsibilities—and obsessions-- Merton was now responsible for teaching courses to the novices (S.J. 251-252). The monk realized that he must carve out a deeper interior solitude as a counter-force. He claimed to want to pull back from the notoriety that his books had brought him. He wanted to be unknown: "They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis--he's half dead too. For my part my name is that sky, those fenceposts, and those cedar trees. I shall not even reflect on who I am . . ." (S.J. 253). Thomas Merton begins to suspect "that solitude is my vocation, not as a flight from the world, but as my place in the world" (S.J. 257-258). Solitude as Place—a unique example of a characteristic of Radical Ecology.

On January 11, 1950 Merton proclaims: "For the first time in my life I am finding you, O solitude" (S.J.267). Solitude and silence not only deepen his presence to and experience of creation (geopiety), but also of his fellow monks (homopiety). "It is in deep solitude," Merton writes, "that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them" (S.J. 268). This is not a shallow, emotionally volatile affection but a "pure affection," one "filled with reverence for the solitude of others" (S.J. 269). For Merton, solitude is not defined by the presence or absence of others. And it is here that Merton

reflects his growing sense of the presence of God both in nature and humanity. “True solitude is a participation in the solitariness of God—who is in all things . . . His solitude is His Being” (S.J. 269). For humans, solitude dwells in their deeper being or self and not in the “artificial and fictional level of being” (Ibid.). Solitude, as he wrote earlier, “is a deepening of the present, and unless you look for it in the present you will never find it” (S.J. 262).

Joy in Creation

On February 5, 1950, Merton is out in the early morning frost, listening to the birds and watching the sun “coming up and throwing soft mother-of-pearl highlights on the frozen pastures of Olivet.” He reflects on the readings from the book of Genesis in the Divine Office. The Biblical description of creation and paradise is meant to tell us about the joy “for which we were created.” The main reason “why we have so little joy is that we take ourselves too seriously.” Only by losing our exaggerated sense of self-importance will we be free “to enjoy true happiness (S.J. 272-273).

Something of this joy in creation shines through Merton’s journal entry for February 27, 1950. Wanting to emphasize the importance of what follows, Merton uses italics in the published version of his journal entries in *The Sign of Jonas*.

The song of my Beloved beside the stream. The birds descanting in their clerestories. His skies have sanctified my eyes, His woods are clearer than the King’s palace. But the air and I will never tell our secret. (S.J. 280)

More clues about the secret are then given:

I had never before spoken so freely or so intimately with woods, hills, birds, water and sky. On this great day, however, they understood their position and they remained mute in the presence of the Beloved. Only His light was obvious and eloquent. My brother and sister, the light and water. The stump and the stone. The tables of rock. The blue, naked sky. Tractor tracks, a little waterfall. And Mediterranean solitude. I thought of Italy after my Beloved had spoken and was gone. (S.J. 280)

Note that Merton characterizes this inner dialogical experience by stating that he spoke *with* nature, and not *to* nature. The latter would connote a monologue and suggest some distance between himself and “woods, hills, birds, water and sky.” Their closeness is permeated and intensified by the “presence of the Beloved.” That he never spoke so “freely” and “intimately”

suggests a relationship that is casual and uninhibited as well as full of close personal warmth (despite the February chill). Franciscan-like, Merton speaks of his “brother and sister, the light and the water” (S.J. 280). The Beloved sings through the birds, filling everything with a “light” that is both “obvious” and “eloquent.” As this light “sanctified” his eyes and cleansed his senses, it deepened his Life with nature. And yet, after this brief visit and encounter, the Beloved “was gone” (Ibid.). Merton thought of the Mediterranean and of Italy. But why? Perhaps it was the sky and the light. Or the familiarity and kinship with nature expressed by St. Francis of Assisi. In other places in earlier journals, certain kinds of skies would remind him of paintings by Manet or Bellini or places he had been: France, Bermuda, Florida, etc.

In the middle of Lent in 1950 Merton notes with obvious contentment that his

. . . chief joy is to escape to the attic of the garden house and the little broken window that looks out over the valley. There in the silence I love the green grass. The tortured gestures of the apple trees have become part of my prayer. I look at the shining water under the willows and listen to the sweet songs of all the living things that are in our woods and fields. (E.S. 3/16/50)

The spiritual elevated and purified the emotional: it was not just any joy but his “chief joy” to look out over the valleys. Silence makes for a special milieu for his “love” for the “green grass.” He is not reticent to use the word “love” to characterize his feelings which he felt even more strongly and was more aware of undoubtedly both because of the “silence” and the permeating Presence of his Beloved. The apple trees’ limbs in their twisted configuration seemed tortured as they reached to the sky, much perhaps as Merton felt his own being and prayer to be at times. His own “tree of life” on occasion felt twisted and tortured. Perhaps it is also the case that his frequent praying while facing the apple trees had forged a deep connection with them (geopiety). Such intense encounters would occur in different ways and elicit different feelings on all or most levels of his being: from body to emotions to mind to spirit. For example, right after the above ecstatic expression, he confesses that “So much do I love this solitude that, when I walk out along the road to the old barns that stand alone, far from the new buildings, delight begins to overpower me from head to foot and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones” (S.J. 288).

This has similarities with his earlier experience of June 27, 1947 and a later one in April

1964 and probably with many more. In 1964 he qualifies the feeling as one of “Heavenliness-again” occasioned by “walking up into the woods yesterday afternoon.” It was as if his feet had “acquired a heavenly lightness from contact with the earth of the path.” It was “as though the earth itself were filled with an indescribable spirituality and lightness as if the true nature of the earth were to be heavenly . . .” (D.W.L. 4/24/64) In this latter case he also draws a parallel between his experience of the earth’s transformation into heavenliness and the transformation of the “heavenliness of bread” at Mass and their association with the transformed ikons of Elias and Christ’s transformation on Mt. Tabor. Both a Teilhardian and Eastern Orthodox theme are woven into the narrative of the 1964 experience.

Returning to the 1950 account, we can also observe a similarity in the type of ecstatic and iconic experience that this sort of movement into nature and solitude on occasion evoked in the monk. In fact, it was probably the richness of this experiences in 1950 that started him repeating again, “The reprehensible dream of building a hermitage” out in the woods (S.J. 299). Since the adjective “reprehensible” does not appear in his original journal (E.S. 4/12/50), one might assume it was inserted in *The Sign of Jonas* as a goad to his Superiors. This dream of a cabin in the woods might have spurred his reading of *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau’s classic description and defense of such a life. Not by coincidence, Merton admires in *Walden* some “beautiful pages on morning and on being awake.” (As we have seen and will treat of in a later chapter, early morning was to be a favorite time of day and being “awake” a rich state and theme in Merton’s experience of and writings on the natural world). But it was what Thoreau wrote next that moved the monk to copy the passage into his journal for emphasis: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (S.J. 316).

Certainly one of the goals of Merton’s own search for simplicity and solitude was “to front only the essential facts of life.” Thoreau then “mysteriously” confesses, “nor did I wish to practice resignation unless it was quite necessary.” Thinking of his own struggles, the monk conjectures, “I suppose he means he did not intend to be resigned to anything like a compromise with life, unless

it could not be avoided” (S.J. 316). Merton is struck (having read both men) by some similarities between Thoreau and John of the Cross, especially regarding: “Ascesis of solitude. Simplification of life. The separation of reality from illusion” (S.J. 316-317). Thoreau’s views on solitude, simple living, returning to fundamentals, as well as on civil disobedience were to affect Merton in many direct and indirect ways. This was intensified by his own time spent in the woods. During the Christmas season of 1950, the monks were given more free time than usual and Merton reports that “Father Abbot let me loose in the woods. I am a new man as a result” (R.J. 1/8/51). This renewing effect of the woods would only increase over the years.

The Garden House

Seated in the garden house during “St. Benedict’s month” (March 1951), Merton declares, again, that he is weary of being a writer. He looks fondly on manual work in the midst of nature which was also St. Benedict’s ideal for the monk. While not mentioning Thoreau, Merton notes that the spiritual life is taught by the “essential facts of life”:

How necessary it is for monks to work in the fields, in the rain, in the sun, in the mud, in the clay, in the wind: these are our spiritual directors and our novice-masters. They form our contemplation. They instill us with virtue. They make us as stable as the land we live in. You do not get that out of a typewriter. (S.J. 321)

Even given Merton’s occasional penchant for exaggeration, this is an interesting statement, especially in the context of his growing recognition of the importance of nature to the development of his own contemplative life. Yet here, Merton asserts that not only solitude and silence but physical activity, if done with the right dispositions, can positively affect growth in virtue, knowledge, and contemplation. The fields, rain, mud and wind can be “spiritual directors and our novice masters” because, like their human counterparts, they “form our contemplation.” Spiritual formation should not be thought of as something “pure” and separate from sweaty, muddy, or wet bodies. Merton would hold this position on monasticism throughout his life, even when in the 1960s his was a voice for monastic reform. In the posthumous *Contemplation in a World of Action* (essays written in the mid-1960s), Merton reiterates that not only does the body benefit from interaction with the forces of nature, but the emotions, mind and spirit do

likewise. Hence such work “is for the spiritual good of the monk first of all,” and, even if it is not of economic benefit to the monastery, should be a regular part of monastic life (C.W.A. 99). If monks are “more and more removed from the sphere of *nature*” and employed in offices or worse still, assembly lines, then they will “certainly lose very much” (C.W.A. 100). (One should recall this when reading his letter in 1968 to Rosemary Reuther defending a type of eco-monastic vocation and rejecting notions of otherworldliness for monks.)

True to his paradoxical life, while Merton reflects positively on the land and questions the typewriter, he is, at the same time, rereading his 1941 unpublished novel, *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis* (later published as *My Argument with The Gestapo*) (S.J. 321). He feels that his solution to the problem of “the world” in that novel was wrong and that it was wrong to condemn the whole world as evil, to ridicule it and reject it in the name of some supernatural solution. He had come to the monastery to find his place *in* the world and failing that, he would have wasted his time in the monastery. The monastery had given him perspective and taught him “how to live” (S.J. 322).

Perhaps foreshadowing his 1958 Fourth and Walnut experience where he felt the walls of religious separation between himself and people in “the world” collapse, he declares that rather than stand apart from or above the world, his “first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself” (S.J. 322-323). Reflecting another developing conviction, Merton insists that to become a saint one must first become a real human being. And his first act as a human being must be to acknowledge how much he owes to others. These others include all the ordinary people in America whose prayers are helping him in his efforts to become a saint. He notes that he has lived for thirty-six years without being a citizen of any country. When he entered the monastery he was proud of being a citizen of heaven and felt he needed no country. Now he thinks differently. He is convinced that God has brought him to Kentucky as “the precise place ...for my sanctification” (S.J. 323). The place where he now lives and works and meditates and encounters woodland trees and birds and animals and fish has been chosen for him by God (Ibid.). Place *does* matter as does the complex

interdependent web of relationships near and far that do not *re-place* but enhance it. In the later 1950s his larger web of limbs and branches, stems and foliage will expand but will depend on a growing trunk, strongly centered and rooted in Place.

Connecting Time Through Epiphanies

April 1951 marked a decade since Thomas Merton, the young English professor from St. Bonaventure College, visited Gethsemani for Holy Week. One of his concerns at the time was whether he would be able to use the woods around the monastery for prayer and meditation. He felt that perhaps he was more of a Franciscan than a Trappist in his love of nature. When he returned to St. Bonaventure he reflected on his misgivings:

By Good Friday I was getting rather disgusted, physically, and so, as an act of rebellion, went for a walk! All the time telling myself some absurd thing about the necessity to love God's creatures--nature etc. The only answer to that is: there is nothing in the Trappist discipline to prevent you loving nature the way I meant it then and do now: loving it as God's creation, and a sign of His goodness and love. (R.M. 9/4/41)

Merton's April 1951 recollection of that visit was sparked by a letter he had received that contained an account of a Syrian Marionite hermit, Father Charbel. Fifty years after his death, Charbel's body was found in an incorruptible state and miracles soon followed. Like Charbel, "it seems to me that I have been asleep for nine years--and that before that I was dead. I have never been a monk or a solitary. Take up thy bed and walk!" (E.S. 4/11/51). On the twenty-second of April, the garden house became a place of epiphany for Thomas Merton, and Father Charbel was the key to its meaning. The morning of that day reminded him of the morning of "that first poem" in the guest house ten years earlier. He had looked at the garden house from his room and thought it "beautiful and mysterious." Now he is hidden in that "very mystery." But such a mystery cannot be revealed to others, as Merton explains to Charbel: "Because I will not tell them about the moon, about the cold hour beyond price, the mist in the early valley, the sun I did not know was rising behind me, or the sweet-smelling earth" (S.J. 325). A dead-yet-living monk with mud on his feet had climbed the ladder of that "glorious barn," Merton states. And though that mud on the steps would cover his hands as he descends, he will descend in glory. Nevertheless, "this barn cannot be known. It is Mount Lebanon, where Father Charbel Makhoul saw the sun

and moon” (S.J. 325-326). Merton would not speak of the inner, hidden secret that that Place and that moment had revealed. But he would recall the time and place of that Mystery, including his awareness of the moon, the feel of the cold and mist of that hour, a sense of the sun rising behind him, and the sweet smells of the earth (S.J. 325). The senses, transformed but not obscured, contributed to the unique character of that sacramental moment and experience.

The previous afternoon there had been another place in the woods and a different kind of ladder. This time Merton is reluctant to paint an exact portrait of the place, but hints at it--as he does to his experience:

There, there is the crooked tree, the moss with my unspoken words, those pines upon that cliff of shale, the valley living with the tunes of diesel trains. Nobody knows the exact place I speak of and why should I tell them? (S.J. 327)

He will not tell us where, like Jacob, he woke up at the foot of his ladder, for each person must climb that spiritual ladder to his or her own “unrecognizable house.” Yet, what is he to do now? Should he simply write, “The rest is silence” and sell the book? No. Like Jacob, his life goes on and like Jacob he must marry again and again and care for his flock. He must “thank God for the hill, the sky, the manna on the ground which every morning renews our lives and makes us forever virgins” (S.J. 327).

Unlike the holy places of France, rooted in an ancient culture and religious tradition whose powers had positively but less consciously influenced the young Tom Merton, these places became sacred through their mediating and contouring of Merton’s more “conscious” experience of the divine. His memory brings to life again the many intersecting variables of time and place, even the “tunes of diesel trains.” Many holy places would exist both because of the monk’s experience and his reliving in their presence of the mysterious intersection of the human, natural and divine, even as they lacked status as officially consecrated spaces for the edification of the religious. The contours and character, the inner landscape of Merton’s life, i.e., his “ecological person” were influenced by these particular climes, hills, plants, animals and streams—the “spirit” of these places that opened up his own spirit.

Set-Back or Opportunity?

In early May of 1951 Merton was reflecting on certain events of the previous week that threatened to seriously curtail his permission to use the woods for reflection and prayer. Dom Louis, the Father Immediate and new Abbot of St. Melleray, had visited Gethsemani and had decided that Merton's going off into the woods alone was dangerous because it could "introduce a kind of 'Carthusian spirit' into the house." Merton received the news with some disappointment, especially in light of the fact that he had previously sent a letter to the Abbot General requesting permission to be out in the woods all day. (Merton does not suggest that there is any connection between that letter and this prohibition). He confesses that "Every time I have been into the woods to pray I have loved them more" (E.S. 5/7/51).

Merton claims that a week earlier he had accepted the General's decision with ease. Yet, the following day, gazing at the woods, he experienced a sense of loss but surmised altruistically that the reason he could accept the prohibition so easily "must be because I love God."

Nevertheless, memories rose up.

At once I remembered all the afternoons I had been out there, the dark afternoons in the gullies along the creeks and the rainy afternoon on top of the knobs and the day I sang the *Pater Noster* on one knob and then on another; the day I found the daffodils in an unexpected place, and the other day when I picked them in a place I knew they would be; and the immense silence of Good Friday when I sat on a rotten log in a sheltered corner by a stream with a relic of the Holy Cross

(E.S. 5/7/51)

Merton then consoles himself with the thought that he will always have "those hours of solitude" and the "enjoyment of them." They had become a part of who he is and would never be lost. When he recalls the great riches he experienced out there, he tries to turn the pain to his spiritual advantage, stating with heroic resignation: "I can only think of being dizzy with happiness that there is one big pleasure left for me to sacrifice to God" (E.S. 5/7/51). Yet, for Merton, any surrender of his desire for solitude in the natural world is never fully satisfactory or final. When it comes to solitude and nature, Merton would return to his conviction that God wills more of both for him. Ironically, Dom James Fox seemed to foresee this and worked around the prohibition.

Back to the Woods

Merton's Abbot had agreed with Dom Louis on one issue: given the large number of young professed monks now at Gethsemani, it was wise to establish a scholasticate and appoint a Master of Scholastics. On Trinity Sunday, 1951 Dom James Fox appointed Fr. Louis Merton to the new position. Merton agreed that the young professed monks "need a Spiritual Director as well as some sort of family life of their own" (E.S. 6/13/51). Thus did Merton become a spiritual director, teacher, and "father."

Dom Fox had always known that the forest played an important role in Merton's search for solitude and in his career as a writer. In addition, providing some access to the forests now could forestall pressure from Merton for more solitude later—or elsewhere. This new position might offer a way to get around the recent decision of Dom Louis. And so, Dom Fox gave his Master of Scholastics permission to take his new "family" to "a wooded bluff outside the east wall which is sufficiently fenced-in to be considered an extension of the enclosure." Merton considered it "a refuge for my scholastics" (note the "my"). On Whitmonday, just before the last stand of cedars within the enclosure were cut down (!), Merton went out to explore this bluff. He describes it as "a pleasant place" where one could be in solitude more quickly than if one were to go to the more distant forest. Yet he thought it not as ideal for prayer and solitude as the forest (E.S. 6/13/51). This reservation indicates that a similar scenario may have to play itself out again and again.

A Family Man: Homopiety

The new position as Master of Scholastics brought other changes. The vault, which had been Merton's refuge for reading and writing, would now function as a place for conferences with individual scholastics. This meant that Merton had to clear some space for such conversations. Looking around, he was abashed at the number of books he had accumulated, books that he had convinced himself would come in handy for future writing projects. Merton also recognized that he must now set an example for his scholastics. This meant adhering to the common schedule more conscientiously and doing common work more regularly. "Thus," Merton says, "I sit on the threshold of a new existence" (S.J.330). He must be "a grown-up monk" and hence will "have

no time for anything but the essentials” (Ibid.) Merton’s heart opened to embrace the young monks even as it sought a deeper experience of solitude in the forest. In the months following his appointment as Master of Scholastics, Merton found himself growing in unexpected ways. He was learning how to care for others as individuals, how to share their burdens, how to listen to them and give them advice as well as how to anguish over words that did harm. Importantly, he was learning that compassionate involvement with others need not be an obstacle to solitude:

I know what I have discovered: that the kind of work I once feared because I thought it would interfere with “solitude” is, in fact, the only true path to solitude. One must be in some sense a hermit before the care of souls can serve to lead one further into the desert. But once God has called you to solitude, everything you touch leads you further into solitude. Everything that affects you builds you into a hermit, as long as you do not insist on doing the work yourself and building your own kind of hermitage.

What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. (S.J. 333-334)

One notes Merton’s renewed confidence that God has called him to solitude and that in one sense he already is a hermit. Solitude and compassion for others are not mutually exclusive. Merton puts his own “spin” on the homopiety/ geopiety dialectic.

In January of 1952, Merton is out working alone in the woods. He repeats to himself the question the Magi asked concerning the location of the King of the Jews, then answers it: “He and I live in the trees.” Yet this “hermit” is at the same time “more of a family man” than he ever had been. This helped him achieve the status of a “mature” hermit, one almost thirty-seven years old. He is glad that the physical work in the woods keeps his stomach flat and that he is not exhibiting the “corpulent middle age” which is the fate of many a writer (S.J. 335; E.S. 1/10/52). But why was he in the woods?

Forester: Young Monks--Like Trees

Merton had been made a kind of official monastery “forester” in October of 1951. Abbot Fox had found a way to keep to this Cistercian tradition while opening up more opportunities for solitude to his hermit/monk--without giving him a hermitage. Merton was responsible both for marking those trees that would be cut and for planting new trees. He was also allowed to explore

hollows and woods that were previously off-limits to him. Thus came more solitude, prayer, and even a little liturgical singing “to the silent glens” (S.J. 335-336).

Merton used his new position to get his scholastics out into the woods for work, as well as for an experience of solitude. He was learning to respect them as individuals, to recognize the inner solitude of each and thus to “meet them in my own solitude.” In this he was no different than other human beings who are also called upon to “lay open” the depths of their solitude to themselves, to others and to God. He was now Thomas Merton, forester and family man:

Thus it is that I live in the trees. I mark them with paint, and the woods cultivate me with their silences, and all day long even in choir and at Mass I seem to be in the forest: but my children themselves are like trees, and they flourish all around me like the things that grow in the Bible. (S.J. 337-338)

If the first stage in Merton’s deepening spiritual relationship to the geography of Gethsemani had been the gradual saturation of the hills with his prayers and the second stage was the gradual evocation of epiphanies from the land, then the third stage was to be the saturation of Merton by the forest itself. The forest is now a part of him, as are his “children” who also take on the quality of trees. Merton’s Tree of Life shades other trees of life.

But there is more going on at times. On a late-February day in 1952, Merton is enjoying a brief free moment between giving spiritual direction to his “children” and joining them for work in the woods. “The blue elm tree near at hand,” he begins, “and the light blue hills in the distance: the red bare clay where I am supposed to plant some shade trees: these are before me as I sit in the sun ...” (E.S. 2/26/52). He briefly reflects on projects, including his dream of finding a “place of prayer” out there. Such reflections cease as the divine presence shining through the landscape grasps his being: “The hills are pure as jade in the distance. God is in His transparent world, but He is too sacred to be mentioned, too holy to be observed. I sit in silence. The big deep fish are purple in my sea” [i.e. in the inner ocean of his mind when he closes his eyes] (E.S. 2/26/52).

Merton then describes the “[d]ifferent levels of depth” in this ocean. The first is the surface which is the place of activity, full of plans, troubled, “toss[ed] in the wake of other men’s traffic: passing liners.” The second level is the darkness that comes when he closes his eyes “where

the big blue, purple, green, and gray fish swim by.” He enters his own deep cavern, a place of natural peace and prayer where only “dull rumors of the world” can be heard and where, with “lovely dark green things . . . we pray therein slightly waving among the fish.” Words drown. This is a level deeper than socialization and conceptualization, one to which he can lay no claim. “Animality. Game preserve. Paradise. No questions whatever perturb their holy botany. Natural territory. No man’s sea” (E.S. 2/26/52). Interestingly, as Merton moves deeper, the analogues with the natural world deepen. Beyond language and closer to the Ground of Being it is the source of language, life, paradise, “holy botany.”

The third level is “no longer thick like water but pure, like air.” There is “starlight” down there whose source is unknown, “[m]oonlight” and stillness, “everything is charged with intelligence, though all is night.” In fact, “life has turned to purity in its own refined depths . . . everything is spirit.” Sounding Zen-like, Merton says that God passed by sooner than he arrived, “has gone before He came . . . returned forever.” He is and is not. Merton has reached “the holy cellar of my mortal existence, which opens to the sky” (Ibid.). In fact, there is an awakening, but it is “a strange awakening to find the sky inside you and beneath you and above you and all around you so that your spirit is one with the sky, and all is positive night” (E.S. 2/26/52).

In March, Merton admits that he is pleased with the combination of solitude and community life. He is also convinced that his worrying the previous year over being denied permission to spend more time alone in nature was unnecessary. He speculates that if he had been given “exceptional permission” to spend one day a month in the woods “merely for the sake of prayer” that he would have always felt guilty that it was simply the result of his will and that therefore his prayer would have been less pure. Now he does work in the woods, “day after day,” and work “assigned by obedience.” This kind of work in the forest “does not interfere with prayer, but even in some sense makes it better.” He claims that “by giving up what I wanted I ended up having more than I had thought of wanting” (E.S. 3/17/52). Merton’s inner debate about whether his increased access to solitude was the result of his efforts, God’s will, or his Superiors’ prescience would continue for years.

Merton's long St. Patrick's Day journal entry concludes with the following eco-wisdom (ecosophia):

When your tongue is silent, you can rest in the silence of the forest. When your imagination is silent, the forest speaks to you, tells you of its unreality and of the Reality of God. But when your mind is silent, then the forest suddenly becomes magnificently real and blazes transparently with the Reality of God: for now I know that the Creation which first seems to reveal Him, in concepts, then seems to hide Him, by the same concepts, finally *is revealed in Him*, in the Holy Spirit: and we who are in God find ourselves united, in Him, with all that springs from Him. This is prayer, and this is glory! (S.J. 343)

In the end, neither the mind that formed the concepts nor the forest that blazed with the Real are lost. The God who reveals Himself in a person is also beyond that person. The Spirit of silence that granted rest is greater than rest. A person, being now in God, discovers their self, the forest, indeed all of creation, permeated by a Source from which it springs and in which its reality participates. Prayer deeper than prayer replaces prayer.

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CHAPTER FIVE

TREES GROW FREELY

I. “Trees Grow the Way They Like”

In June 1952, Merton completed another handwritten journal and added two typed essays or reflective entries to it for publication. The title of the first and shorter of the essays is simply “June OCTAVE OF CORPUS CHRISTI.” The second of the essays became the famous “Epilogue” to *The Sign of Jonas* entitled “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952.”

Merton’s first essay begins journal-like, setting time and place: the heat and sheer physical sensations of a June day in Kentucky, the beauty of the cloister walkways “covered with flower petals” for the feast days surrounding Corpus Christi and the fragrance of incense as it wafts through the morning’s warm air. Merton confesses that after ten years and several flirtations with other religious orders like the Carthusians and Camaldolese, he still considers Gethsemani to be the Place for him.

I feel as though I had never been anywhere in the world except Gethsemani--as if there were no other place in the world where I had ever really lived. I do not say I love Gethsemani in spite of the heat, or because of the heat. I love Gethsemani: that means burning days and nights in summer, with the sun beating down on the metal roof and the psalms pulsing exultantly through the airless choir, while, row upon row of us, a hundred and forty singers, we sway forward and bow down. And the clouds of smoke go up to God in the sanctuary, and the novices get thin and go home forever. (S.J. 344)

Merton then leads us outside, away from the warm pulsing sacred center filled with smoke, to introduce some of the new buildings that are signs of change at Gethsemani. Some of these changes Merton objects to, some he accepts, and some he warmly embraces (S.J. 344). He reviews the plans for a new infirmary chapel onto which adjoining rooms will open so that the “very sick monks, the dying monks can hear Mass from their beds.” Merton stops to ask himself whether he “shall die in such a bed, or in any bed at all” (Ibid.). [Unfortunately, he will die neither at the monastery nor in a bed.]

Merton speaks quite positively of his opportunity to say Mass for the brothers that week. Not coincidentally, one of the special rewards of fulfilling that responsibility occur after Mass,

kneeling alone in the dark as “the sky grows pale outside over the forest, and a little cool air seeps in through the slats of the broken shutters.” And as “the birds sing, and the crickets sing,” he is “silent with God” (S.J. 345). Following the Angelus he will then “walk out and have the dawn to myself.” For two hours, he can “pray or read or think” by himself and recite the Night Office that he missed. An important part of this experience is being “all alone in the cool world of morning, with the birds and the blue hill and the herd that lows across the field . . . and the rooster that sings sol-do in the coop behind the apple trees, and Aidan Nally growling at a team of mules on the side of his hill over yonder” (S.J. 345).

Reflecting on the meaning of his being here, in this place, Merton gives thanks for “the land where you have given me roots in eternity, O God of heaven and earth. This is the burning promised land, the house of God, the gate of heaven, the place of peace, the place of silence, the place of wrestling with the angel” (S.J. 345). Being rooted in the land or attached to a particular piece of the earth can take on mythic meaning with echoes of the promise of ancient Israel. As a dwelling it can be both a human dwelling and the house (oikos) of God; at once a door behind which identity grows but also a gate where one touches heaven. He can be rooted both here and “in eternity,” both in time and touching the timeless. It is a place both of peace and silence, and of wrestling with one’s angel (vocation).

Merton feels that he finally belongs, that he is truly a dweller in this land and in this house: “Blessed are they who dwell in thy house, O Lord! They shall praise thee for ever and ever [Psalms 83:5]” (S.J. 346). Then he takes note of what is happening to several “old” places that had been places of numinous encounters with God or in other ways had played a role in his own spiritual development. “The roof is peeling off the old garden house, which has become a rejected building,” Merton laments. The “old wagon shed” is also falling apart and will be replaced by a large hangar for “the machines.” The “old horsebarn” is gone and in the ground where it stood, Merton is charged with planting some “shade trees, that it may some day be a place of contemplation.” He ends and frames these reflections with the announcement: “It is four o’clock in the morning” (S.J. 346).

These reflections on Place are followed by a sustained reflection on Nature, including a plea for humans to adopt an attitude of respect for nature, an attitude that recognizes nature's intrinsic worth, a worth grounded in the Creator's gifts to each being of goodness and freedom central to their authentic individual identity. While reflecting Merton's Thomism, this meditation also bears witness to the monk's own experience of nature, past and present.

One could say that both poetically and theologically, this part of the essay is charged with feelings, feelings that are never completely left behind, even when borne aloft on conceptual wings. Merton's poetic statement on God's presence in nature introduces a more lengthy meditation. The original journal entry was published posthumously in *Entering the Silence*.

The Lord God is present where the new day shines in the moisture on the young grasses. The Lord God is present where the small wildflowers are known to Him alone. The Lord God passes suddenly in the wind, at the moment when night ebbs into the ground. He Who is infinitely great has given to His children a share in His own innocence. His alone is the gentlest of loves: whose pure flame respects all things. (E.S. 474)

The monk then moves into a sustained reflection on the theme of both God's and humanity's respect for all beings. To say that God respects all beings, Merton notes, is to say that, though strictly speaking, God "owns" all things because He created them, God in fact does not take them for His own, as humans might, but "leaves them all to themselves." God, the source and maintainer of all beings, loves all beings but does not seek to possess them. He does not use His creation. God is pure and has no need "to keep the birds in cages." He is great and "can let the grasses grow where they will, and the weeds go rambling over our fallen buildings (for the day will come when all our buildings will have fallen down, because they were somebody's possession)" (E.S. 474).

God is also considered a Lawmaker, but He "is His own law and the law of all things is in His freedom." If one spends time around natural realities, Merton seems to imply, one does not get the sense that they feel compelled to follow "laws" as humans might. "Every wave of the sea is free. Every river on earth proclaims its own liberty" (E.S. 474, 475).

Freedom, then, is essential to individual identity. Merton's insistence on respect for individuality found support in St. Thomas, St Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and Gerard Manley

Hopkins among others. It is a prime characteristic of Merton's nature spirituality. Merton's language here is striking:

. . . The independent trees own nothing and are owned by no one and they lift up their leafy heads in freedom. Never were two of them alike. Never were two leaves of the same tree identical. Never were two cells of the same leaf exactly the same. Because the trees grow the way they like; and all things do the things they do for the pleasure of God, as if He could be pleased with them! But we use the word pleasure, and say He is pleased, because in all these things it is *His freedom* [in which He] takes His pleasure. Pleased, not because it is His, but because it is theirs. For He has given it to them. (E.S. 475)

God is pleased, so to speak, with their use of His given freedom. He sees something of Himself reflected in this freedom. The freedom of natural beings in a sense "prohibits" God from interfering with, manipulating, and "ordering" them about. Merton would reject, one assumes, a cosmology where God is a monarch who imposes an order onto all things, thereby destroying freedom and spontaneity. Like His freedom, God has glory, but His glory does not take away from the glory of each being nor overwhelms it. Rather, "His glory is to give them everything and to be in the midst of them as unknown" (E.S. 475). God gives but does not seek glory. Humans receive what they are from God but must go out beyond what is gift to what God IS. Here, again, however, humans should not seek to possess God, "but to love Him and know Him and see Him as unseen and unknown and unpossessed" (E.S. 476). To possess God would be to limit God's Being. "We love Him perfectly, who is perfectly free, when we are content to leave Him His freedom" (E.S. 476).

Therefore, we are to love all beings in the way God loves them, respecting their integrity and their freedom. As a corollary of this, we must love ourselves as God loves us. In doing so, we also love God as God loves us. Thus, we who have been made in the image of God but lost our likeness due to the Fall, can reestablish this likeness of God in us through "perfect love." We are to mirror God's freedom and love (E.S. 477).

This means that we let God love us and give us all things, but not so we may possess them. Rather, "we must hold on to none of them as if they were our own." [my italics] This is the way we imitate God who "does not claim them as His own, even though He had made them" (E.S.477).

Thus we receive all things and hold on to nothing. We own all things in Him and possess nothing. We touch all things and defile nothing. We are in all things and are not mixed up with them. We retain our integrity and they retain their integrity and God retains His integrity. (E.S. 477)

Human and other-than-human beings retain their integrity and their freedom and God retains His. “Things are everlastingly themselves,” Merton writes, “and we are everlastingly ourselves and God is God forever” (E.S. 477).

Humans, according to Merton, must respect nature and its inherent freedom to develop. Each being or individual organism is unique and is to be respected and allowed to flourish. To reduce the meaning of nature to its usefulness to humans and to calculate its value as one would a human-made object reflects a mind that is itself alienated from the natural order of things and projects that self-centered vision back onto nature. It reflects a state into which humans have “fallen” both from a communion with the divine and from an integral relationship with nature. In terms of Place, we might say that we have dropped our membership in the divine-human-natural *oikos* or ecological household.

Merton’s approach has similarities to Paul W. Taylor’s biocentric or “life-centered theory of environmental ethics.” Taylor claims that “the taking of a certain attitude toward nature,” which he calls “respect for nature,” is central to and grounds the moral norms which govern our treatment of the natural world. For Taylor, all living beings are “moral subjects” as are humans (R.N.21-22). For Merton, this attitude of respect for nature reflects and in some manner participates in God’s respect and love for nature. Another similarity between Merton and Taylor comes from both thinkers’ indebtedness to Aristotle’s idea of *telos* or each being’s movement to realize its good. Merton embraces this idea as interpreted by Thomas Aquinas. As Aquinas wrote,

All movements and operations of every being are seen to tend to what is perfect. Perfect signifies what is good, since the perfection of anything is its goodness. Hence every movement and action of anything whatever tends toward good. But all good is a certain imitation of the supreme Good, just as all being is an imitation of the first Being. Therefore the movement and action of all things tend toward assimilation with the divine goodness. (quoted in Jenkins, 122)

In sum, God does not possess things, does not dominate things, and does not manipulate

things. All created beings have been given their freedom and existence by God. In this Thomist vision, created beings, natural and human, are ontologically related to God as to their true good, but each being realizes that good through the realization of more immediate and proximate goods. However, as Merton notes, humankind, nature, and God each retains its own integrity.

II. “The Meanings are Hidden in the Walls”

There can be no better climax to Merton’s first decade at Gethsemani and no finer tribute to his own deepening experience of it as Place than “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952.” Originally a typed addition placed at the back of one of his personal handwritten journals, “Firewatch” was to appear in a more polished form as the beautiful epilogue to Merton’s first published journal, *The Sign of Jonas*. “Firewatch” weaves together biographical and spiritual reflections and provides ample and exquisite evidence of the author’s attention to detail, his connection to Place and his love of nature. Merton’s skills as a writer who is able to sensitively, and at times powerfully, organize and illuminate a series of personal events according to guiding themes and extended metaphors are also on display.

Merton begins by setting the context: a hot night when at eight o’clock the monks, “packed in the belly of the great heat,” sing to the Mother of God like exiles in the bowels of a ship sailing to glory. Then, like a “holy monster,” the community breaks into parts and disperses into the “airless cloisters.” Merton picks up the sneakers, flashlight and keys that are the signs of the office of watchman.

By eight-fifteen Merton sits in “human silence.” And this silence is a prerequisite for and a context for his hearing the sounds of “the eloquent night, the night of wet trees, with moonlight sliding over the shoulder of the church in a haze of dampness and subsiding heat.”

The world of this night resounds from heaven to hell with animal eloquence, with the savage innocence of a million unknown creatures. While the earth eases and cools off like a huge wet living thing, the enormous vitality of their music pounds and rings and throbs and echoes until it gets into everything, and swamps the whole world in its neutral madness which never becomes an orgy because all things are innocent, all things are pure. (S.J. 350)

The night and the heat and the animals are holy, Merton insists, even if some people use

the night to cloak their evil actions. The night was not created to hide sins but “to open infinite distances to charity and send our souls to play beyond the stars” (S.J. 350).

The watchman begins his rounds and leads the reader on a journey through the various levels and sections of the monastery. As he travels, scenes from his life at Gethsemani are evoked, so that he moves through both space and time. The walls, stairs, rooms, and windows are no longer “objective” realities separate from Merton. As a part of Place, they are interwoven with Merton’s own identity. Thus they come alive through the sensual experience of noises, lights, smells, hard floors, hot air and cool walls. Under Merton’s touch, Place becomes a living being composed of humans and a host of natural beings along with artifacts that relate to the human presence. The monk’s rounds as watchman affirm and celebrate the fact that his own identity has been irrevocably shaped by and shaped this place, Gethsemani.

As the watchman enters the novitiate of the choir monks, he takes note of the bulletin boards and the lists and notices posted on the walls. The walls have “their own stuffy smell” and these smells also trigger memories:

...I am suddenly haunted by my first days in religion, the freezing tough winter when I first received the habit and always had a cold, the smell of frozen straw in the dormitory under the chapel, and the deep unexpected ecstasy of Christmas--that first Christmas when you have nothing left in the world but God! (S.J. 352)

Suddenly other dimensions of the fire watch open:

The most poignant thing about the fire watch is that you go through Gethsemani not only in length and height, but also in depth. You hit strange caverns in the monastery’s history, layers set down by the years, geological strata: you feel like an archaeologist suddenly unearthing ancient civilizations. But the terrible thing is that you yourself have lived through those ancient civilizations. The house has changed so much that ten years have as many different meanings as ten Egyptian dynasties. The meanings are hidden in the walls. They mumble in the floor under the watchman’s rubber feet. (S.J. 354-355)

Merton’s study of geology at Columbia provides him with a fit metaphor with which to express this insight. Before Gethsemani, his life story was shaped by its movement from one place to another. Now, after a decade in this monastery, he begins to see the history of his individual self as intimately connected with the history of this one place. And so, many of the changes to himself

could not be fully comprehended without taking into account the changes to and within this place.

Merton moves on through other stations of his rounds, through other memories and reflections. Finally he climbs “the trembling, twisted stair into the belfry” (S.J. 359). He shines his light on the gears that keep the old tower clock running. He checks the fuse box. His “whole being breathes the wind which blows through the belfry.” Then his hand opens the door and he walks “upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer.” This makes him reflect upon his own death and wonder when and how that door will open or be opened by God. Will God open it “upon the great forest and set my feet upon a ladder under the moon, and take me out among the stars?” (S.J. 360). Merton then looks out over the hills and forests bathed in moonlight. Though the monastic choir lies asleep, the voices of other choirs fill the night. There is a Life surrounding him that sings and throbs, jumps and flies and the light from stars and galaxies join in through billions of miles of cold space.

Now the huge chorus of living beings rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things. And far above me the cool sky opens upon the frozen distance of the stars. (S.J. 360)

Merton’s panoramic sensual survey of the moonlit Kentucky countryside evokes other memories of places of intimate encounters with the Living God. He asks God whether He remembers “the place by the stream” or “the Vineyard Knob that time in autumn, when the train was in the valley” or “McGinty’s hollow” or “the thinly wooded hillside behind Hanekamp’s place...” (Ibid.). These were places that gave shape to the sacred geography of that land and moments when Merton had come to know, in an especially intense and intimate manner, that Mystery present at all times and in all places. Echoing Blake, Merton declares that “things of Time are in connivance with eternity.” The Eternal can be found “in the present” and the Infinite “in the palm of the hand” (S.J. 361). Ultimately, divinity, humanity and bio-geology dwell together in this household (oikos): “Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me...” (S.J. 360). The finite is held in the palm of the infinite and the momentary pulses within the eternal.

III. Cyclical Time and Sacred Symbols

If the spatial world -- fields and forests, the sun and moon, the rain and wind and even the humblest of creatures -- can speak to you of the divine and through religious and poetic experience shape your spiritual life, so can the seasonal cycle and rhythms of nature. The monastic life epitomizes the integration of culture (liturgy, ritual) and nature.

The essay "Time and the Liturgy," written in 1955 and published in *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (1965) reaps the harvest of Merton's first decade of experiences of and reflections on the liturgical cycle. As he points out, the liturgy accepts both our "common everyday experience of time" and "the archetypal, natural image of a 'sacred time,' a primordial time which mysteriously recurs and is present in the very heart of secular time" (S.O.C. 47).

For Merton, time can become a sacramental means by which the grace of God enters our life and makes us holy (S.O.C. 48). This is made possible by Christ's laying hold of time, thereby making it "an efficacious sign of our union with God in Him" (S.O.C. 49). Hence, the cycle of creation becomes also the cycle of redemption, through the efficaciousness of the liturgical symbolism.

The seasons are natural, created, and good. They already give us meaning and integrate us into the mysteries of creation (S.O.C. 49). One need not fear that the modern individual is too caught up in the cosmic cycles and therefore has lost his or her humanity. Rather, the modern individual "is something more than fallen" and lives "below the level of nature--below his own humanity" (S.O.C. 51). No longer in touch with the created world and its seasonal cycle, the modern person lives within a web of collective illusions and fictions, and moves on "a linear flight into nothingness" with no purpose "except to keep moving" (Ibid.). Sacramental time is replaced by meaningless movement. Modern humanity must be reintroduced to nature by the Church. "Before we can become gods we must first be men" (Ibid.). Merton implies that liberation by Christ from one's collective obsessions must include the return of the person to a proper appreciation for his or her connectedness with nature.

For, in addition to being a year of salvation, the liturgical year is one “of enlightenment and of transformation” (S.O.C. 53). As enlightenment, the cycle teaches us about ourselves, about Christ and life in Christ, and provides ongoing and new insights “into the ways of God” (Ibid.). As transformation, the liturgical year reshapes character and makes the Christian more like Christ by offering a “dynamic participation” in a sacred time whose events are always recurring and always full of power. The eternal breaks into the temporal again and again and provides it with an inner power that transforms (Ibid.).

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CHAPTER SIX

ST. ANNE'S: SILENCE

The summer of 1952 marked the beginning of another push by Merton for more solitude. He wrote to the General of the Order in mid-1952 suggesting that the Scholasticate be moved to Colorado where the Trappists had been willed a large house. This would take the pressure off the overpopulated monastery at Gethsemani (and provide Merton with more solitude). On the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, he renounced his plan, calling it a temptation and full of his own desires (S.S. 8/15/52). Yet, when Msgr. Lorroana, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, visited Gethsemani later that month, Merton again raised this idea. Although the Secretary agreed with Merton on the need for better training and a special atmosphere for the scholastics, he pointed out that the Order's traditions wisely affirmed the need for scholastics to remain a part of their monastic community. The Secretary also told Merton "authoritatively" that he should continue to write (S.S. 8/23/52).

In 1952 (as at times during the 1940s), Merton's personal temptation to leave was centered on the Carthusians and the Camaldoli, two Orders that he felt would provide more solitude. Yet he was wary of his own motives and torn over what the will of God was for him. Certainly the "cross" was at Gethsemani and if that was willed for him, why go elsewhere? Merton's frustrated desire for more solitude and the resultant mental distress were partially addressed in September, 1952. Merton's need for more solitude and space had been addressed by the Abbot who had allowed him to use the vault in the monastery and later added some time for solitude in the woods. Though he questioned Merton's suitability for the strict eremitical life, Dom Fox knew that Merton's desire for more solitude was strong. He also knew that in the woods beyond the horse pasture sat a discarded toolshed. In early September, 1952 he gave Merton permission to use this shed within limits for prayer and meditation. Merton immediately warmed to the idea. "I am now almost completely convinced that I am only really a monk when I am alone in the old toolshed Reverend Father gave me." Although he has "the will of a monk in the community," he has "the *prayer* of a monk in the silence of the woods and the toolshed" (S.S. 9/3/52). The silence and

simplicity were like a medicine he desperately needed but could never seem to get. Nature allowed for new and varying openings to “conversation” with God:

What is easier than to discuss mutually with You, O God, the three crows that flew by in the sun with light flashing on their rubber wings? Or the sunlight coming quietly through the cracks in the boards? Or the crickets in the grass? You are sanctified in them . . . (S.S. 9/3/52)

One notices in the above passage both the sense of a divine Presence and the sensory presence of a dance of wings, sunlight, colors, and sounds. The divine and natural realities were not in competition with each other, but were mutually present in Merton’s awareness. They, in fact, affirmed and complemented each other. In the September woods Merton was as “aware of Him as of the sun and the clouds and the blue sky and the thin cedar trees.” He was happy to be “[e]ngulfed in the simple and lucid actuality which is the afternoon: I mean God’s afternoon, this sacramental moment of time when the shadows will get longer and longer, and one small bird sings quietly in the cedars, and one car goes by in the remote distance and the oak leaves move in the wind” (S.S. 9/15/52). The sense of a sacramental moment might mean a hushed moment when the eternal and temporal meet, when the shadows’ lengthening and the birds’ singing become “lucid” and full of eternal import. The afternoon in all of its elements plays on the monk’s senses and mind. A string of these sacramental moments runs through and brings fuller meaning to the life of Thomas Merton. Light and darkness, song and quiet, oak and wind, time and eternity-- Merton’s “poetic” rendering of these moments reminds one of T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets.

Access to the toolshed whetted Merton’s appetite for more solitude. Convinced of his “vocation to solitude,” he had written letters to Carthusian and Camaldolese superiors exploring the possibility of joining their respective houses. The tension between solitude and solidarity reemerged. This fever for solitude made him question whether his “compassion” for the scholastics actually ran very deep and whether this “job” as their Master was not an obstacle to his real vocation. He again expressed a lack of enthusiasm for writing books, especially the one on St. Bernard that was now expected from him (S.S. 9/13/52).

These doubts were intensified by several other events in September, 1952. The General

wrote that he was not happy with some of Merton's criticisms of the Order's early leaders in the manuscript of *The Waters of Siloe*. The General also refused Merton permission to publish his journal, *The Sign of Jonas*. In addition, Fr. David, a priest at Gethsemani that Merton admired, had a nervous breakdown and was forced to leave (S.S. 9/22/52). All of these trials seemed to confirm his vocation for more solitude and made him realize again that he existed "for no other reason than for God's will to be fulfilled" in him (S.S. 9/25/52).

Yet, Merton's own mental state was precarious. He feared experiencing his own imminent "crack up" because of these and other tensions. A scheduled private retreat in early October helped him "to calm down, to some extent," to gain some needed perspective and a renewed appreciation for what it had meant for him to be at Gethsemani for eleven years. "So that," he said, "when I came out of the retreat, there were still two sides to the question" (S.S. 10/10/52). This was fortunate, for at that time Dom James Fox had just returned from the General Chapter meeting in Europe and revealed to Merton that he had seen the three letters he had written in September to the Carthusians and Camaldolese. Merton seems to have been handed the replies from the Carthusians, which he termed as "non-committal." Dom James "threw buckets of cold water on the mere suggestion" that Merton be allowed to visit the Carthusians in Vermont. Later the letter arrived from Camaldoli encouraging Merton to come right away and start as a hermit. Merton felt "this may be it," but also knew that Dom James "would do anything" to stop him from leaving Gethsemani (S.S. 10/10/52).

Merton was caught. On the one hand, if he indeed had a vocation to solitude from God, must he not pursue it? On the other hand, had he not sincerely believed that God had called him to the Trappists and had he not written confidently about the contemplative life? What was he to do? In September he had stated that since "the Trappists are not a purely contemplative order," trying to change them into one would be useless (S.S. 9/25/52).

What am I certain of? If it were merely a question of satisfying my own desires and aspirations, I would leave for Camaldoli in ten minutes. Yet it is *not* merely a question of satisfying my own desires, On the contrary: there is one thing holding me at Gethsemani. And that is the Cross. Some mystery of the Wisdom of God has taught me that perhaps, after all, Gethsemani is where I belong because I do not *fit* in and because here my ideals are

practically all frustrated. (S.S. 10/10/52)

Here one finds echoes of Merton's autobiography in which he argued that not being permitted to enter the Franciscans had probably been best for him because such a life would not have really cost him anything and was too compatible with his own "natural" desires. (S.S.M. 292). He worried that once again he was trying to identify his own notion of an ideal place (Carthusians, Camaldolese, etc.) with the will of God when actually God willed Gethsemani as the place for him. If the latter, it was a place where he felt he did not fit. But, did that discontent and his desire to be in a more solitary place signal a lack of cooperation with the graces provided by God for his transformation? Was this situation itself perhaps a purifying fire?

Merton concluded that the highest good was to renounce his own desires and to sacrifice all "in order to live for God." Is not the Cross the primary way to salvation, he thought, and is not the Cross here at Gethsemani? Yet, it would probably also be there at Camaldoli. Merton resolved that he "would not go there seeking anything else" (S.S. 10/10/52). Yet, from all he had said and acted on, would a bystander not have to conclude that it was Solitude that he had primarily sought, and not the Cross? Merton did not raise that question, but framed the options as between Cross and Cross. If this is the reality, he writes, "the only thing that remains to be seen is whether God wills change or not" (S.S. 10/10/52).

That Merton had not found peace in the above resolution is obvious from the beginning of his next journal entry: "Since my retreat I have been having one of those nervous breakdowns." He compares it to two earlier collapses: one on the Long Island Railroad in 1936 that landed him in a hotel under a doctor's care, and one following ordination (S.S. 10/25/52). The earlier event was one of a series of emotional and spiritual upheavals that resolved themselves temporarily in his decision to become a Catholic. One might also point to his serious internal torment in the summer of 1940 over the Franciscans' decision that his past disqualified him from entering their Order and his torturous conflict during the fall of 1941 over whether to join Dorothy Day's Friendship House staff, remain at St. Bonaventure's as a teacher, or join the Trappists.

And so it was that Thomas Merton's crises over finding his place had often

been accompanied by periods of mental anguish that at times were intensified by other disappointments. Yet when a deeper peace and happiness emerged out of such upheavals so did growth:

And so I go on trying to walk on the waters of the breakdown. Worse than ever before and better than ever before. It is always painful and reassuring when he who I am not is visibly destroyed by the hand of God in order that the simplicity in the depths of me, which is His image, may be set free to serve Him in peace. Sometimes in the midst of all this I am tremendously happy, and I have never in my life begun to be so grateful for His mercy. (S.S. 10/22/52)

After initially denying permission, the General of the Order in late October granted permission for the publication of *The Sign of Jonas* (S.S/ 10/30/52). One must keep in mind that Merton realized very well what an important asset he had become to the Trappists. Therefore, even if his hopes to leave Gethsemani were still unrealized, his obvious success as a writer and his repeated pleas for more solitude might put pressure on those who would block publication of his manuscripts as well as on his superiors, especially on Dom Fox, who held the key to giving him more solitude at Gethsemani.

Merton had begun to think of the toolshed as his hermitage, although others used it at times also. The toolshed was a step in the right direction, but under the current arrangements it did not seem to allay all of his mental anxieties. His struggles with the monastic life and with his own inner demons continued that winter. Sometimes he felt on the verge of a breakdown, at other times he found deep peace. Sometimes they followed one another as he admits at the end of the annual retreat of 1952: "Aware that I might crack up at any moment. I find, nevertheless, that when I pray, I pray better than ever." He felt that God willed for him "once again to forget about ever leaving Gethsemani." He prayed that he would die either as a "holy monk in the monastery or in a solitude closely dependent on the monastery" (S.S. 11/29/52).

And what he took as a positive signal from the divine, a type of indication that was to repeat itself in similar situations in the future, occurred after saying his Masses on Christmas Day. He was "sure Jesus wanted me to press forward and really ask for solitude." He composed a letter to the Abbot asking to become a hermit after three years. The Abbot was ill, but Merton

was persuaded by Dr. Law, a visiting psychiatrist friend, to push for the hermitage immediately. Merton enlisted him and a fellow Trappist to “convince Rev. Father that this is necessary-if only to keep me from folding up entirely.” This move made him feel “the way I felt when I finally made up my mind to become a Catholic.” Merton’s desire was to spend more time in the “fixed up shanty” and thus turn it into at least the beginnings of a hermitage (S.S. 12/29/52).

A month later he had settled into the shed turned part-time hermitage that he named “St. Anne’s”. He was already sinking into its solitude. Merton opined that psychologically, solitude provided the opportunity “to un-learn all tension, and get rid of the strain that has falsified me in the presence of others, and put harshness into the words of my mind.” The following words which describe what draws him to the woods and solitude, anticipate experiences and sentiments that become more real and permanent in the 1960s when he finds increasing solitude in a real “hermitage” at Gethsemani.

To be alone by being part of the universe - fitting in completely to an environment of woods and silence and peace. Everything you do becomes a unity and a prayer. Unity within and without. Unity with all living things-without effort or contention. My silence is part of the whole world’s silence and builds the temple of God without the noise of hammers. (S.S. 1/28/53)

Solitude is now “something concrete – it is St. Anne’s.” In fact, it is a Place: “the long view of hills, the empty cornfield in the bottoms, the crows in the trees, and the cedars bunched together on the hillside . . . lots of sky and lots of peace and I don’t have distractions and all is serene—except for the rats in the wall.” And then, of course, his deeper wish: “If only I were here always!” (S.S. 2/9/53). For the time being, St. Anne’s would have to function as “a rampart” between the world of the monastery where “to return seems like a waste” and “the great wilderness of silence” into which he would like to vanish and not speak to anyone but God “as long as I live” (Ibid.).

Not all members of the community were happy with the special treatment being given to their famous brother. One monk had made “dark allusions to people who ‘do their own will with permission’ and openly stated that we were supposed to make our living by manual labor and not by writing books.” Merton felt that he had both “a right and even a duty to use the place for what

it is for: recollection, prayer, solitude, study--justified in the minds of my superiors by the fact that they are the only thing that can keep me from cracking up, and that they are a good investment for the monastery--intended to bear fruit in direction, conferences, and books. Yet I certainly don't want to speak or write--felix culpa [happy fault]" (S.S. 3/10/53).

As far as Merton's own inner struggles were concerned, St. Anne's would serve him well. Gradually his troubled heart was being pacified by the quiet and beauty of this place in the woods. He found a deeper simplicity in his prayer life, moving away from the torturous concerns with "mysticism" that had plagued and fascinated him earlier (S.S. 2/24/53). His journal becomes peopled with birds, trees, plants, and the moods of the weather.

A few days later, he writes that St. Anne's is what he has been "waiting for and looking for" all of his life. And, in line with his custom of making definitive statements, he declares that "Now, for the first time, I am aware of what happens to a man who has really found his place in the scheme of things" (S.S. 2/16/53). "Everything that was ever real in me," the monk says, "has come back to life in this doorway open to the sky." He no longer feels split and torn within. "In the silence of St. Anne's everything has come together in unity and the unity is not my unity but Yours, O Father of Peace" (S.S. 2/16/53). When he was a child walking all over Sussex in England, it was St. Anne's he was looking for. When as a monk, gazing at the hills surrounding the monastery had haunted him for 11 years and had spoken to him of "another country." But now the "quiet landscape of St. Anne's speaks of no other country . . . I am here to stay . . . The silence of it is making me well" (S.S. 2/16/53). This is what Merton felt during those months of healing in early 1953. In the future, increased solitude would similarly mean a recovery of self, of wholeness with healing. This silence, moreover, is connected with his priestly calling. Here he is "a priest with all the world as my parish." There is "an apostolic fruitfulness of this silence." Outside in the world there is iniquity but here there is so much peace that it must be "the heart of a great spiritual battle that is fought in silence." Unlike Merton's concerns with the world in his hermitage in the 1960s he declares that "I am nothing and do not need to know what is going on" (S.S. 2/17/53).

Even in the winter, “At St. Anne’s the sun is as bright as the first day it was created. The world is clean.” And he notes:

Many birds, going North, were flying in the wind. They move slowly against the blue sky and looked like a school of fish in clear, West Indian waters. The sun shone through their wings and made them seem like red and orange fins. (S.S. 2/18/53)

On February 22, 1953 exactly eleven years to the day since he had received his habit as a novice, he receives a book from the scholastics that he calls “my spiritual children.” Realizing that he has “become the spiritual father of many” he is “aware of the mystery of my vocation.” But he also declares that the “greatest mystery is here at St. Anne’s.” In the simplicity of life there, he is more conscious of the grace of God, noting that

When I am most quiet and most myself, His grace is clear and then I see nothing else under the sun. What else is there for us but to be tranquil and at peace in this all-enchanting wonder of God’s mercy to us? It falls upon this paper quieter than the morning sun, and then, I know that all things, without His love are useless, and in His love, having nothing, I can possess all things. (S.S.2/22/53)

Merton’s fame, however, follows him into solitude. Since the publication of *The Sign of Jonas*, “a lot of people know all about ‘the vault’” (a quiet place specially assigned to Merton as a place for praying, for writing and occasionally counseling others). Merton wonders if the public will find out about St. Anne’s (as if he were not the conduit for such knowledge). He then asks a rather interesting question about the possible dynamics between his chronicling of his search(es) for more solitude and his readers following his trek: “Will I run from one solitude to another like Little Eva across the ice floes, with the public right behind me?” (S.S. 3/3/53).

A New Solitude, a New Solidarity

St. Anne’s certainly helped Merton satisfy some of his desire for solitude while allowing him some respite from the monastery. Yet, not surprisingly, it also served to suggest to him what a true solitary life might be like. By 1955, Merton was looking more deeply into the life of the Camaldolese in Italy. Dom James anticipated another showdown and looked for a way to head it off. Nelson County had built a fire tower on a nearby knob and was interested in having someone live there full-time. They had approached Dom James to see if a volunteer was available. Merton,

both as forester and aspiring hermit, was initially enthusiastic about the possibility. He was beginning to see that what he considered his “solitary vocation” could be realized in a variety of ways.

Dom Fox sought permission for Merton to take the new position from the General Chapter of the Order at a September meeting in Citeaux. The Abbot General, Dom Gabriel Sortais, supported Dom James and thus the General Chapter agreed. When Dom James returned, he presented what he thought was good news to Merton. However, there would be restrictions and agreements. One proposed change would be that Merton, the famous writer, must stop writing. To the surprise of his Abbot, Merton declined the offer and volunteered for the vacant post of Novice Master. What had happened? Dom James’s conclusion was that Merton, when faced with the prospect of total solitude, lost his nerve. Merton’s biographer Michael Mott claims that in 1955 Thomas Merton was simply “not on good enough terms [with himself] to live in solitude on the top of the fire tower on Vineyard Knob or anywhere else” (S.M. 288).

In *Thomas Merton’s Art of Denial*. David Cooper takes a different slant, claiming that the clue to Merton’s about-face lies in the ongoing tension between his identity as writer and as monk. Merton had been writing at a feverish pace in 1955 while at the same time proposing to give it up for solitude. Cooper points out that as early as June, 1955 Dom James had mentioned the watchtower possibility to Merton. One of the conditions that he had set at that time was that Merton would give up writing as a test to see if he was really cut out for the life of a hermit. Merton initially accepted the idea, Cooper notes, but realized how difficult it would be to stop writing. He would have to face the issue head on and would no longer be able to blame either his superiors or his publishers for his frenetic writing schedule. Cooper suggests that when the time finally came to formally agree to this condition, Merton had already found an “out” in the Novice Master opening.

There were, as Cooper notes, some very attractive features to the Novice Master position. It came with the luxury of a private room and a private office and, most importantly, it provided Merton with time in which to write. The irony is that, next to the position of Abbot, the Novice

Master's position was the most powerful in the monastery. It demanded that Merton educate the new monks into a tradition that he had been seeking to leave for several years. Dom James happily assigned Merton to the post but made him agree to take the position for at least three years but not to give conferences to the novices on being a hermit. Merton joked that he had had enough of that now (T.M.A.D. 57-58).

Only Thomas Merton knew what ingredients entered into his decision, and perhaps even he was not fully aware of them all. One must remember that Merton certainly had become intimately familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of Gethsemani's admissions policy. He worried about the emotional stability and psychological maturity of many new recruits. He realized that a Novice Master must not only be well-grounded in Cistercian and Christian spirituality, but that he must be able to draw upon contemporary Biblical scholarship, theology, and psychology. The formative period of the Novitiate was crucial on many levels to the very survival of Gethsemani.

Merton seemed genuinely relieved and at peace with his decision. At the end of 1955 he wrote in a letter to his Columbia University professor and friend, Mark Van Doren:

You don't know, do you, that I am now master of novices -- a much more responsible and occupying job than the other one. I have practically a small kingdom of my own . . . The best of it is the place is quiet, and we have our own garden and chapel, and the job is not too plaguing. (R.J. 27)

Merton's letter goes on to characterize the past year in terms of that "old wrestling" over solitude. He confessed that he had pushed his case pretty hard until "the highest Superiors under the Pope calmed me down and told me to stay here. It sounds silly but I had to go through it" (Ibid.). Perhaps he had to go through it to satisfy himself, at least temporarily, and within his present theological resource, as to what God willed for him. The upshot of the whole year was that he was done with "ideals" and the terrible questions about "What I am or what I've got or where I'm going . . ." (Ibid.). Merton does not tell his old professor that he had a choice and could have had his hermitage. In the midst of a later temptation to leave, Merton recalled:

I think my superiors, after the General Chapter of 1955, were ready to let me be a hermit here, but I realized this would never work. The novitiate was the final compromise--some-

thing of a change, some silence, and a face-saver!! (S.S. 7/28/59)

In Merton's defense, one must admit that life in a fire tower was hardly the kind of a solitary life as a hermit that he had envisaged or could enthusiastically embrace. The fact that Dom James leapt at the chance to have Merton as Novice Master indicates the presence of deeper considerations on both their parts.

But St. Anne's would always be on his mind until his real hermitage materialized. Years later, on another March day, returning after a long absence from St. Anne's, and on the heels of his defining experience of commonality with ordinary people at the corner of 4th and Walnut in Louisville, he would write: "How many graces, here in St. Anne's, that I did not know about, in those years when I was here all the time, when I had what I most wanted and never really knew it." Merton then suggests, perhaps too harshly, that the fact that he did not realize or appreciate fully this gift was an indication that "solitude alone was not exactly what I wanted." Nevertheless, he remarks, "How rich for me has been the silence of this little house which is nothing more than a tool shed . . ." Merton's reflections here had been sparked by a wonderfully dramatic event: "A red-shouldered hawk wheels slowly over Newton's farm as if making his own more special silence in the air--as if tearing out a circle of silence in the sky" (S.S. 3/19/58).

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CHAPTER SEVEN
FRUITS OF ST. ANNE'S:
A CONTEMPLATIVE-POETIC APPROACH TO CREATION

I. No Man Is an Island

There are some men for whom a tree has no reality until they think of cutting it down, for whom an animal has no value until it enters the slaughterhouse, men who never look at anything, until they decide to abuse it and who never notice what they do not want to destroy. These men hardly know the silence of love: for their love is the absorption of another person's [or, being's] silence into their own noise. (N.M.I. 258)

The final two chapters of *No Man Is An Island* (1955), "The Inward Solitude" and "Silence," breathe the same atmosphere as will Merton's reflections in *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958). Both witness to the deepening of his desire for solitude and explore its connection to the natural world. They also connect true solitude to a human being as person rather than individual, allowing him or her to forge a special relationship with other persons, the natural world and God. These should be relationships of respect because other human persons, like all created beings, are dignified by their relationship to God. They likewise can be defiled when this relationship which provides the basis for their inherent worth and dignity is ignored and they are reduced to being solely a means to fulfill the self-centered desires of individuals who have lost or never realized their own Personhood and who seek to fill their inner emptiness by controlling others or devouring created things (N.M.I. 248).

Lacking inner solitude, they do not respect the silence of other beings, a silence which stands as witness both to their own intrinsic value and to the Silent One who brought them into and maintains them in being. Love and justice should govern our relationship guided by our respect for the intrinsic value of each and every being. "This respect for the deepest values," says Merton "is a debt we owe in justice to every being" (N.M.I. 245).

No longer obsessed by the need to control or possess, we seek to understand beings as they really are, in themselves, which for Merton is to know them in God. Merton contrasts the state of original justice (*italics mine*) with that of original sin. Through the latter, we inherit "the power to love destructively." That is, to destroy the object of our supposed love by devouring or

“consuming” it. Paradoxically, this only contributes to our own “interior famine” (N.M.I. 246). On the other hand, we “increase our own heritage of life” (or in Daoist terms, “nourish life”) when we love others for and according to their own good, a goodness intrinsic to them. But when we teach our children and others “to live as we live: centered upon themselves” we “ruin others and ourselves” (NMI 246). Merton’s logic would lead to the conclusion (that he explicitly makes later) that a society rooted in competitive individualism will be devoid of real spiritual life within itself and destroy other forms of life outside of itself.

“A person is a person insofar as he has a secret and a solitude of his own that cannot be communicated to anyone else,” Merton writes (N.M.I. 244). This secret and solitude within each of us helps define us and should be respected by others. Likewise, we cannot know, let alone respect, the solitude that is others, unless we experience it and value it in ourselves. Too often we confuse love with a perverse desire to “lay open” the secrets of another “and besiege his [or her] solitude with importunity” (N.M.I. 245). If successful, we may destroy what is best and most intimate in him or her. On the other hand, it is through “[c]ompassion and respect” that we truly come to know the solitude of another and at the same time discover the other “in the intimacy of our own interior solitude” (Ibid.). Thus, we mutually reflect one another’s solitude, and as our relationship grows, we develop as unique individuals but also “grow in likeness to one another and to God” (Ibid). Merton frequently makes this distinction between the true solitude of the Person and the false solitude of the Individual. The needs created by the latter’s sense of insufficiency drive the ever-growing, never-ending dynamics of the consumer society (whose negative effects on nature Merton was already aware of) (N.M.I. 248).

Feeling isolated and incomplete, the individualist tries to “fill his solitude with more and more loot, more and more rapine, seizing things not because he wants them, but because he cannot stand the sight of what he has already obtained” (N.M.I. 249). This self-centered and competitive individualism also undermines the possibility for a genuine sense of community and hence any concern for social justice (N.M.I. 248). Being closed within his or her false solitude, afraid of vulnerability, one can “no longer effectively give them [brothers and sisters] anything or

receive anything from them in his own spirit” (N.M.I. 248). The true solitary realizes that love for others, human and non-human, “will not destroy his solitude. Love *is* his solitude” (N.M.I. 251).

Yet this does not always mean that the true solitary is accepted by or is happy being one of “the crowd.” On the one hand, because true solitaries do not share many of their contemporaries’ values and illusions, the tendency of the latter is often to ignore them (N.M.I. 252). On the other hand, because of their commitment to a larger vision and higher values, the lives of true solitaries may bring them into conflict “with the world” and its power structure. The solitary on a mission may discover that “he has become a force that reacts on the very heart of the society in which he lives, a power that disturbs and impedes and accuses the forces of selfishness and pride” (N.M.I. 252-253). Thus, as Merton will point out later, the contemplative must also become a prophet (including an ecological one).

Silence

“The rain ceases, and a bird’s clear song suddenly announces the difference between Heaven and Hell” (N.M.I. 254). Thus Merton opens chapter sixteen, “Silence.” In it he reflects on the relationship of silence to words and language, especially in a religious context. Merton reminds us that although words and language are used in religious ritual, proclamations and prayers, these words are not the last word, so to speak. There must come a time when we “go forth to find Him in solitude.” Deep and direct communication with God proceeds “without words, without discursive thoughts, in the silence of our whole being” (N.M.I. 254). What is “said” at this level is too deep for words to capture and convey. Thus it cannot be easily broadcast to others (N.M.I. 254-5). If one decides to journey “to that which is unspeakable and unthinkable,” then one has to be “ready to leave their own ideas and their own words behind them” (N.M.I. 255). Silence and prayer are often a more effective way to bring people to God than are the many words of the zealous. Merely because a person wants to give glory to God by “talking about Him” their speech may not actually give God glory. Merton asks pointedly, as a segue to his next section on nature: “Have you never heard that silence gives Him glory?” (N.M.I. 256).

Nature teaches us through its silence and if we learn to approach it in silence it can lead

us into the silence of God. If we enter the solitude of nature “with a silent tongue,” Merton writes, “the silence of mute beings” will share with us their rest. If we go into solitude with a silent heart, “the silence of creation will speak louder than the tongues of men or angels.” The silence of our tongue “dissolves the barrier between ourselves and the peace of things that exist only for God and not for themselves.” If we silence our inordinate desires, “the barrier between ourselves and God” dissolves and “we come to live in Him alone.” Thus it is that, in this much deeper silence, the Lord who is hidden “in the midst of our own selves,” speaks to us (N.M.I. 256-7).

Unfortunately, a spirituality that emphasizes a deep respectful listening to the silent voices of creation is increasingly rare. Rather than listening to the silence of nature, we fill it and our human world with noise.

Those who love their own noise are impatient of everything else. They constantly defile the silence of the forests and the mountains and the sea. They bore through silent nature in every direction with their machines, for fear that the calm world might accuse them of their own emptiness ... It is the silence of the world that is real. Our noise, our business, our purposes, and all our fatuous statements about our purposes, our business, and our noise: these are the illusion. (N.M.I. 257)

[While these sentiments were strong when stated in the 1950s and stronger yet when more fully developed by Merton in the 1960s, today they have a powerful message for individuals, religious or secular, who know and love the silence of nature but also hear and see the widespread noise of modern social media conduits. While Merton critically examines this new technological “world” more fully in the 1960s, one catches a glimpse here of some of the aesthetic and spiritual sensitivities that led to those explorations.]

This attitude has religious implications. “God is present,” Merton states, “and His thought is alive and awake in the fullness and depth and breadth of all the silences of the world.” Paraphrasing Jeremiah 1:11 Merton writes, “The Lord is watching in the almond trees, over the fulfillment of His words” (N.M.I. 257). The silences of nature’s beings can speak to us of the presence of the divine. When Merton reminds the reader that “God is watching” in His trees and that He is “alive and awake” in silent beings and places (desert, forest, mountain, sea), He is inviting us to adopt a respectful, relational attitude or stance towards and in nature (Ibid.).

This calls to mind the words of the Stoney Indian, Tatanga Mani (Walking Buffalo):

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don't listen. They never listen to the Indians so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit. (McCluhan, 23)

Merton speaks for the reality and integrity of an almond tree when he reminds us that she "brings forth her blossoms in silence" whether a plane goes by today or tomorrow, whether cars are on the roads or not, whether radios blare or not (N.M.I. 257). And so, "whether the men go off to town or work with tractors in the fields . . . whether the liner enters the harbor full of tourists or full of soldiers, the almond tree brings forth her fruit in silence" (N.M.I. 257-258). The quiet yet strong voice of the almond tree stands in awful if meek judgment on the spiritual and ethical deafness and blindness behind much of humankind's destruction of nature. Merton observes that:

There are some men for whom a tree has no reality until they think of cutting it down, for whom an animal has no value until it enters the slaughterhouse, men who never look at anything, until they decide to abuse it and who never notice what they do not want to destroy. These men hardly know the silence of love: for their love is the absorption of another person's [or, being's] silence into their own noise. (N.M.I. 258)

"No reality," "no value," except to be used and ab-used. And if they don't even have those useful, humanly projected values, then we don't even notice them. We don't hear the silent voice of their being. On the other hand, instead of using His power to exclude or destroy others, God gives life to those "He draws into His own silence" (N.M.I. 258). Drawn into our noise, the tree or animal's silence is obliterated along with its life. Full of the noise of their own self-importance such individuals have no silence within their hearts and cannot tolerate the silent reality of other beings but feel compelled to impose on them their own noisy purposes. As Merton had earlier observed, "They constantly defile the silence of the forests and the mountains and the sea. They bore through silent nature in every direction with their machines, for fear that the calm world might accuse them of their own emptiness" (N.M.I. 257).

Such attitudes towards silence and the silence of beings do not arise in a vacuum.

And they have implications for even supposedly religious persons. “Silence is the strength of our interior life,” claims Merton. “Silence enters into the very core of our being, so that if we have no silence we have no morality.” If we do not have silence “our virtues are sound only, only an outward noise, a manifestation of nothing” (N.M.I. 259). Actions “speak” of who we are and of our character just as our words do--sometimes louder. If I am merely an Individual whose solitude is narrow, confined, and false, and I have not realized my core identity as Person, then, as Merton will point out in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, my words are not even my own words but parrot the opinions and clichés of the masses identified with my own self-interest (C.G.B. 80). To love and respect other humans and other-than-human beings presupposes that I know and am respectful of both my own and the other’s solitude and silence. In true love I recognize something of my own hidden solitude in theirs and hence respect that silent core and refuse to violate it in the name of a false love (N.M.I. 246-247).

Yet, as Merton warns: “Do not stress too much the fact that love seeks to penetrate the intimate secrets of the beloved. Those who are too fond of this idea fall short of true love.” And why is that? Because, says Merton, “they violate the solitude of those they love, instead of respecting it” (N.M.I. 244). If one really respects the other, one allows him [or her] to keep their secrets and to “remain in his [or her] own solitude” (N.M.I. 244). But even where love is difficult, respect for the values hidden in the other “is a debt we owe in justice to every being” (N.M.I. 245).

The Poetic Knowledge of the Real

In the early chapters of *No Man Is an Island*, Merton emphasized the importance of the aesthetic sense, of educating the senses through an appreciation for the beauty of nature and of the arts for spiritual development. Yet in the final two chapters he seems to downplay the role of language and emphasizes solitude and silence. In the end, while Merton considers silence to be of immense importance, words, images, and symbols are also important for personal, social and religious life. There are several ways to configure their relationship. In *No Man* Merton proposes that when one truly understands both, one can relax into a healthy rhythm wherein neither one is reduced to the other or dominated by the other, but finds and expresses something of the deeper

Life grounding them both.

Silence . . . is ordered to something else. Silence is the mother of speech . . . If our life is poured out in useless words we will never hear anything in the depths of our hearts, where Christ lives and speaks in silence . . . [Life's] rhythm develops in silence, comes to the surface in moments of necessary expression, returns to deeper silence, culminates in a final declaration, then ascends into the silence of Heaven which resounds with unending praise. (N.M.I. 258, 260, 261)

Thus in this work Merton pulls together thoughts on the artistic and aesthetic experience of the beauty and reality of creation and the experience of deep silence. As we have seen, the monk claimed that he had understood from childhood “that the artistic experience, at its highest, was actually a natural analogue of mystical experience. It produced a kind of intuitive perception of reality through a sort of affective identification with the object contemplated—the kind of perception that the Thomists call ‘connatural’

(S.S.M. 202). This is knowledge by “identification” or direct experiential knowledge (Ibid).

Thomas Aquinas had also taught that creation educates the mind to an understanding of the Creator. Extending this to artistic creations, Merton considered an appreciation for the arts, especially poetry and music but also painting and architecture, as important for the development of a healthy human being and because of that also important for a healthy spiritual growth. Hence, an “education” in aesthetic sensitivity towards nature and the arts could prepare one for contemplation and even mystical experience.

Merton's own lifelong cultivation of artistic sensitivities, his study of philosophers such as Jacques Maritain and his increasing experience of the solitary life, especially while within nature, lay behind his treatment of these topics in *No Man Is An Island* (1955). In addition, his experience working with young monks had convinced him of this truth. Enthusiasm, good intentions and ascetical will-power could carry one only so far. Thus Merton saw to it that those under his tutelage, first Scholastics and then Novices, would have the opportunity to spend time in nature and through him to be introduced to poetry and the visual arts. While aesthetic experience could help activate one's imagination, tone one's emotional resources, and even provide an introduction to mystical experience, one must eventually silence the tongue and imagination, leave behind

words, images and concepts and enter a solitary place, a place of direct encounter with the Silent One who is present within and beyond the silence of nature and its beings.

Reflecting the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Merton could advise that, “We ought to be alive enough to reality to see beauty all around us. Beauty is simply reality itself, perceived in a special way that gives it a resplendent value of its own. Everything that is, is beautiful insofar as it is real . . . “ (N.M.I. 33). Hence, it is a mistake for beginners to think that detaching their senses from external reality is an essential first step in the development of an interior life meant to bring them into union with Reality Itself or the Really Real. On the contrary, one of the fundamental but often overlooked “elements essential in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God “(N.M.I. 33). Therefore, the first task for an aspiring contemplative is to unlearn “wrong ways of seeing, tasting, feeling, and so forth, and acquire a few of the right ones” (N.M.I. 33).

Merton here advocates a *kataphatic* and sacramental path to God where creation lifts us upward to God since God is reflected, even present, in creation. In fact, both in body and mind, humans have been shaped by and hence oriented towards the natural world. Unless blocked or malformed by society, children will naturally “resonate” with their natural environment. Note also the increasing use by Merton of words associated with “life” such as “coming alive to the splendor” and with an “ability to respond to” or “see”-- not esoteric but “ordinary things.” Hence, for Merton, we must consecrate reality, not reject it; make it a gift to God and to others. But, to do this we must be able to see and value things rightly. The problem with the young men who were then entering the monastery, according to Merton, was that their minds and senses had been so bombarded with commercial and other external stimuli that to protect themselves they had been forced to simply shut themselves off from all such “worldly” temptations (N.M.I. 33).

Furthermore, a negative asceticism cannot provide us with positive spiritual energy or nurture the inner resources that would allow us to advance to the deeper levels of the interior life. In fact, if one is neurotic, renunciation and withdrawal might only make things worse. On the

other hand, through “an aesthetic experience” gained through either creating or contemplating a work of art, “the psychological conscience is able to attain some of the highest and most perfect fulfillments.” By art we are able to both lose and find ourselves “at the same time.” As a result of apprehending the “intellectual and spiritual values” hidden in a piece of music or a poem, the mind “discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve” (N.M.I. 34). An experience of being lifted above one’s self is certainly better than being absorbed in picking and prying at oneself in a “dull self-analysis” that only ends up tormenting and disfiguring one’s “whole personality” (N.M.I. 34). There is less need for such intricate self-analysis when one discovers oneself by discovering one’s “capacity to respond to a value that lifts” one above one’s “normal level.” Such a response makes one aware of “a new life and new powers” that one will quite naturally seek to develop (Ibid.).

The ability “to respond to such flashes of aesthetic intuition” is also important “in the life of prayer.” To ignore or minimize such experiences in the name of Catholic tradition is simply wrong, claims Merton. The Church never conceived of art as an enemy of prayer, claims Merton, but had wisely provided architecture, chant, script, etc. to help shape and nurture “prayer and the religious consciousness” (N.M.I. 35). The Church realized that “a true and valid aesthetic formation was necessary for the wholeness of Christian living and worship.” Such a formation shapes and spiritualizes human consciousness, giving one’s prayer life “a tone and a maturity” that add depth and purity (N.M.I. 35).

Art, music, and poetry express and introduce one to “a higher spiritual order.” They can “attune the soul” to God because they “induce a kind of contact with the Creator and Ruler of the Universe” (N.M.I. 36). Merton asserts that the artist, through “creative sympathy, or connaturality,” comes into contact with a deeper level of reality, “into the living law” of the universe where things gravitate toward their Center which is God. Because this same living reality is present within our own nature, “true art lays bare” its action. As a result, we become more “alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which we ourselves, together with all living and existing

things, come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him” (N.M.I. 36).

The creative work of both the human and Divine artist nourishes our growth as humans on all levels. In an essay on sacred art published in 1959 in *Disputed Questions*, Merton pulls together some of his thinking on the relation of art and creation to our development as whole persons. The eyes, Merton says, were created “to see and enjoy God’s beauty in creation, and to seek Him in and through that beauty” (D.Q.123). For Merton, what we might call the Poetic plays an important role in our development as whole persons:

All these things go together. Man is a living unity, an integrated whole. He is not sanctified just in the mind, or in his will. The whole man must be made holy, body and soul together, imagination and senses, intelligence, heart and spirit. (D.Q. 124)

Moreover, sacred art can function as “a witness to the power of the divine Spirit at work to transfigure the whole of creation and to ‘recapitulate all things in Christ,’ restoring all material creation to the spiritual and transforming rule of divine love” (D.Q. 124).

Thus, as he was emphasizing in *No Man Is an Island*, since genuine artists themselves enter through creative sympathy into the hidden creative dynamics of a universe centered on God, their artistic creations can enable the sensitive person to experience something of this power within themselves and creation. They come alive to the Mystery of Being that humans share with all other beings and to the universal creative process rooted in the life of God. God’s will is not a force or set of laws bearing down from above, but “is a creative power, working everywhere, giving life and being and direction to all things, and above all forming and creating, in the midst of the old creation, a whole new world...” (N.M.I. 53).

However, what might be called an ecospiritual discipline is necessary if we are to cooperate with this creative power present in nature and humankind and to positively move the process forward in hope. To do so we must “stop looking at ourselves, stop checking and verifying ourselves in the mirror of our own futility, and be content to *be* in Him and to do whatever He wills . . . in the light of His reality which is all around us in the things and people we live with” (N.M.I. 120). And while all around us creatures praise “God’s fidelity to His promises,” they nonetheless depend on us “for the fulfillment of their own destiny.” On the one hand, “[I]f we

misuse them, we ruin ourselves together with them.” On the other, “[I]f we use them as children of God’s promises, we bring them, together with ourselves, to God” (N.M.I. 19).

Lacking such a discipline, including a healthy non-attachment, we impose *our* will onto nature to satisfy our often trivial desires and thereby prevent the realization of its own good and its unfolding according to the creative will of God. Merton insists that these two processes are interrelated: the development of ourselves as whole persons in cooperation with the creative work of God within us, and the coordination of this with our identity and responsibility “as part of a universal whole . . .” (N.M.I. 64-65).

Reflecting on Romans 8:19-21 where Paul states that creation itself waits for the revelation of the children of God, Merton concludes:

Upon our hope, therefore, depends the liberty of the whole universe [b]ecause our hope is the pledge of a new heaven and a new earth, in which all things will be what they were meant to be. They will rise, together with us, in Christ. The beasts and the trees will one day share with us a new creation and we shall see them as God sees them and know that they are very good. (N.M.I. 19)

Nature, therefore, needs our healthy detachment and non-abusive actions. “All nature is meant to make us think of paradise,” says Merton. “Woods, fields, valleys, hills, the rivers and the sea, the clouds traveling across the sky, light and darkness, sun and stars, remind us that the world was first created as a paradise for the first Adam . . .” Yet even now, eschatologically, this paradise is “reflected in created things” (N.M.I. 115). Creatures themselves can help us in our spiritual development by inviting us “to forget our vain cares and enter into our hearts” which are meant to be a paradise as well. If God dwells in us, “making our souls His paradise, then the world around us can become . . . His paradise and our own” (N.M.I. 115). However, if our hearts are filled only with our desires and our interests, creatures will become mere objects meant to serve and please us and there will be no peace. And so, instead of speaking to us of God and reflecting God’s presence and will at work, creatures will reflect back the sad human face of beings at war with themselves and nature and consequently closed to the presence and opposed to the true will of God. However, the peaceful and pure person who has God as his or her paradise within, “finds that creatures have become [their] friends . . . they speak to [them] of God” (N.M.I. 116).

Gratitude is central to this transformation, says Merton, for without it “we cannot taste the joy of finding Him in His creation.” Being grateful for our own existence and that of creation is essential. Otherwise, “we don’t know who we are,” or “what it really means to be and to live.” Gratitude aids in the right perception and treatment of creation. “Gratitude,” claims Merton, “shows reverence to God in the way it makes use of His gifts” (N.M.I. 116). Hence, what we might today call an “ecological asceticism” is important to an authentic vision and experience of creation both as sacramental and as eschatological. As a consequence, a moral use of creation is required both because creation manifests and reflects God’s goodness and beauty, and, as an unfinished work and the subject of God’s promise, creation needs our hope and creative action to assist in bringing it to fulfillment.

According to Merton, personal transformation is required. First, seeing and respecting the beauty and goodness of creation as reflective of God rules out our looking at creation as reflective of and hence subservient to our egocentric or anthropocentric fantasies. Second, the sheer experience of Being yields wonder and a sense of gratitude. Our existence and that of other created beings are valuable as Gift. How we use our own and their existence is a moral issue. Gratitude is manifest in a respectful use of creation that recognizes its giftedness. Third, humankind and nature are moving together towards a fullness of Being promised by God. Nature is neither a static world meant only for admiration nor a dead resource whose present value and future fate are to be determined solely in terms of the satisfaction of the increasingly voracious desires and whims of consumers. The eschatological vision prompts us to hear the groaning of creation, to liberate it from the legacy of our sins for a fuller realization born of an authentic human-earth relationship. Merton will discover in Teilhard a powerful voice for this vocation.

II. Thoughts In Solitude

Merton’s book of meditations, *Thoughts in Solitude* (1956,1958), bears the fruit of time spent at St. Anne’s. Its original title was *37 Reflections* with most of the *pensees* having been written down in 1953 and 1954. Merton characterizes the book as “quite personal,” not because it reveals private accounts of mystical experiences or “spiritual adventures,” but because it grew

out of and reflects a special time spent in solitude thanks to “the favor of his Superiors” (T.S. 11). The “Preface,” however, in which Merton sets forth the context within which he wants the work approached, has the feel both in style and content of the Merton of the late 50s. One can discern something of an existentialist influence in the preface, especially in the rationale for why solitude and silence are important for people in contemporary society. Merton warns about the illusions of “technological progress” and our “materialistic society.” It is one thing to admit the obvious, i.e. that a human is a “social animal,” it is quite another to make him or her “a mere cog in a totalitarian machine--or” as Merton pointedly adds, “in a religious one either” (T.S.12). He pictures individuals in modern society as being like “numbers, or mechanical units” who are “submerged in a mass of other automatons.” Living on the level of the individual they have lost their “rightful integrity as persons.” (T.S. 12-13). Merton continues to develop the distinctions between the individual and false-self, on the one hand, and the person and true self, on the other. Here, again, Merton anticipates a redefinition of what constitutes the basic problems with “the world” in lieu of the traditional language of sinners and saints, the unredeemed and saved.

Also, in 1953 one would probably not have found the Taoist sage Lao-Tzu, the Zen Masters, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and American icon Henry David Thoreau joining ranks with Christian prophets as examples of “independent voices” who in the name of solitude and the human person counter totalitarianism and materialism (T.S. 12). Anticipating something of his 1958 “turn to the world,” his preface ends by broadening the context within which he wants his subsequent reflections to be read. “What is said here about solitude is not just a recipe for hermits. It has a bearing on the whole future of man and of his world: and especially, of course, on the future of his religion” (T.S. 14). One notes a certain urgent concern about the historical times. Merton also uses “religion” in a more inclusive global sense that anticipates his eco-ecumenism.

The monk’s *Reflections* begin with these words: “There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality, for life is maintained and nourished in us by our vital relation with realities outside and above us” (T.S. 17). Note that Merton speaks of a spiritual “life” and its “nourishment” by a type of relation to reality that is “vital.” “The spiritual

life is first of all a *life*,” Merton reiterates. “It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived. Like all life, it grows sick and dies when it is uprooted from its proper element.” Furthermore, it is the “whole [person]” that is sanctified (T.S. 46).

The spiritual life does not happen solely “at the ‘high point’ of the soul.” Reason, imagination, feelings, and sensations cannot be excluded. But all of these are to be “elevated and transformed” (T.S. 27). The use of terms like “vital” connected to others like “life” and “whole person” may be additional indicators of Merton’s moving beyond old dualisms, some of which would place the “spiritual life” and “soul” on a superior and separate level from the material life or body. Now Merton is finding the language that will also place the human, even in its higher realizations, in a relationship to the ecological world, rather than primarily to the “other-world.” (Chuang Tzu’s Taoist spirituality as Life and its practices and expressions as forms of “nourishment” will in the 1960s fascinate and lead Merton to write *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.)

The spiritual life, then, does not refer to a half-life; our whole life must be oriented towards reality (T.S. 56). If the tree of one’s life (*arbor vitae*) is to bear healthy fruit, it must be rooted in and nourished by reality. Conversely, to feed on unreality is to invite starvation and eventually death. That kind of death does not bring forth fruit, unlike the “true, fruitful” death which is “a complete gift of ourselves” and a “total commitment to reality” (T.S. 17).

But, how do we separate the real from the unreal or the illusory? We must not oversimplify reality and call spiritual things real and material things unreal. What makes some things “unreal” and illusory is most often our attitude towards them, that is, when we perceive, value and relate to them in terms of “our own selfish interests” (T.S. 17). “If you want a spiritual life,” writes Merton, “you must unify your life.” To do this, you must “unify [and] . . . spiritualize your desires” (T.S. 56).

It is the unreal and disordered quality of our relationship to creatures that makes them unreal. The first thing we must do is to stop grasping things, release our hold on them, and step back so as to gain a proper perspective, one that sees them “as they are in themselves.” Only then can we begin to “penetrate their reality, their actuality, their truth” and so “begin to appreciate

them as they really are.” Then we are prepared to “see God in them” and, eventually, as we reach the deeper levels of contemplation “find them in Him” (T.S. 18). Embracing reality we “thus find ourselves immersed in the life-giving will and wisdom of God which surrounds us everywhere” (T.S. 47).

Silence, Words, and Reality

Merton maintains that if we are to discover reality within ourselves, other humans and creation, then silence and solitude are necessary. The common assumption in an information-laden society is that as words and data increase there is a proportionate increase in our grasp of reality; words convey reality. However, Merton reminds us of an unpopular truth: words often come between us and reality and act as a substitute for reality (T.S. 85). One consequence of “being silent,” a prime characteristic of the solitary life, is to clear away “the smoke-screen of words” between us and reality so that we can come “face to face with the naked being of things” (Ibid.).

Then Merton makes an important point with reference to words and modernity’s attitude towards nature. Too often, given a dualistic and utilitarian framework, words become tools that we use “to classify, to control and even to despise” creation. Silence, on the other hand, can teach a more respectful and reverential way of approaching beings (T.S. 86). Merton will increasingly emphasize and develop this point. If we are to learn the right use of words and concepts, we must unlearn the wrong use. Perhaps, after we have lived in silence with nature for some time, we will be able to use words in such a way that they will not break the communion between our silence and that of other beings. Such silence will simultaneously liberate us from the compulsive need to control life and free us to “begin to live it” (T.S. 93).

Adam respected this silence of beings, even as he named the animals. Merton’s interpretation of this Biblical story (as in *The New Man*) refrains from the usual anthropocentric trumpeting of human dominion over other creatures. In Merton’s rendering, Adam and the animals are equally present in the same silence. The solitary one does not name the animals in order to “disturb their privacy” but so “that the silence they dwell in and that dwells in them, may

be concretized and identified for what it is” (T.S. 69). Their silence is identified with their being and their being makes this silence real. Hence, “to name their being is to name their silence. And therefore it should be an act of reverence” (Ibid.).

This naming is also a praying, for “Prayer uses words to reverence beings in God.” Magic -- and one could extend this to include any manipulative technique -- tears beings away from God and seeks only to exploit them. Such actions violate their silence and their sanctity “before the face of His silence” (T.S. 69). Silence, both in one’s self and others, is of God. Silence is therefore of absolute necessity if I am to know my own true name. For just as Adam named the silence of all beings, so God, who alone knows me, in silence “speaks my own name,” and in that same silence “I also know His name” (T.S. 73).

Merton introduces the concept of “presence” into this discussion, something that will be rich in resonance with his ecological spirituality and experience of Zen:

His presence is present in my own presence. If I am, then He is. And in knowing that I am, if I penetrate to the depths of my own existence and my own present reality . . . then through this deep center I pass into the Infinite ‘I Am’ which is the very name of the Almighty.

My knowledge of myself in silence . . . opens out into the silence and the ‘subjectivity’ of God’s own self. (T.S. 70)

“When I am liberated by silence” and am simply living my life rather than measuring it, then “my whole life becomes a prayer,” Merton notes (T.S. 93). If I think of my prayer life as a search for a private, privileged experience, then, of course, “created things interfere with my quest for some special experience.” Everything that touches me becomes a distraction and the enemy of my prayer which, ironically, can itself become the source of my greatest distraction. Centered on this isolated self that is full of curiosity, I eat from the Tree of Knowledge (not of Life) and thereby tear my false self from my true self, from creation and Creator (T.S. 94). On the other hand, true solitude and humility take me out of myself and put me in touch with reality. “Let me seek, then, the gift of silence, and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees are my prayer, for God is all in all” (T.S. 94).

Meditation: Keeping Awake

How then does one move towards this deeper mode of prayer and state of being? What kind of pious practices should one undertake? Merton avoids prescriptions on techniques, thinking them counter-productive. For him the spiritual life is “first of all a matter of keeping awake.” Keeping awake is not just the opposite of being asleep. The interior life is a condition of alertness and awareness. In such a state, one becomes increasingly sensitive to the subtle movements of the Spirit and the presence of God. The “practice” of silent attention and awareness Merton here calls “meditation” or “meditative prayer.” What one should not do is to take a willful, aggressive approach to being aware. Paradoxically, meditation is “a stern discipline” that requires courage, perseverance and patience. Meditation as such goes beyond eliciting pious thoughts or stimulating pious affections or running through a series of spiritual exercises. Merton is suggesting the more apophatic, silent, meditative prayer that he increasingly turned to. One also finds him increasingly alluding to it in his journals, especially as he becomes more familiar with Buddhist and Orthodox traditions. Certain of these pensees point towards future developments both in their emphasis on the whole person including the body, on being present and experiencing presence, on being awake and aware, on silence and solitude. Merton connects several of these to his call for respecting the “silence” or integrity of created beings rather than seeking to control and manipulate them, even if only through language. The new orientation of the whole person to God is at the same time a new orientation to creation.

In meditative prayer, one thinks and speaks not only with his mind and lips, but in a certain sense with his *whole being*. Prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart – it is an orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration. All good meditative prayer is a *conversion of our entire self to God*. (T.S. 48)

This conversion and transformation may require “an inner upheaval” and a breaking with one’s routine and a freeing of the heart from an excessive preoccupation with “one’s daily business” (T.S. 48). But if we “embrace reality,” then we “find ourselves immersed in the life-giving will and wisdom” of a God who “surrounds us everywhere” (T.S. 47).

The Desert

There have been places in nature that are so real that individuals who choose to live there are forced to face their own falsity and to plumb the depths of their own reality. The Desert Fathers believed that such a place “had been created as supremely valuable in the eyes of God precisely because it had no value to men” (T.S. 18). The desert, like the mountain and sea, was created to be itself and “not to be transformed by men into something else.” Hence it has been sought out by individuals who wanted to simply be themselves--poor, solitary “and dependent on no one but God” (T.S. 19).

However, surrounded by the starkness of the desert, some individuals go mad or succumb to their inner demons. Merton suggests that we see an analogous situation today --anticipating his concerns of the 1960s including his linking of the exploitation of nature with modernity’s myths. When the desert is not allowed to be itself, but becomes a place where the human thirst for power and wealth dominates, it takes on an unreal and even demonic quality. Indeed, modern America found perverse uses for the desert. Referring to nuclear weapons, Merton laments the fact that the desert has become the “birthplace of a new and terrible creation, the testing-ground of the power by which man seeks to un-create what God has blessed” (T.S. 19). Along with this industry has come a burst in housing activity. Enclosed towns and cities feed off these demonic nuclear experiments. Also springing up out of the soil “overnight” are glimmering cities of vice, shining epiphanies of unreality, “brilliant and sordid smiles of the devil upon the face of the wilderness.” Some are “cities of secrecy” and others of money (T.S. 20). In short, the military-industrial complex, including the entertainment “industry” have filled the spiritually rich deserts with demonic monuments to modern military power, commercial greed and consumer voraciousness. Ironically, when we see what goes on in the desert now, says Merton, do we not again want to “do something to purify our hearts?” (T.S. 20).

Solitude and Wilderness

Fortunately, says Merton, there are still places where one can go “to be proved by the wilderness,” (T.S. 101-102) and “[t]o deliver oneself up, to hand oneself over, entrust oneself

completely to the silence of a wide landscape of woods and hills or sea, or desert; to set still while the sun comes up over that land and fills its silences with light” (T.S. 101). One’s life in such a place becomes simple yet infinitely rich as the silence works its way into all aspects of one’s existence:

To pray and work in the morning and to labor and rest in the afternoon, and to sit still again in meditation in the evening, when night falls upon that land and when the silence fills itself with darkness and with stars...to let it [silence] soak into their lives, to breathe nothing but silence, to feed on silence, and to turn the very substance of their life into a living and vigilant silence. (T.S. 101)

This passage anticipates something of Merton’s daily routine at his hermitage a few years later. Lived amidst the silence of nature, periods of silence, simplicity, and true poverty, can be transformative. Yet, there is the solitude experienced on visits to wilderness and a deeper abiding solitude. The former experience is in part defined by and gets its value from its contrast with ordinary life. Although such a wilderness experience may indeed affect our ordinary lives for some time after we return, our inner solitude soon wilts because it has not been rooted deeply enough and hence has not become truly transformative. The more prolonged periods and profound experiences of solitude open us to the Unfathomable Silence within which all places and all beings dwell and which dwells in them. Eventually the heart itself becomes a wilderness in which silence dwells, or, our being becomes a silence within which wilderness dwells. Then activities in the world can be expressive and not destructive of that silence (T.S.108). Merton, of course, sought increased solitude and considered this desire itself an expression of the spirit’s inbuilt thirst for a fullness of Life.

When the spirit of the “desert” dwells in the solitude of one’s heart, the heart becomes a place in which we do penance and wage war against our own inner devils. In this wilderness we learn self-denial and self-control, not in order to dry up the springs of emotions, but to cleanse them of self-centered contagions. When that is finished, we can “return from the desert, like Jesus or St. John, with our capacity for feeling expanded and deepened, strengthened against the appeals of falsity, warned against temptation, great, noble and pure” (T.S. 26). Through this wilderness experience, we are purified and brought into touch with reality. Now we are ready to live.

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CHAPTER EIGHT ZEN — THAT’S IT!

Truth Beyond Words and Concepts

The world can be grateful for whatever factors played into Merton’s decision to take the position of Novice Master in 1955. If nothing else, it helped to free up some time previously needed for class preparation and his tradition-based writings (even given Merton’s constant expansion of topics and his pushing of the envelope in content and style). Beginning even before 1956, Merton was broadening his interests and the range of his correspondents. He was a beneficiary of the creative possibilities realized in his past.

Everything I see and experience in Kentucky is to some extent colored and shaped by the thoughts and emotions I had when I first came to the monastery. It cannot be otherwise. All these are possibilities that were latent in that experience and in the decision that followed. So this brilliant day, too, is another link in the chain that was begun then, and began in fact long before then. (C.G.B. 245)

Merton explains that it is precisely “through these possibilities and realizations” that he is slowly “working” his life into another dimension where they “count less and less” and where he experiences a “growing liberty” from this specific “succession of events and experiences.” Merton is now beginning to see that the experiences and events of his life are becoming “more and more woven into the great pattern of the whole experience” of the human race and even into “something quite beyond all experience.” He can retain his own unique vision and voice as a monk and writer while at the same time seeing and speaking for many (C.G.B. 245). From now on, a significant part of his spiritual development would involve a deliberate reaching out.

In short, Merton is approaching an important period in his life and thought. We find him in the early stages of his “turn to the world” (1956-61), one side of which is his branching out, absorbing and being energized by new sources of light and warmth coming from universal wisdom traditions. Some of these are other branches of Christianity such as the Eastern Orthodox traditions ancient and modern, Greek and Russian, some are wisdom traditions of the Far East such as Taoism/Daoism, Zen Buddhism, others come from the philosophers of the western ancient world such as Herakleitos. And there are contemporary writers whose wisdom and vision

attract Merton's attention, such as Boris Pasternak, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and Teilhard de Chardin to mention only a few.

Zen Buddhism, particularly as interpreted by D.T. Suzuki, affected Merton in various ways. For example, Zen gave him support in his meditative life, offered new lenses through which to see the natural world, and a boldness in his articulation of a mystical Christology that allowed for inclusion of Buddhist concepts such as "emptiness," "suchness," etc. and a poetics of the natural world including Merton's own poetry and other ventures such as those into Calligraphy and Photography.

As Merton's Tree branches reached out to engage more of the global human community, his roots deepened into the solitude of the forest and his desire for life as a hermit began to be realized. This was accelerated in the early 1960s as he began to spend more and more time in a "conference center" that began to function as a hermitage. Often his simultaneous widening and deepening made him more critical of the complex of formalities associated with monastic life. He felt that instead of bringing monks closer to the Truth, monastic routine would often hide them from it and in its place create "an infinitely complex set of pretenses and verbalizations" which, he joked, would make a sane person "lose his faith forever!" At the end of a litany of verbal absurdities that Merton claims are taken seriously in the monastery, he contrasts these "verbalizations" with the simple wordless experience of Wisdom in nature:

Because all along, when one is quiet and listens to the song-sparrows and the crows, he knows very well that the real truth that he has come here to find is not contained in these declarations, it cannot really be stated, it is lived and grasped in the depths of the heart and one must be very careful of words, for words betray it . . . we use words to defile the Truth we recognize in the silence of our heart. (S.S. 3/25/58)

This passage also tastes of the Zen of D.T. Suzuki whose works Merton had been reading since late 1955 or early 1956. For Zen, Truth cannot be transmitted by sacred books, is beyond words and concepts, and must be experienced directly, although devices such as *koans* might crack open a mind ready for enlightenment. Wisdom (*prajna*) and Compassion (*karuna*) are the two cardinal "virtues" in Buddhism, and become "metaphysical" realities to most Buddhists in the Mahayana tradition. What makes Merton's above comments filled with light and wisdom (*prajna*)

from nature even more interesting is that they took place less than a week (March 18) after his experience of unity with the many people around 4th and Walnut Sts. in Louisville (compassion). His spontaneous heartfelt love for these people and his deep realization that he was “still a member of the human race” which was a “glorious destiny since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the human race.” This experience shattered what he characterized as his longstanding “dream of separateness” (S.S. 3/19/58).

On Holy Saturday 1958, Merton was again raising questions in his journal about the nature of Truth. One might simply answer “God,” he writes, but that would be too easy. It would be an answer “characteristic of monks” who, if then asked, “what do you mean by God?” would go on, stringing a series of words together to define God. One could take an oath and sign it, testifying that one truly believes the words. Unfortunately, this kind of official statement “is what hides God so that no one will ever find Him.” Such “belief in ‘propositions’ is only the beginning,” Merton claims. “Full belief must imply some *grasp of the reality* expressed in the propositions, and that grasp goes beyond propositions—it attains to “something more” (S.S. 4/5/58).

Merton uses an example of an experience he had the day before to elaborate on this distinction. “Yesterday I was sitting in the woodshed reading and a little Carolina wren suddenly hopped on to my shoulder and then on to the corner of the book I was reading and paused a second to look at me before flying away.” At the very moment he was writing these words, Merton notes: “(Same wren just came back and is singing and investigating busily in the blocks of the wall over there.)” He then makes his point:

Here is what I think.

Man can know about God’s creation by examining its phenomena, by dissecting and experimenting and this is all good. But it is misleading, because with this kind of knowledge you *do not really* know the beings you know. You only know *about* them. That is to say you create for yourself a knowledge based on your observations. What you observe is really as much the product of your knowledge as its cause. You take the thing not as it is, but as you want to investigate it. Your investigation is valid but artificial. (S.S. 4/5/58)

Unlike a wren or other wild creatures, a tamed animal is “already invested with a certain falsity” and “takes a disguise which we have decided to impose upon it.” Even a scientific

observation of a wild animal yields only what the framework and parameters of that science will allow. This means that the animal “is not seen as it really is.” Merton contrasts these more abstract ways of knowing with the way of those who spend time watching birds and wild animals and are “already wise in their own way.” Yet, he seeks something even deeper. He wants “not only to observe but to *know* living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor. This is the reality I need, the vestige of God in His creatures.” At the same time he experiences “the Light of God in my own soul” (S.S. 4/5/58).

The task, then, is to deepen one’s *experience* and that requires bringing more of one’s whole self (body, mind, spirit) into it. One must give up the sterile laboratory or “controlled environment” wherein a bird can only do or be what one wants it to do or be. In the other way of knowing, the wren “remains fully and completely a wren, itself, and hops on your shoulder if it feels like it.” That means allowing freedom to the wren. “The wren either hops on your shoulder or doesn’t.” He is what he does – “*Hoc est* [That it is]” (S.S. 4/5/58).

But what about our “ideas of Nature etc?” Merton asks. Like the propositional truths that Merton was discussing earlier, they are “all very well, but *non est hoc, non est hoc* [it is not this, it is not this]”. Merton shifts from Latin to the famous Sanskrit, “*Neti, Neti* [Neither this nor that].” Our ideas, scientific and otherwise, can manipulate, distort and just plain miss what is there in nature. The way we use ideas and methods of thinking are not all harmless or morally neutral. “Do no violence to things,” cautions Merton, “to manipulate them with my ideas – to track them to strip them, to pick something out of them my mind wants to nibble at . . .” (S.S. 4/5/58, 190). These images suggest a use of the mind in a way that is analogous to the physical trapping and stripping of animals. Just as a predator sits over a carrion and picks out pieces of flesh that seem tasty, so this mind will pounce on a certain aspect of the behavior or biology of a wild animal and chew on it. An important aspect of its freedom and identity is gone, because a fully living wren might choose to sit or not to sit on one’s shoulder, to sing or not to sing. The context of place, the web of interrelated living beings and the freedom of the wren as well as the moral, mental and spiritual condition of the human enter into this (ecologically) rich encounter.

Presence

Merton is moving into an even deeper and more holistic way of experiencing the natural world (and humans), a way that involves his whole self and so remains embodied. Not surprisingly, he finds himself drawn to Zen Buddhism, a tradition that was serious in its recipe for achieving an unmediated experience of Reality and Truth. Zen offers a direct way into the nondualistic experience of Reality of which Merton already had moments due to his own contemplative practice and the time spent in silence and solitude in nature.

As Roger Lipsey has pointed out, Merton had written to his publisher friend Jay Laughlin in early 1955 asking if Jay can find him some books by D.T. Suzuki. Whether Laughlin sent him books is not clear, but by May 1956 Merton had already worked through some writings on Zen, perhaps even some of the works by Suzuki that he had been seeking. He was quite taken with Zen, especially its emphasis on the direct experience of reality and on being fully present in the here and now. That same summer Merton wrote to an old friend, the painter Ad Reinhardt, obviously enthralled with and thrilled by the writings of Suzuki: “The very name of Suzuki produces in me electric currents from head to foot.” (quoted by Lipsey in *Merton & Buddhism*, 138).

During the summer of 1958, there would be Zen-like moments. One occurred on the feast of his namesake, St. Louis:

The grip the *present* has on me. That is the one thing that has grown most noticeably in the spiritual life—nothing much else has. The rest dims as it should. I am getting older. The reality of *now*—the unreality of all the rest. The unreality of ideas and explanations and formulas. I am. The unreality of all the rest. The pigs shriek. Butterflies dance together—or danced together a moment ago—against the blue sky at the end of the woodshed. The buzzsaw stands outside there, half covered with dirty and tattered canvas. The trees are fresh and green in the sun (more rain yesterday). Small clouds inexpressibly beautiful and silent and eloquent, over the silent woodlands. What a celebration of light, quietness, and glory! This is my feast, sitting here in the straw! (S.S. 8/25/58)

Harking back to his reflections of March and April, Merton points to the “unreality” of “ideas and explanations and formulas.” Then he simply states, “I am.” What IS matters: shrieking pigs, dancing butterflies, small clouds in a blue sky, and a mute buzzsaw. While the liturgy within the monastery celebrates his feast day, another celebration, one “of light, quietness, and glory” is

taking place outside in nature while Fr. Louis sits on some straw (S.S. 8/25/58).

Two months later, during a private two-day retreat meant to help Merton with his problems, he is reading “some Symeon the New Theologian, some Zen.” He realizes that whatever problems he has “are on the level where Zen can hit them squarely.” His mind and life have become disorganized, filled with “wrong attitudes, ‘conflicts’ more than anything else.” Because of these he has “been failing to face the issue,” avoiding the “big job” of his life which is fighting “the interior battle for freedom.” He had allowed external plans and “useless” writing projects that were mainly for “quick results” to pull him away from his path towards spiritual freedom (S.S. 10/15/58).

Yet, Merton had had moments of freedom and deep insight, as we have seen. If he was convinced that Zen could now hit his problems “squarely,” it was because he had already prepared himself, or had been prepared, to take advantage of the methods of practice and insights that Zen offered. One doubts whether by 1948 or even 1950 the branches on Merton’s Tree of Life had spread out sufficiently to benefit from the full light and energy of Zen. But more recently he had been able to understand and deal with his life of paradoxes and self-contradictions as though dealing with *koans*. That he had experienced many of his intense Zen-like moments of lucidity and self-forgetfulness when in the natural world should come as no surprise. Silence and solitude had provided the inner and outer peace and “emptiness” for such “openings”.

Suzuki’s Zen

Merton had been reading the works of D.T. Suzuki and thus the language and mystical flavor of Zen for nearly three years when he wrote:

My Zen is in the slow swinging tops of sixteen pine trees.
One long thin pole of a tree fifty feet high swings in a wider arc than all
the others and swings even when they are still.
Hundreds of little elms springing up out of the dry ground under the
pines.
My watch lies among oak leaves. My tee shirt hangs on the barbed wire
fence, and the wind sings in the bare wood. (S.S.11/25/58)

In addition to Zen’s helping clear his mind and heart and deepen his experience

of life, especially of trees, it had also intensified his attention to the reality of death: “The meaninglessness of any life that is not lived in the face of death.” This had struck him “forcibly” when “reading a passage from a Zen Samurai writer and warrior of the 17th Century quoted by Suzuki” (S.S.11/25/58). (He may have been reading *Zen and Japanese Culture*.) Four days later he journals: “Read remarkable pages of Suzuki on the tea-ceremony.” Interestingly, the same day he notes that he has “finished a twenty two page article on the Pasternak affair.” He saw Pasternak as a “Christian anarchist” (S.S. 11/29/58). Both the Zen Buddhist and Russian Orthodox traditions—as well as Pasternak’s witness to ancient revelations of life and cosmos--were dancing together in his life and spirit at this time.

On January 29 of 1959, a Haiku by Merton is the sole entry in his Journal:

High winds all night
Stole the voices of the bells:
No one knows what they said. (S.S. 1/29/59)

In March 1959, Merton finally writes to his Zen “Master,” D.T. Suzuki. Anyone familiar with the history of Zen’s introduction into the West understands the important role that D.T. Suzuki played. His interpretation of Zen was controversial for some Japanese Buddhists because he seemed to lift Zen out of its historical and cultural context in order to present it as a universally accessible spiritual path. Merton resonated with and was moved by the latter. As he confessed in his letter to Suzuki:

All I know is that when I read your books – and I have read many of them -- and above all when I read English versions of the little verses in which the Zen masters point their finger to something which flashed out all the time, I feel a profound and intimate agreement. Time after time, as I read your pages, something in me says, “That’s it!” Don’t ask me what. I have no desire to explain it to anybody, or to justify it to anybody, or to analyze it for myself. I have my own way to walk, and for some reason or other Zen is right in the middle of it wherever I go. (H.G.L. 561-562)

Merton notes that Zen seems to be right in the middle of his own spiritual path or Way. He feels a common ground with Suzuki’s Zen, ground on which he will still pursue his own path but now a path he can more intensely walk, thanks to Zen. Zen, as well as the Sophiology of the Russian tradition, would provide Merton with contemplative experiences, theological insights,

and a language that enabled him to deepen his inner life, widen his sense of communion with creation and more deeply engage his prophetic spirit in addressing the current historical turmoil. (See the fuller discussion in Christopher Pramuk's *Sophia*)

In his second letter to Suzuki, Merton speaks more forthrightly. He wants to state clearly that his understanding and experience of Christ is not that of mainline Christianity but of the rich Christian “mystical” tradition of which Suzuki himself is somewhat familiar. For Merton and that tradition, “The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, *is* our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be ‘found in him’ and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself.” Merton laments the fact that so many Christians do not experience the inner freedom of Christ but are “enslaved by images and ideas of Christ.” Those projections block the experience of Christ “in us as unknown and unseen.” The conventional Christ is usually imagined by believers to be outside of themselves. Even the Jesus that people experience walking beside them (as on the road to Emmaus) must vanish “[b]ecause He is even closer than that. *He is ourself*” (H.G.L, 564).

Then, in words that are simple, human and yet profoundly respectful, Merton writes, “Oh my dear Dr. Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are ‘doctors in Israel’” (Ibid.). In other words, Suzuki intuitively knows of what Merton speaks because of his own deep experience, while many of Merton’s fellow Christians, even theologians, seem content with and even defensive about traditional discourse. “No one cares for fresh, direct, and sincere intuitions of the Living Truth,” Merton remarks, but are “preoccupied with formulas” (Ibid.). Here Merton returns to the importance of direct intuition to the experience of Truth and implies a lack of appreciation among his fellow Christians for the necessity of such experiences.

Merton addresses the issue of language but in a slightly different way in a November 1959 letter to Suzuki. When it comes to saying something intelligible about the Buddhist concept of “emptiness,” he is “happier” when he doesn’t “have to talk about it.” He struggles with words in speaking of that which goes beyond words, and yet “one must speak and not speak.” However, for

him, that is not the real problem. It is not primarily a problem of which words are the best words to use to get to the Truth. The real problem is “a problem of ‘realization’--something that has to break through. Every once in a while it breaks through a little. One of these days it will burst out” (H.G.L. 569). As in his previous letter, Merton admits to the linguistic and doctrinal difficulties in his day but locates the real issue as one of experience. As Christopher Pramuk notes, the problem of Christian faith for Merton in a post-Christian world was not “an intellectual or philosophical puzzle to be solved so much as a problem of realization: *something has to break* through. It is not a problem, as he wrote to Suzuki, but a *koan*” (*Sophia*, 135).

As we have seen, such “breakthroughs” had occurred in Merton’s life before and would occur even more often as he moved more deeply and for longer periods of time into the solitude of the forests. The beauty and vitality of the natural world, the movement of birds and animals, the canvass of changing colors and rhythms brought small satori-like moments. We have seen how, from his early days in the monastery, Merton would suddenly bring his—and the reader’s—attention to a particular flower or bird or animal that caught his attention. Over the years these had continued, but perhaps due to his own developing ability to bring deep attention and awareness into the present, he seemed more in tune with and attuned to their presence.

In an April, 1959 letter to Suzuki, Merton expressed a wish to learn a Zen discipline. “At the moment, I occasionally meet my own kind of Zen master, in passing, and for a brief moment. For example, the other day a bluebird sitting on the fence post suddenly took off after a wasp. Dived for it, missed, and instantly returned to the same position on the fence post as if nothing had ever happened. A brief, split-second lesson in Zen” (H.G.L. 563). Merton would often carefully record the details of a particular bird and the context within which it was observed. Sometimes the spiritual “atmosphere” was also noted. “Meadowlark sitting quietly on a fence post in the dawn sun, his gold vest—bright in the sun of the east, his black bib tidy, turning his head this way, that way. This is a Zen quietness without comment” (D.W.L. 7/2/64). Simply being present to a bird, with no desire to interfere with its being, even by commenting; there is nothing but a meadowlark sitting “quietly” on a fence post. And yet, that “nothing” is everything.

For Merton, Zen both supported and helped nurture a state of open awareness and immediate presence to nature and members of the natural community. Nothing esoteric, it simply took the form of an intensified perception and response to what was right in front of his eyes, to paraphrase Herakleitos.

Such a direct, immediate knowing or *seeing*, since it is basically nondualistic, must also involve a shift in one's own mode or state of "being." Knowing and being are united rather than separated as in conventional subject/object thinking or experiencing. You become what you know since the surface self and its way of knowing are left behind for a mode of knowing/being that is deeper, antecedent to epistemological and existential dualisms. In theological terms, this shift brings one into contact with Christ, for as Merton wrote to Suzuki, "*He is ourself*" (H.G.L. 564). The Christ within as pure subject is also the Cosmic Christ present within creation as a whole including its smallest of beings.

What is required, as Merton will note in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, is that one open one's mind and, indeed, one's whole being, to Life. In Zen, a *koan* is often a means to do that. As Merton would write, "The purpose of *koan* study is to learn to respond directly to life by practicing on the koan, that is to say, by striving to meet the koan with an adequate and living response" (M.Z.M. 249). When, after years of struggle, the Zen student demonstrates a "*living and authentic* response . . . to the koan, he shows that he is now able to respond fully, directly, and immediately to life itself" (M.Z.M. 249). Spiritual depth is not achieved or demonstrated by repeating correct formulas, memorizing sacred texts or excelling in metaphysical speculation. What is required of us, writes Merton, is "actually to *respond* in a full and living manner to any 'thing,' a tree, a flower, a bird, or even an inanimate object, perhaps a very lowly one." But response is not reaction. "Response involves the whole being of man in his freedom and in his capacity to 'see.' . . . [W]hen one attains to pure consciousness, everything has infinite value" (M.Z.M. 250).

One could point to Merton for a basic principle of an ethical geopiety that flows out of this living experience. The ascription of intrinsic value to a bird or a tree is not the conclusion of a rational argument or an extension to natural beings of a quality (purportedly) inherent in

humans. What is awakened within self and encountered directly in the other does not dissolve all differences into an amorphous unity. The “other” now stands revealed as it IS and not as the ego-mind had formerly perceived it to be. Nor is the knowing subject alienated from the known object. (True to Zen: no comment.)

According to Christopher Pramuk, “If we substitute the word ‘Christ,’ ‘Spirit,’ or ‘Sophia,’ for the word *koan* in Merton’s above passage, we will begin to hear the resonances Merton perceived between the Zen mind and Christian mystical experience

...” (S.H. 136). In other words, if a Christian is able to demonstrate a “*living and authentic* response . . . [to Christ]” she should be able “to respond fully, directly, and immediately to life itself. . . [as well as] to *respond* in a full and living manner to any ‘thing,’ a tree, a flower, a bird, or even an inanimate object, perhaps a very lowly one.” This is because Merton’s, claims Pramuk, is “a mysticism which sees the whole cosmos transfigured in Christ, or, as he writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, bursting forth in ‘The General Dance’ of Sophia” (*Ibid.*). If the *koan* is meant to produce a breakthrough to the True Self/Buddha Mind in the Buddhist monk, this for Merton could potentially be a deep experience of Christ, who, as he told Suzuki “*is our inmost self*” and “*He is our self*” (H.G.L. 564).

These ecumenical explorations also point to a maturing of Merton’s ecopiety. Merton was experiencing Christ present in the bluebird or wren (geopiety), Christ present within the stranger or the hungry brother (homopiety), and Christ present within or as his “inmost self.” As Pramuk eloquently notes:

There is nothing novel, abstract, or esoteric, Merton insists, about this experience of creation transfigured in divine presence. It accords with an ancient conception of God as light, or, as Thomas Aquinas explained, not ‘that which’ we see, but rather ‘that through which’ we see. But more than this, it is the intuition of creation’s radical goodness and gratuity that turns into an accusation of every dehumanizing decision, every ‘Unspeakable’ force or structure of evil churning through the world. For Merton, contemplation (*theoria*) is the living seedbed of a prophetic worldview that seeks always and everywhere to ‘guard the image of man for it is the image of God.’ (S.H.C.136-137)

Merton, then, was finding these universal connections (the branching out of his Tree of Life) not in spite of but because of his own religious experience (the deepening roots at the

center). Nor was the strengthening of his “prophetic” voice during the 1960s disconnected from or at the expense of his contemplative silence. His ecopiety was composed of a strengthening of both geopiety (his experience and increasing valuing of creation) and homopiety (his awareness of inter-human violence and its connection with human violence towards creation).

Merton found no need in his dialogue with Suzuki to either exaggerate the wisdom of his own Catholicism or minimize that of Buddhism. “It seems to me very important, indeed a basic fact of primary importance,” Merton emphasized, “that Suzuki and I can speak the same language and indeed that we speak much more of a common language than I can, for instance, share with the average American business man, or indeed with some of the other monks” (S.S. 4/11/59).

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CHAPTER NINE

ECO-SOPHIA (WISDOM)

Merton's way of *seeing* and experiencing Reality was certainly being intensified and in some areas deepened under the influence of D.T. Suzuki and Zen Buddhism. Something was beginning to "break through." But his simultaneous immersion in the Russian Orthodox tradition, especially his engagement with the feminine figure of Sophia, both drew upon and developed imaginative resources that also transformed his apprehension of the creative dynamics at work in nature, the human community (including its history), and in the life of the individual. It was Sophia/Wisdom who, during this period, became a central symbol for Merton of the inner life of this interconnected totality. Merton had become fascinated with modern Russian theologians such as Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Paul Evdokimov. All three in their own way placed the figure of Sophia at the center of their theology, identifying Her either with one of the persons of the Trinity, usually Christ/Logos, or with the inner nature (*ousia*) of God.

As early as 1956 Merton had been reading and taking notes on the writings of Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov and Nicholai Berdyaev. While they spoke in a more modern context, they remained in continuity with older traditions. For Soloviev and Bulgakov especially, that tradition focused on the figure of Sophia, the divine feminine. And they spoke out boldly, especially Bulgakov and Berdyaev, who Merton called

. . . writers of great, great attention . . . [and] great men who will not admit the defeat of Christ who has conquered by his resurrection . . .

One wonders if our theological cautiousness is not after all the sign of a fatal coldness of heart, an awful sterility born of fear, or of despair. These two men have dared to make mistakes and were to be condemned . . . They have dared to accept the challenge of the sapiential books, the challenge of the image of *Proverbs* where Wisdom is "playing in the world" before the face of the creator. (S.S. 4/25/57)

Merton was especially struck by their enthusiastic embrace of a positive role for human creativity in the vast plan of creation and salvation. "Most important of all," Merton emphasized, was "man's creative vocation to prepare, consciously, the ultimate triumph of divine wisdom." Wisdom (Sophia) is at work within both cosmic and human history, pulling both creative

processes together as the Word prefigured in the Incarnation and Resurrection. Humankind is “the microcosm, the heart of the universe” who had been and “who is called to bring about the fusion of cosmic and historic process in the final invocation of God’s wisdom and love.” The Holy Spirit acts in human beings, seeking “to reach through our inspired hands and tongues into the very heart of the material world created to be spiritualised” (S.S. 4/25/57). While Zen can open eyes and minds to the wonder and spiritual power of the world in the present, Sophia places this experience in an historical context uniting both divine and human creativity and the cosmic and human historical processes.

As Willis Jenkins notes:

Wisdom seems to invite the attention of environmental theologians trying to associate creaturely becoming and divine agency. She seems to be the one toward whom we look when struggling to designate the way creativity transfigures the world. Sophia, says Thomas Merton, names both ‘the dark nameless Ousia’ shared by the Trinitarian Persons as well as the living beauty and hidden highest reality of creation. To understand her better, Merton directs the reader to Sergei Bulgakov. (E.G. 111)

Merton was busy in the summer of 1957 entering passages from Bulgakov’s *The Wisdom of God* into his journal. Merton notes that “Within ourselves humanity is so close that one can seek to discover and will discover that ‘God is all in all.’” Sophia as the Divine Wisdom in God is also “humanity in God,” the “divine prototype and foundation of the being of man.” As Divine Wisdom she was also the “divine world which was in God at creation.” Humanity in God becomes, in the created order, the common unity of human beings. Merton can say that she is at once his being and his nature. She is “the foundation of Wisdomness” (S.S. 104-105).

Yet, it was not only sophiology as a system of thought or Sophia as a cosmic principle, no matter how splendid, that transformed Merton. For both Soloviev and Bulgakov, Sophia, as Christopher Pramuk states, “was, in the first place, a central figure of mystical experience, and within that experience, she represented the divine-human feminine” (S.H. 219). Likewise, for Merton, Proverb/Sophia became a living presence who played no small role in stimulating and articulating the eruption within himself of dreams and deep feelings associated with “the feminine.” All manner of inner and outer walls began to crumble. New and more vital shoots

insisted on being allowed access to the conscious mind of the monk. The image and reality of Sophia provided Merton with a way to experience and articulate his growing sense of intimate connection with the divine in nature and in other people.

Something was happening on many levels during February and March of 1958 and much of it was connected with the entrancing figure of Sophia, now haunting daytime visions and night-time dreams. In a letter to Boris Pasternak dated October 23, 1958, Merton recalls an important dream that had occurred in late February 1958. In his letter, Merton connects that dream with his subsequent breakthrough experience and “vision” on March 18, 1958 at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville:

One night I dreamt that I was sitting with a very young Jewish girl of fourteen or fifteen, and that she suddenly manifested a very deep and pure affection for me and embraced me so that I was moved to the depths of my soul. I learned that her name was “Proverb,” which I thought very simple and beautiful. And also I thought “She is of the race of Saint Anne.” I spoke to her of her name, and she did not seem to be proud of it, because it seemed that other young girls mocked her for it. But I told her that it was a very beautiful name, and there the dream ended. A few days later when I happened to be in a nearby city, which is very rare for us, I was walking alone in the crowded street and suddenly saw that everybody was Proverb and that in all of them shone her extraordinary beauty and purity and shyness, even though they did not know who they were and were perhaps ashamed of their names -- because they were mocked on account of them. And they did not know their real identity as the Child so dear to God who, from the beginning, was playing in His sight all days, playing in the world.

Thus you are initiated into the scandalous secret of a monk who is in love with a girl, and a Jew at that! One cannot expect much from monks these days. The heroic asceticism of the past is no more. (C.T. 90)

In the journal entry of the day following his dream he recalls a sofa on the porch where he was “embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl” (S.S. 2/28/58). He seems to downplay its significance by calling it “a charming dream” (Ibid). On March 4, 1958, however, he writes a “letter” in his journal addressed to “Dear Proverb.” Here he makes it evident that this dream and the young woman had affected him deeply. In part it reads:

How grateful I am to you for loving in me something which I thought I had entirely lost, and someone who, I thought, had long ceased to be. And in you, dear, though some might be tempted to say you do not even exist, there is a reality as real and as wonderful and as precious as life itself . . .

I think what I most want to say is that I treasure, in you, the revelation of your virginal solitude. In your marvelous, innocent, love you are utterly alone: yet you have given yourself to me, why I cannot imagine . . .

Dearest Proverb, I love your name, its mystery, its simplicity and its secret, which even you yourself seem not to appreciate. (S.S.3/4/58)

In addition, the entry in his journal of March 19, 1958, which recalls his experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville on the prior day, suggests that it was not just people in general who shone brightly, but women in particular. Merton felt “as if waking from a dream – the dream of my separateness, of the ‘special’ vocation to be different.” He writes, “It is not a question of proving to myself that I either dislike or like the women one sees in the street,” but that each had a “secret beauty” and that his vow allows him to be “married to what is most true in all the women of the world.” In each was Sophia, Wisdom, Mary. He also alludes to the “God-[hu]manhood” --a humanness “transformed in God!” (S.S. 3/19/58). One recognizes the Orthodox image of Sophia and of the “God-[hu]manhood” which had absorbed Merton during his readings of Soloviev, Bulgakov and others.

Who it was that revealed herself in these women becomes evident from the note Merton writes to “Proverb” immediately after the above entry:

I have kept one promise and I have refrained from speaking of you until seeing you again. I knew that when I saw you again it would be very different, in a different place, in a different form, in the most unexpected circumstances. I shall never forget our meeting yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child, sent to me by God. (S.S. 3/19/58)

The return of the feminine to Merton, clothed in Proverb and Sophia, and his turn to the world, must be seen in this context. During 1958 Merton was experiencing a “change in state,” rooted both in his inner struggle with what seemed to be a stagnant spiritual life and his turning to the world to engage it in a wider dialogue. At the same time, he intensified his criticisms of the monastic life as lived at Gethsemani and even, in some instances, as proclaimed by the superiors of the Order. He admitted in early 1958 that there were many things at Gethsemani that he could not and, in fact, should not accept any longer. Accepting them as a way of “conforming” would mean being “*unfaithful* to my real vocation” (S.S. 3/11/58). Living out one’s vows means “living

out one's personal consecration" and is not reducible to conforming to a way of life or obeying rules. The vows do not mean consecrating oneself to an abbot or a religious order "but to God Himself in Christ." If following the former resulted in a diminished contemplative and spiritual life, he no longer felt "bound" by the "rather rigid concepts of this Order of Strict Observance with which, as ideals go, I agree less and less" (S.S. 3/11/58).

On March 13 he writes that one thing he no longer agrees with is that Solitude means "indifference to or separation from what is happening to the rest of the human race" (S.S. 3/13/58). Five days later he would awaken from his "dream of separateness" at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville.

At the beginning of May, Merton reports that he is:

Thinking of the new and necessary struggle in my interior life.

I am finally coming out of the chrysalis . . . Now the pain and struggle of fighting my way out into something new and much bigger. I must see and embrace God in the whole world.

. . . I have been seeing Him only in a very small monastic world. And this is much too small . . .

Cool again this morning. Many birds singing. The tops of hills still hidden in mist. The lark sings "Dr. Zhivago" - (which I very much want to read). (S.S. 5/5/58)

Little did Merton foresee the effect that reading Pasternak's novel would have on him and on his desire to "embrace God in the whole world." Merton admits that the biggest struggle is "[t]he battle against inertia. In the life and in myself. This is the great thing. The constant struggle to break through illusion and falsity and come to Christ and to freedom." Merton saw more clearly that passivity and inertness had characterized his recent past. Now he must open out and "embrace God in the whole world." Until then he had only seen God in the "very small" world of the monastic life. That world, he now concludes, "is much too small" (S.S. 5/5/58). Merton is turning towards the world, but not re-turning to the world that he once knew. He had no desire to simply become more active and run across its surface. He wants to "embrace God" who is in it and in himself.

Somehow, Proverb/Sophia is providing him with the spiritual confidence and theological

resources that will allow him to simultaneously deepen his own roots and widen the reach of his branches. He feels a positive call and the inner courage to more fully realize his vocation. Unlike 1955, he would no longer simply accept “all the standards and formulas adopted by

others . . . “ More than that, and due in part to both Zen and Sophia, Merton is gripped by “The conviction that I have not even begun to write, to think, to pray, and to live and that only now I am getting down to waking up” (S.S. 6/22/58). Indeed, for the remainder of 1958, Someone--call her Sophia-- prodded Merton from within to wake up and grow, and beckoned him from without towards a broader communion with Her, present in nature and humanity. This did not cease with the New Year.

In early 1959, Merton was visiting an artist and friend, Viktor Hammer, at the latter's home in Lexington, Kentucky. Throughout lunch, Merton was repeatedly glancing at a triptych of Hammer's that depicted a woman holding a crown over the head of a young Christ. Merton asked his friend about the identity of the woman and Viktor replied that he had not decided yet. Merton excitedly announced that *he* knew her, that he had always known her, and that she is, in fact, Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom. In a follow-up letter to Hammer written in May 1959 Merton states:

The first thing to be said of course is that Hagia Sophia is God Himself. God is not only Father but a Mother. He is both at the same time, and it is the “feminine aspect” or “feminine principle” in the divinity that is the Hagia Sophia...to ignore this distinction is to lose touch with the fullness of God. (W.F. 4)

This is rather stunning language for a male theologian and spiritual writer of the 1950s. But Merton refers to “the oldest Oriental thought,” which also embraces this “masculine-feminine relationship” which is fundamental to all reality, “simply because all reality mirrors the reality of God.” In relation to the deepest mystery of God, Sophia “is the dark, nameless *Ousia* [Being]” of the three persons, the “‘primordial’ darkness which is infinite light.” This uncreated Wisdom, moreover, is within “all beings and nature.” As the pivot, the “center and meaning of all,” she resembles the Tao/Dao of the Chinese tradition. She is found in “that which is the smallest and poorest and most humble in all: the ‘feminine child’ playing before God the Creator in His universe, ‘playing before Him at all times, playing in the world’ (Proverbs 8)” (W.F. 4). Sophia is

the feminine principle, both the dark unknown inner Being of God shared by the Trinity, and the divine as present in all beings in the created order. She is humble, simple, childlike, like the wisdom of the Bible, playing before God. But there is more.

While alluding to Tao, Merton does not explicitly state that Tao in the *Tao te Ching* is pictured also as humble, lowly, as a child, even an infant. He does say that, like Tao, “[t]his feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father’s glory in the world and is in fact the manifestation of His glory” (W. F. 4). Sophia, while “living and hidden in creation,” is also reflected in the “beauty of all creation” (W.F. 5). Merton further notes that “Sophia in ourselves is the mercy of God, the tenderness which by the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of God’s love.” Thus one could say that “Sophia is the feminine, dark, yielding, tender counterpart of the power, justice, creative dynamism of the Father” (W.F. 4).

Merton then connects Sophia with Mary, the Mother of Christ, who “realizes perfectly all that is hidden in Sophia” and “is a kind of personal manifestation of Sophia.” Merton tells Viktor Hammer that Mary crowning Jesus in his painting is crowning the Second Person of the Trinity with a human nature that is low, fragile, and able to suffer. She sends him on “a mission of inexpressible mercy,” to die for us and through the resurrection, express the “manifold wisdom of God’ which unites us all” in Christ (W.F. 4-5). Merton connects the mercy and hiddenness of God with the poverty and nothingness that He took upon Himself in Christ (W.F. 5). He associates Sophia with the Church, St. Francis’s Lady Poverty and the solitude and silence of the Desert Fathers. Merton calls her the creative force and guide in “all true artists” (W.F. 5).

While Merton thanks the artist Viktor Hammer for copies of an article on wisdom from the Catholic Encyclopedia, he is unimpressed with it. He suggests that Carolyn Hammer secure *The Wisdom of God* by Sergius Bulgakov for her library, which “would cover very well the Sophia theme.” While Merton admits that he has taken notes on it (indeed he did) he confesses that it is rather technical “in its own way” (W.F. 6). Certainly, as we shall see, Merton will avoid technical language in his own prose poem, *Hagia Sophia*.

A Tender Fruit: *HAGIA SOPHIA*

On July 2, 1960, the Feast of the Visitation, in a Louisville hospital, the soft voice of a female nurse woke Thomas Merton from his sleep-- not a usual event in the life of a monk. It was an “awakening” that occurred on many levels, captured by a series of intricate images in his journal and later reworked into the beautiful prose poem, “Hagia Sophia.”

The journal entry begins:

At 5:30, as I was dreaming, in a very quiet hospital, the soft voice of the nurse awoke me gently from my dream – and it was like awakening for the first time from all the dreams of my life – as if the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom had awakened me. We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice of the Mother: yet she speaks everywhere and in everything. Wisdom cries out in the market place – “if anyone is little let him come to me.”

. . . Deep is the ocean, boundless sweetness, kindness, humility, silence of wisdom that is *not* abstract, disconnected, fleshless. Awakening us gently when we have exhausted ourselves to night and to sleep. O Dawn of wisdom! (T.W. 7/2/60)

Hagia Sophia bears the fruit of years of study, reflection, and meditation on, as well as earlier “visits” by Wisdom/Proverb/Sophia. That prose poem, written a year later, is structured around the canonical hours, beginning with Lauds.

I. Dawn. The Hour of Lauds

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, Natura naturans. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created beings, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.

I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity. (T.M.R. 506)

The invisible fecundity present within all visible things reaches out to a sleeping man through a woman, a “sister”. That fecund voice brings him life and consciousness and wisdom. Sophia “speaks” in creation as well as within the humanity of Merton’s sisters and brothers, awakening the One Christ in them and in many lands. (Not all lands are experiencing sunrise.) “Hidden wholeness” suggests an invisible, dimmed, meek source of unity within and beneath

the lightly dancing surface of the many. As the first chapter of the *Daodejing/Tao te Ching* also suggests, this Mystery in its depths goes beyond names but as the Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth. Yet, if one must name it as a fertile power that gives birth to the myriad (ten thousand) things, one would call it “Mother.” This maternal energy is “inexhaustible,” claims Merton, calling to mind Chapter Four of the *Daodejing* with its image of a bottomless bowl that despite constant use is never exhausted.

This inner, sweet, pure and silent fount is also the dynamic source of “action and joy,” claims Merton. As Mother Wisdom she is the hidden Unity and Integrity of the wholeness that is nature. As Mother she is wordless but as Sister Wisdom she speaks. It is interesting that Merton uses a feminine parallel to the traditional masculine Father (Wordless) / Son (Word). And in shifting genders he also emphasizes gentleness, tenderness, humility, meekness, sweetness, purity. The mode of action of this “rising up” force suggests *wu wei*, a mysterious merging of activity and passivity, both a “drawing down” through gentle emptiness or an soft going forth that “fits in” so perfectly that it is unobtrusive and hidden.

Merton turns to himself as a being among other created beings. Wisdom “rises up” from the “unseen roots” in the Ground he shares with all created beings (Merton’s “Tree of Life”). Being a human, he also recognizes and experiences this approaching Wisdom as a Presence that gently and humbly makes herself known. Part of this recognition comes from within, for she is closer to Merton than he is to himself. She is also his own being and his human nature (perhaps a created reflection of the humanity of God), a Gift through the divine creativity (Thought and Art). And, as we shall see, this recognition is also rooted in his own experiences of Proverb/Wisdom.

This remarkable passage links Western Christianity with its Eastern counterpart as well as with Daoism/Taoism. Because of the close Daoist connection it might also be considered an invitation to explore more deeply an eco-sophical spirituality or geopiety. Because of this hidden wholeness, the cosmic and human, geopiety and homopiety, masculine and feminine, spiritual and material, flowing and still, vocal and silent, join in an intimate dance, a yin/yang of ecopiety. In *Sophia* Merton finds a way to Name a living Presence with traditionally feminine qualities who

unites into a hidden wholeness the many levels and dimensions of us as humans and members of the natural world of which we are a part.

Merton also offers us a type of vision and spirituality that invites an ecological intimacy but also links the subject of that intimacy to other humans (and as we shall see, to the creativity in cosmos and history). During a retreat in January, 1961 (midway between his actual hospital experience and his writing of *Hagia Sophia*), Merton had been reading the theology of Evdokimov, a student of Bulgakov. He confesses that in orthodoxy “I meet the concept of *natura naturans* [nature acting according to its nature]—the divine wisdom in ideal nature, the ikon of wisdom, the dancing ikon –the summit reached by so many non-Christian contemplatives.” Merton sees the implications of this common wisdom of contemplatives, for “Faith in Sophia, *natura naturans*, the great stabilizer today—for peace. The basic hope that man will not be completely destroyed is hope in *natura naturans*” (T.T.W. 1/26/61).

There is that within all humans that has risen up from the natural world, a wisdom and presence that show themselves in the great unfolding of life in *natura naturans*. Given what was said above, it is also the ground for hope in the future. Something has “broken through” numerous times in the history of cosmic and earth evolution, creatively lifting it past (or through) destructive forces onto a new level. This divine creativity within the process is that out of which and by which we humans rose up and were awakened (as was Merton in the hospital). Still at work inspiring many humans to follow the path of freedom and love, it unfortunately comes up against humans who choose the path to destruction of much of nature and fellow humans. Yet to those who see, there is room for hope, “hope in *natura naturans*” (T.T.W. 1/26/61).

The First Section continues and reflects this journal entry: “Let us suppose I am a man lying asleep in a hospital. I am indeed this man lying asleep. It is July the second, the Feast of Our Lady’s Visitation. A Feast of Wisdom.” A soft voice awakens him from his dream and it is “like all mankind awakening from ... all the nights ... like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves ... in all the lands of the earth . . . like all the minds coming back together in awareness ... like the first morning of the world ... and like the Last Morning . . . “ (T.M.R. 506). Interestingly

it is now Wisdom who Merton claims woke Adam from “nonentity and he knew her.” And it is Wisdom who will, on the last day, call forth “all the fragments of Adam” from death (Ibid.).

Woven into this simple narrative of being awakened in a hospital are references to the One Christ or Logos, the Image of God present in the many images that are individual persons. Not only is there a Unity in creation, there is a Unity among humans. Here Sophia Wisdom is not Christ, the second person of the Trinity, because she awakens the One Christ present in the many humans. Analogies abound, most of them structured around traditional qualities of the feminine and embodied in the voice, touch, emotional expressions of a female: being wakened by the nurse is like being awakened by Eve or the Blessed Virgin, like “coming forth from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in Paradise” (T.M.R. 507). The present event becomes mythicized, opens to a deeper time and place where fuller meanings are found. For example, “in the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of Spirit” (Ibid.). Spirit brings life and in many theologies Spirit is the creative and life-giving energy of the Trinity in creation. Through the nurse’s cool touch this larger process is felt, mediated to this person who was “dead” to the world of day.

Merton then expands Sophia to her role as source of great Mercy (and perhaps Buddhist compassion—*karuna*) to humans, but especially to those most in need. This also reflects Merton’s rising prophetic voice denouncing human injustice and oppression. Just as the voice of the nurse cried out to the helpless sleeping one, Sophia/Wisdom (*Prajna*) “cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and the helpless.” The helpless, poor, little one who entrusts himself to sleep “without awareness, without defense,” represents the helpless, the little and the poor of the world to whom Wisdom is especially solicitous. Symbolically for the materially or spiritually helpless one, when Sophia the Nurse takes him by the hand she “opens to him the doors of another life, another day” (T.M.R. 507).

But there is also a reward for trust. Merton reminds us of the deeper symbolic (poetic) meaning attending the simple act of falling asleep. Entrusting ourselves to sleep is an act of letting-go of ego and its defensiveness and an opening to a wider Natural process (that because

of the Art and Thought of the divine has a spiritual meaning and dimension to it). The reward to the one who recognizes his or her ultimate helplessness but nevertheless trusts is that “Gentleness comes to him when he is most helpless and awakens him, refreshed, beginning to be made whole.” Not only refreshed, but “taken by the hand” and has opened to him or her “the doors of another life, another day” (Ibid.).

Parenthetically, Merton contrasts this person with one who has not trusted but has adopted a position centered on a defense of and love for itself and who has spent the night watching over himself. This person “is killed at last by exhaustion” and is unable to experience the refreshing, creative “newness” brought by his Sister. Instead, “[e]verything is stale and old” (T.M.R. 507). But for the trusting one, newness and strength accompany the “voice of mercy.” This sweet invitation is offered “as if Life, his Sister, as if the Blessed Virgin, (his own flesh, his own sister), as if Nature made wise by God’s Art and Incarnation were to stand over him and invite him with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live” (Ibid). Here again Merton brings in Life and Nature (capitalized) not simply as physical and biological processes but as a meaningful, purposeful Reality made so by the Art of God and by the Incarnation. So, Merton adds, “this is what it means to recognize Hagia Sophia.” All is the same “Unity and Integrity,” the same Wisdom (T.M.R. 507).

This “awakening” involves a more sacramental or iconic apprehension of Reality. We are in a different yet not totally unfamiliar world from that of Zen and Taoism. The cosmos embraces us and unites us with all “created beings” in a “hidden wholeness” permeated by the presence of Sophia who, like Dao, is dark, hidden, invisible but fecund, life-giving, nourishing, soft, tender. Merton’s imagery invites us to sense within ourselves the same subtle movements that move within the natural world and other humans. There is silence at the center but there is also the need for well-crafted and expressive words and images, meant to draw out what has been “rising up” within us. Ego must dissolve, but as a letting-go to be moved by the flow, to be moved from within as we creatively adapt to the movement all around us—*natura naturans*, *wu-wei* and *ziran*. The Spirit of Life is a maternal, sisterly, feminine spirit. This is not only a matter of sensing,

opening and responding to but perhaps even dancing or playing with.

One senses the power that Sophia/Wisdom has in Merton's life and creative imagination. Much of this grew out of his deepening study of and meditation on the traditional Russian Orthodox theologians as well as on modern prophetic voices such as Boris Pasternak. There is also the living presence of his own epiphanies, both those experienced within and from a cosmos and humanity full of presence, beauty and power. Much of this is packed in a poetic manner into a few paragraphs of Hagia Sophia as well as in journal entries and letters that invite endless reflection and expansion by the reader.

II. Early Morning. The Hour of Prime

Merton addresses Wisdom: "O blessed, silent one, who speaks everywhere!" And yet, the fact is that the human race in general, and especially during this time of militancy and war, does not hear "the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine" (T.M.R. 507). Nor does it hear Wisdom speaking as "mercy," "yielding love," "non-resistance," "non-reprisal," "uncomplaining pardon." In her voice we should not expect to hear a host of reasons or string of answers. Nevertheless, she is "the candor of God's light, the expression of its simplicity." (TMR, 508) His simplicity" (T.M.R. 508).

Turning poetically to nature, Merton says, "We do not hear the uncomplaining pardon that bows down the innocent visages of flowers to the dewy earth" (Ibid.). And so we are not aware of the silent Child imprisoned in so many, who nevertheless smiles because she cannot really "be a prisoner" (Ibid.). "The helpless one" who has trustingly surrendered to sleep will be awakened by "the gentle one," Sophia. The awakened one "will never be the same again," for Sophia's sweet tenderness will "speak to him from all sides and in everything, without ceasing." Not waking "to conquest and dark pleasure but to the impeccable pure simplicity of One consciousness in all and through all: one Wisdom, one Child, one Meaning, one Sister" (Ibid.). Just as the stars in their setting rejoice at the rising of the sun, so together they rejoice in this awakened one arising out of his "primordial dark night into consciousness" and into the joyful work of creating a new world. We must "wake up," he implies, both from our historical trance and

spiritual sleep to the wondrous grace-filled world around us and to our own positive potentials so that we might chart a new course.

III. High Morning. The Hour of Tierce.

In this section, Merton reflects on the revelation of Sophia at the height of the day. The Sun's light is diffused in the air like "the light of God is diffused by Hagia Sophia." Thus this One Light shines from within "ten thousand things" (the Chinese term for everything). God, Merton says, "is at once Father and Mother." As Father He stands "surrounded by darkness" but as Mother his light is diffused "embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness." God's power in Sophia "is experienced only as mercy and as love." God does not shine onto things from on-high as the blazing powerful Sun does onto plants, but shines from within them, witnessing to the humble, "loving kindness of Wisdom" (T.M.R. 509).

Alluding to the fourteenth-century English mystic, Julian of Norwich, Merton speaks of those mystics who looked out on the fens and sky and spoke to "Jesus our Mother." This was Sophia who "had awakened in their childlike hearts" (T.M.R. 509). Perhaps, Merton ponders, Sophia is ultimately darkness, infinite light, "the Divine Nature, One in Father, Son and Holy Ghost." Yet, Merton does not want Trinitarian debates to distract from the Mystery he is exploring and trying to express. Being manifest of God she is at once hidden in things and yet obvious, since she appears as "their own self ... naked and without care." She is also the "unseen pivot of all nature, the center and significance of all the light that is in all and for all" (T.M.R. 509).

Here, as with the term "ten thousand things," Merton's images resonate with the invisible Tao of Lao Tzu who is the mother of all, and the central pivot for Chuang Tzu around which the polarities of existence dance. As source of life, Tao gives birth and is manifest, yet remains as if nothing. So Merton says Sophia is "God as all, and God reduced to Nothing: inexhaustible nothingness." Humility keeps God hidden and dark, while God remains the source of all visible things and of "unfailing light" (T.M.R. 510).

Sophia is both God's gift and God as gift. As Love, she unites creation with Creator. "She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight." Hence, all things prosper in her and praise God

by their being and rejoice in reflecting Him. She is festival and they praise her by “sharing in the Wedding Feast.” She is the “inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father’s glory... His manifestation in radiant splendor” yet few recognize her, sometimes none know her.” As the mercy of God that frees humans from their sins, her work in us is that of “new being in grace.” In the end, she is in us, “the yielding and tender counterpart of the power, justice and creative dynamism of the Father” (Ibid.).

IV. Sunset. The Hour of Compline. Salve Regina.

Merton reflects on Mary, a long-time object of his love and devotion. He now judges Mary to be the one creature who manifests totally in her person and life what is hidden in Sophia. It is Mary who crowns the Second Person, the Logos, with “His Human Nature.” Through her, God dwells among us. She displays Sophia’s yieldingness by a consent through which God enters “the city of rapacious man.” The crown she offers is not a symbol of glory, but of “weakness, nothingness, poverty.” The “infinitely Rich and Powerful One” is set forth by her “as poor and helpless” on His mission of mercy.

The cycle of the day reaches its completion. Evening sets in and the divine wanderer rests:

The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep. Night embraces the silent half of the earth. A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep. (T.M.R. 511)

In a succinct and lovely description of the sequence of the Liturgy of eventide, Merton includes shadows, stars and sleepy birds. In the foreground of nature – and Sophia’s – rest, a “vagrant” finds his way (note that while lost he finds his way) and this way involves a “new” road (something about Merton’s own search perhaps?). “Dusty feet” indicate not only that he has been walking for some time barefooted but that he has no home or Inn wherein his feet could be washed. Adjectives: destitute, vagrant, homeless, lost, frail, expendable are meant to elicit both pity and wonder. There is something *kenotic* about this whole passage that reveals on one level a person or state of being that does not fit into or conform to conventional social norms and, on another, the presence of a “homeless God” who identifies with and operates in accord with

these attributes. There is a freedom that allows the divine presence to be everywhere. The image of “exile” is richly biblical and not wholly negative either. To be “expendable” in the judgment of the world only brings judgment on the blindness of human institutions whose value system centers on what or who is useful. In the end, the stars are “sweet” and there is that about sleep that symbolizes a trust in the night, perhaps in Sophia who “embraces the silent half of the earth.” A man awoke from the trusting embrace of night at Lauds and now at Compline trustingly returns.

While we have merely touched upon this very significant prose poem, one can glimpse in it some of the riches Merton was uncovering in and through the figure of Sophia. Wisdom will play and dance in Merton’s thought, life and writings throughout the 1960s, sometimes visible, at other times, true to her nature, hidden but recognizable. Wisdom dances with Buddhist *Prajna*, she weeps with the children of Birmingham, she displays her wondrous form in the dawn’s flaming forest and captures Merton’s heart in unexpected ways and places and persons. And Merton finds her mysteriously present, among other places, in the writings of Catholic and Orthodox theologians and essayists, Christian and non-Christian mystics, ancient and modern philosophers, poets, painters, and nature-writers.

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CHAPTER TEN

ECO-WISDOM IN MERTON'S *CHUANG TZU*

If one word captures Merton's estimate of the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, it is "wisdom." Writing to the Chinese American scholar John C. Wu in April of 1961, Merton confesses that he has become "more and more struck by the profundity of his thought." The monk considers him "one of the *great* wise men." His wisdom "has a marvelous wholeness" which is simple but also "utterly profound" (H.G.L. 613). It is this "marvelous wholeness," that links this Taoist philosopher to Merton's own thought and to ecological philosophy. Furthermore, Merton believed that God had "manifested His wisdom so simply and so strikingly in the early Chinese sages." Christians must have the humility "to *learn* and learn much, perhaps to acquire a whole new orientation of thought . . . from the ancient wisdoms which were fulfilled in Christ." Encountering and learning from these wisdoms can lead Christians to strive earnestly for "spiritual wisdom" and a "higher and deeper fulfillment" demanded by Christ (Ibid.).

Merton certainly found a deep resonance between his beloved *Sophia* and *Tao*. In his now famous letter to artist Victor Hammer, Merton notes that *Sophia* as the Wisdom of God "is also *Tao*, the nameless pivot of all being and nature, the center and meaning of all." Like *Tao*, *Sophia* is the "feminine principle in the universe . . . the inexhaustible source of creative realization of the Father's glory in the world and is in fact the manifestation of that glory." Personified she is a "feminine child" who plays in the world (W.T.F. 4).

Chuang Tzu himself displays the cosmic humility and playfulness of one who is aware of his place within the great mystery of the Way (Chinese landscape paintings capture something of this spirit). His wisdom "manifests itself everywhere by a Franciscan simplicity and connaturality with all living creatures." In fact, "[h]alf of the 'characters' who are brought before us to speak the mind of Chuang Tzu are animals—birds, fishes, frogs, and so on" (W.C.T. 27). This signifies, for Merton, Chuang Tzu's nostalgia for "the primordial climate of paradise" (Ibid.). Paradise, under the gentle guiding presence of *Tao*, is characterized by a state of peace and harmony that is at once individual, social, and ecological.

This paradise “is still ours, but we do not know it,” says Merton, “since the effect of life in society is to complicate and confuse our existence, making us forget who we really are by causing us to be obsessed with what we are not” (W.C.T. 27). Both Merton and Chuang Tzu were very critical of those social forces that work against the full flourishing of and harmony between humans and the natural world. However, they both felt that we are capable, when freed from alienating social conventions, of acting “in perfect harmony with the whole” (Ibid.). The fundamental and first task, therefore, towards regaining a spiritual sanity is to shake off the pathologies that distort our view of reality. Philip Ivanhoe notes that Chuang Tzu’s “mind-bending, unsettling, exhilarating, and always amusing stories are designed as cognitive therapy, a means of freeing the mind and self” (S.A.103).

This chapter takes seriously Merton’s invitation to learn from Chuang Tzu’s wisdom, and approaches it as an ecological wisdom, an eco-sophy. In 1973, Arne Naess, the Norwegian ecophilosopher and father of the “deep ecology” movement, coined the term *Ecosophy* to describe “a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium . . . philosophy as a kind of *sofia* [wisdom]” (W.E. 99). We use the term Ecosophy to refer to both the Wisdom (*sophia*) of the Earth Home (*oikos*) and the human wisdom that seeks to know and live harmoniously with Earth Wisdom. This provides a bridge to Christian theology’s *Sophia* and *Logos* and Taoist philosophy’s *Tao* and *T’ien* (Nature, Heaven). Wisdom is manifest in and inseparable from the Earth’s ecological functioning. In this context, one might say that the vocation of humankind as a self-conscious and technologically enhanced part of the whole is to blend contemplative wisdom and action, *theoria* and *praxis*, into a way (*tao/dao*) that is attuned to and accords with the Great Harmony that is also the Great Transformation.

The following ecosophical reflections on Merton’s “readings” of the *Chuang Tzu* share Merton’s conviction that the message and wisdom of Chuang Tzu is as relevant today as it was 2,300 years ago—in some ways, even more relevant (W.F. 616). It is certainly relevant to those who believe that the root (*radix*) of our current situation goes much deeper than technological or economic “fixes” alone can reach. The ecological crisis forces us to ask once again radical (*radix*)

questions: who are we and what is our place as a species, what should our relationship be with other members of the earth community, the earth, and the cosmos; where lies the source of the creativity, energy, and wisdom needed to turn ourselves around; what are the obstacles that stand in the way of such a liberating and transforming experience? As we move back and forth between the sage's musings and our own questions we will hear a third voice in the background. It is a tribute to his reading of Chuang Tzu from the depths of his own spirituality that it is hard at times to know where Chuang Tzu's thought stops and Thomas Merton's begins!

GREAT & SMALL

Merton captures something of Chuang Tzu's therapeutic approach in the selection he calls, "Great and Small." [xvii.4-5-8]. These selections from Ch.17 (87-90) pick up on a lecture in-progress by the Ocean God (God of the Northern Sea) to the River God (Yellow River) at the beginning of the chapter [xvii.1.] ("Autumn Floods" (84). The River God was full of arrogance. His self-importance was as swollen as his river until he reached its mouth and looked out upon the Northern Sea. Awestruck, he admits to feeling like a narrow Confucianist who suddenly sees the true Way (*Tao*). The Ocean God agrees, noting that trying to tell a philosopher who is bound by his doctrine about the Way of Life is like telling a frog stuck at the bottom of a well about the sea or describing ice to insects of the summer ("dragonflies") (W.C.T.84). (Subsequent quotations from Merton's work will be indicated simply by the page number(s) in parenthesis from his text.)

Wisdom, then, begins with an expansion of one's mental horizons, a realization of the limited nature of one's knowledge and a humble acceptance of one's place in the universe—as an individual or species. Puncturing the anthropocentric balloon, the Ocean God states that humans are only one species. Among them, civilized people are only a small group and, among them, those who have money or high position are few and, among them, a person riding in his or her vehicle is only one. Wouldn't that person be nothing more than the tip of hair on the downy flank of a horse? So, the Ocean Lord asks, "why all the fuss about great men and high offices?" (84-5). The Overlord continues his speech in "Great and Small" [xvii.4-5-8.]:

When we look at things in the light of Tao,

Nothing is best, nothing is worst.
Each thing, seen in its own light,
Stands out in its own way.
It can seem “better”
Than what is compared with it
On its own terms.
But seen in the light of the whole,
No one thing stands out as “better.” (87)

In the complex world of nature or “the ten thousand things,” all beings are bound to all other beings in an incredibly complex web of relationships, interconnected on various levels and in a variety of contexts. A predator is not better than its prey or microbes worse than eagles. Diversity is essential but all are equal having *Tao* as their source and unity.

If, however, you *measure* differences in order to draw comparisons, problems arise. If you measure size and label one thing “great” because it is bigger or more important than something else, then “there is nothing that is not ‘great,’” claims Chuang Tzu. If you label “small” what is smaller than something else, then “there is nothing that is not ‘small.’” Thus, since beings in the visible universe vary so dramatically in size, what is “small” in one comparison (bush to an oak) is large in another (bush to a blade of grass). Furthermore, whether something is deemed “small” or “great” depends on who or what is doing the judging. An elephant might judge a hyena “small,” whereas a termite might consider it “large.” “So the whole cosmos is a grain of rice,/And the tip of a hair/Is as big as a mountain —/Such is the relative view” (87).

Instead of comparing beings or ranking them according to some arbitrary standard, Chuang Tzu suggests that humans ought to see each “in its own light” and appreciate its uniqueness. As part of the whole, each being has its individual talents, uses, gifts, and capacities. Each niche and positive role comes, of course, with limitations.

You can break down walls with battering rams,
But you cannot stop holes with them.
All things have different uses.
Fine horses can travel a hundred miles a day,
But they cannot catch mice
Like terriers or weasels:

All creatures have gifts of their own.
The white horned owl can catch fleas at midnight
And distinguish the tip of a hair,
But in bright day it stares, helpless,
And cannot even see a mountain.
All things have varying capacities. (87-88)

On the other hand, the anthropocentric approach selects one or two characteristics allegedly unique to or abundant in the human species, declares them superior to all other qualities, uses them to rank other creatures and thereby justifies their oppression. Thus, the unique gifts and capacities that each species or being possesses are either ignored or trivialized. This is not science but a justification for a bias akin to racism or sexism. Humans select language or reason and then declare themselves superior to chimpanzees who are superior to dogs who are superior to birds, and so on. But, of course, any species can win at that game—but they don't play it (which might be a mark of *their* superior wisdom). Chuang Tzu might want to point out that if bats were constructing a hierarchy of abilities by which to rank species, we would end up near the bottom. We cannot fly at night, have no inbuilt radar and cannot catch our food on the wing.

The last section of "Great and Small" could well be addressing the question: "What would happen to this complex natural world filled with beings of various abilities if they adopted human attitudes?" Typical of Chuang Tzu, he answers our hypothetical question by creating a series of short exchanges among some colorful creatures. We meet a "one-legged dragon" who is "jealous of the centipede." The dragon exhibits a humanlike desire to compare abilities when he asks the centipede: "I manage my one leg with difficulty:/ How can you manage a hundred?" The dragon implies that the ability to "manage" something is worthwhile and a legitimate power, reflecting his own experience. However, "The centipede replied:/ 'I do not manage them/They land all over the place/Like drops of spit'" (89-90).

At this point one would expect Chuang Tzu to praise such notions as *tzu jan* (spontaneity) or *wu wei* (effortless action, non-action). But, of course, these are creatures plagued with human traits. And so, instead, he has the centipede become jealous of a snake who effortlessly glides along without even one leg, who is himself jealous, etc.

Part of the humor of this story centers on creatures exhibiting jealousy and other traits of an ego, such as the need to favorably compare self with other as a way to alleviate a basic insecurity rooted in the self's dependence on the other for its identity. Animals and plants, on the other hand, are naturally, "spontaneously" (*tzu jan*) who they are. They accord with *Tao* and engage in effortless action (*wu wei*).

SYMPHONY FOR A SEABIRD

An anthropocentric view that sees and values all in the "light of the human," so to speak, neither respects the other as Other, nor values it as an equal member of the earth community. One of the problems with this commonly accepted "truth" ("everyone knows humans are superior") is that it easily translates into action. And these actions can cause pain and death. The brief tale, "Symphony for a Seabird," [xviii.5.] illustrates what can happen when humans—even for the best of intentions—use themselves as the standard by which to judge others and ignore the good (*telos*) of another creature.

Once upon a time, a sea bird was blown ashore and landed in a sacred precinct.
The Prince ordered a solemn reception.
Offered the sea bird wine in the sacred precinct,
Called for musicians
To play the compositions of Shun,
Slaughtered cattle to nourish it:
Dazed with symphonies, the unhappy sea bird
Died of despair. (103)

What is the moral? "Water is for fish/And air for men./Natures differ, and needs with them" (104). And so, out of respect for this principle, "the wise men of old/Did not lay down/One measure for all" (104).

Each creature, including the individual human, has its own "capacity" (*te*) by means of which the Way (*Tao*) stimulates individual growth and guides its harmony with others. The imposition of an external, arbitrary standard or "measure" easily distorts or terminates growth, bringing unnecessary suffering and even death, as in this case. Not coincidentally, given Taoism's critique of Confucianism, the sea bird in the story lands in a "sacred" precinct and becomes a

victim of ritual courtesy (*li*).

Li in its more explicitly religious form is evident in the selection from chapter 17 Merton calls, “The Sacrificial Swine.” In this tale, pigs who are destined for ritual sacrifice are told by the Grand Augur (Priest and Government Official) that they should feel privileged because their special status and destiny entitles them to the best of food, drink, and living conditions. They have been blessed with a far nobler existence than other swine. However, in an unguarded moment, the Grand Augur looks at this situation through the eyes of the swine. “Of course, I suppose you would prefer to be fed with ordinary coarse feed and be left alone in your pen” (108). He wonders if they would prefer fewer honors and longer lives.

Quickly, however, he dismisses such a radical thought, perhaps frightened by this heady escape from his own epistemological confines. And so he reiterates that the swine have been chosen for a higher, nobler type of existence. But the philosophical “damage” remains. The Augur recognizes something of his own situation in that of the swine. Indeed, while he too is honored with title and position, fed well at state expense, it is likely that his own career, if not his very life, will also be shortened, given the volatile nature of politics. This realization only reinforces in his mind the correctness of his decision not to let the swine off the same hook.

So he decided against the pigs’ point of view, and adopted his own point of view, both for himself and for the pigs also.

How fortunate those swine, whose existence was thus ennobled by one who was at once an officer of the state and a minister of religion. (108)

Interestingly, once having taken the pig’s perspective, he cannot escape the fact that they both share a common destiny. What is the significance of his quick recourse to the language of honor and sacrifice? Does he glimpse, perhaps, a common logic and rhetoric behind the “sacrifice” of humans for the good of the State and the sacrifice of animals for the good of humans? Every year tens of billions of “lower” animals are sacrificed to please the palate and allegedly advance scientific knowledge meant to increase the health and welfare of “higher,” more “noble” animals. Chuang Tzu might point out that in the light of our behavior towards one another (war, genocide, torture), human claims to superiority based on grounds of rationality and

morality sound more like the self-justifying rhetoric of the Augur than the conclusion of men and women of wisdom (*sophia*).

Perhaps if we start with the understanding that we are all members of one Earth Home (*oikos*), then the ritual actions (*li*) by which we celebrate and enact our kinship relations would be less exploitive, coercive, and destructive. Given the fate of the seabird and the swine, Chuang Tzu might suggest that we use our mind-heart (*hsin*) to see the world through the eyes of other creatures and bracket our discourse on human exceptionalism. Then maybe, as with the Augur, when we return to our own viewpoint, we will ask afresh why we call farms “factories” and humans “resources”? Could looking at ourselves through the eyes of other creatures shed light on the social and personal causes behind our destructive treatment of the natural world?

WHEN LIFE WAS FULL

For Chuang Tzu, we are cosmic beings first, children of *Tao*, siblings of the ten thousand things, equipped with the potential to both flourish as ourselves and find our place in the midst of an incredible universe. The energies (*ch'i*) that flow through and link together all beings are available to us for internal renewal and external movement and action in the world. Human communities that take shape under the guidance of *Tao* benefit from the spontaneous “virtues” of self-realized members while at the same time nurture, guide and support this unfolding in new members. They help infants and children to actualize their capacities and shape and discover their own identities, both as individuals and as members of a human and earth community. For Chuang Tzu, civilization was moving in the opposite direction. It was interfering with *te* and its natural unfolding while restructuring and redirecting the energies of mind and body to serve the external demands of political hierarchies and the needs of a more complex division of labor. This theme is also present in the selection from chapter xii, “When Life Was Full There Was No History” [xii. 13.] and in Chapters 18, 38, 51 of the *Tao te Ching*.

The fate of an old tree provides Chuang Tzu with a metaphor for the fate of humans at the hands of social carpenters-or managers of human “resources.” This is captured in a section [xii.15.] that is edited and creatively re-presented by Merton as “The Five Enemies”

With wood from a hundred-year-old tree
They made sacrificial vessels,
Covered with green and yellow designs.
The wood that was cut away
Lies unused in the ditch.
If we compare the sacrificial vessels with the wood in the ditch
We find them to differ in appearance:
One is more beautiful than the other
Yet they are equal in this: both have lost their original nature. (78)

The irony of this is not lost on Merton, as his wording indicates. Here again we have the natural destroyed by representatives of the cultural. Ironically, those most highly trained in the virtue of reverence prove insensitive to and irreverent towards the sacredness of the old tree that stands in front of them. The Taoists criticized a strictly humanistic concept of “virtue” contrasting it with a spontaneous (*tzu jan*) virtue (*te*) rooted in a union with the cosmic *Tao* and hence sensitive to the “ten thousand things.”

Not only will the vessels be set aside from natural objects and labeled “holy,” they will also be judged “beautiful,” bearing “green and yellow designs” on their finely carved contours. According to cultural conventions (*wen*), there is a great difference between the painted, finished vessels that have human labor added to them and the chips and chunks in the ditch. But Chuang Tzu will have none of this. Drawing attention to the different appearances of pieces of wood ignores this tragic similarity: both vessels and chips have lost their inner vital impulse and capacity for growth. This does not register in a world where instrumental value reigns—regarding both natural and human beings. This is made clear when Chuang Tzu shifts to the carving of humans by the socialization process. The latter, from ecosophical and social ecological perspectives, also conditions people for carving up trees and the earth itself.

So if you compare the robber and the respectable citizen
You find that one is, indeed, more respectable than the other:
Yet they agree in this: they have both lost
The original simplicity of man. (78)

Society praises the “respectable citizen” (sacred vessel) and condemns “the robber” (profane waste). But, Chuang Tzu wants to point out, the same destructive process that created the one, created the other. True, society uses different value-laden labels to carve up and thus

differentiate one from the other. The citizen has value as part of a smooth running social machine (See also “Active Life”). He or she was successfully ornamented and finished off while the robber “mysteriously” ended up as socially deviant. The unfolding from within of their original simplicity and the subsequent wholeness had been rendered impossible along with possible social realizations in continuity with their integrity (*te*).

How do we lose touch with that original simplicity, the uncarved block (*p'u*)? Society, according to Chuang Tzu, creates a new set of desires for both tangible and intangible goods external to the person and promises fulfillment. There is no emphasis upon the exploration and development of unique inner capacities but upon the chase after economically produced externals. “Desires unsettle the heart” and are increased “[u]ntil the original nature runs amok” (79). And, running amok, running becomes an end in itself. We even lose touch with our own bodies and a healthy relationship with our own senses.

If that was a problem in ancient China, what would Chuang Tzu say about a modern consumer society where the senses are bombarded with advertising and images of the “good life” encourage people to increase their quantitative resources, personal and financial, in the hopes of an increase in happiness. Addicted to the “rush” that social and economic rewards provide, we must get our fix, either legally or illegally. Yet, as Chuang Tzu concludes, “If this is life, then pigeons in a cage/Have found happiness!” (79). Note again that the philosopher chooses the condition of an animal in an unnatural state imposed by humans as an analogy for what happens to the natural or heavenly capacities of humans at the hands of social machinery. Since true freedom is lost, the legal division of people into “free” and “imprisoned” masks the spiritual non-freedom of most people.

In short, before we can regain contact with the *Tao* and its guiding force, we must abandon the misguided and harmful distinctions society has inculcated in us from birth . . . we must work to eliminate the various artificial categories and unnatural orientations that warp our perceptions and judgments and lead us to pursue fruitless and destructive ends. We must *undo* our socialization . . . (S.A. 99)

Ecologically, we come full circle. The human products of social carving return to the

natural world to carve up more trees and destroy other earth beings. Those who have had their own unique potentials deadened and have become dependent on the new identity given by society, accept a growing economy and rising “lifestyle” as ultimate values when moral questions are raised concerning their effects on the natural world. The “essentials of their nature and destiny” have become identified with the well-being of the very system that prevented them from accessing their essential nature.

The fate of the old tree represents the fate of the earth: consumer products on the one hand, waste on the other--and in both cases, a loss of self-renewing energies. The fate of nature may depend upon whether we consumers redefine “the good life” to include both the life and the good (*te*) of all beings, whether we can rediscover and recover our natural capacities, return to the source of the earth’s and our own original goodness and thereby discover contentment. For Chuang Tzu, this means first freeing ourselves from our mental and emotional cages so we can see clearly (*ming*) and live “naturally” (*tzu-jan*) with full integrity (*te*). The suppression of our heavenly/natural capacities by social forces and economic interests leads to our insensitive cooperation in their domination of nature. The loss of a “paradise” state in which humans are nurtured and renewed as part of the “marvelous wholeness” of *Tao/Sophia* and see things “in the light of the whole” (87) leads to the self-defeating attempt to build the City of Man on anthropocentric illusions and the non-sustainable cannibalizing of the sources of life.

THE USEFULNESS OF THE USELESS

Since one of the problems that both trees and people share is being “useful,” a possible tactic for survival is becoming “useless.” Significantly, the very first selection in Merton’s book “The Useless Tree” is from the first chapter [i. 7.] of *The Chuang Tzu*. Hui Tzu, Chuang Tzu’s friend and debating partner, complains about a large tree that he says is useless. Its trunk is “distorted” and “full of knots” and its branches are extremely “crooked.” As a result, “No carpenter will even look at it.” Hui Tzu sarcastically remarks to Chuang Tzu, “[s]uch is your teaching--/Big and Useless” (35). Chuang Tzu then notes that a wildcat and a weasel have very “useful” skills for stalking prey but the same display of skills lands them easily into a trap or net. The yak, as big as

it is, cannot catch a mouse. Therefore, usefulness can be limiting and dangerous. In the selection “Monkey Mountain” [xxiv.8.], it is a monkey’s flaunting of his useful skills that invites attention and a barrage of arrows. On the other hand, Yen Pu’i “learned to hide every ‘distinction.’” He made himself useless so that society didn’t know “what to make of him.” Unable to make anything of him (like the useless tree), “they held him in awe” (143).

While, therefore, from the carpenter’s point of view, a knotted and crooked tree is useless, from the tree’s perspective, uselessness is useful. One need only recall the “useful” old tree that ended up as wood chips and sacred vessels. Chuang Tzu implies that being cursed as “useless” might be a singular blessing. Uselessness can provide a “freedom from” those who want to use and twist us to serve their purposes and a “freedom for” nurturing and developing one’s capacities (*te*) so as to have a “freedom to” mirror and move with the energies and patterns of the *Tao*. In being crooked, twisted, and full of knots, the tree is being itself and protecting its original simplicity. This allows it to live out its full life: “No axe or bill will ever cut it down” [i.7.] (36).

This intrinsic value and cosmic integrity (*te*) transcend such categories as useful and useless, attractive or unattractive. Hui Tzu’s obsession with usefulness displays both his narrow utilitarian mentality and his distinct lack of imagination. Chuang Tzu tells him to loosen up his logical categories, to “chill,” as we might say. A more contemplative mode will allow him to see alternatives to making planks for coffins or a profit from sacrificial vessels.

So for your big tree. No use?
Then plant it in the wasteland
In emptiness.
Walk idly around,
Rest under its shadow;
No axe or bill prepares its end.
No one will ever cut it down.
Useless? You should worry? (36)

This selection chosen by Merton comes at the end of a section that begins with Hui Tzu complaining that the seeds he had been given produced a gourd “of huge capacity.” However, it proved useless for making ladles when cut up or holding liquid when hollowed out. So he smashed it to pieces. Chuang Tzu scolds Hui Tzu, suggesting that the problem was not the bigness

of the gourd but the smallness of a mind that was locked into unimaginative ways of seeing things. “Why didn’t you think of tying it on your waist as a big buoy so that you could go floating on the lakes and rivers instead of worrying that it couldn’t hold anything because of its shallow curvature? This shows, sir, that you still have brambles for brains!” (W.W. 8).

“Walking idly around” and “floating on the lakes and rivers” symbolize useless activities and a contemplative state of “wandering” freed from conventional thinking. It is a return to a “paradise” state, a “child mind” that too often gets ignored and “unused” in a society obsessed with justifying everything in terms of some goal determined by an organization. Just as the tree was spared (and the gourd could have been) when humans found imaginative, spiritually enriching alternatives, so the earth needs minds and spirits able to wander freely among possibilities not entertained by specialized minds trained in conventional instrumental ways of thinking.

The concept of uselessness sheds light on our ab-use of nature in another way. In Merton’s selection “The Useless,” [xxvi. 7.] (153), Hui Tzu is again criticizing Chuang Tzu’s teachings as being “centered on what has no use.” Chuang Tzu replies that if you do not appreciate “what has no use” then you cannot “talk about what can be used” (153). He points out that, of the whole broad expanse of the earth, a person uses only what is immediately underfoot. What would happen, Chuang Tzu asks, if you were to cut away all of the earth surrounding his feet leaving “nowhere solid except right under each foot:/ How long will he be able to use what he is using?” Hui Tzu acknowledges that it would lose its usefulness relatively soon. Chuang Tzu drives home his point: “This shows/The absolute necessity/Of what has ‘no use’” (153). Likewise, the madman of Chu, after confusing Confucius, declares: “Everyman knows how useful it is to be useful. /No one seems to know/How useful it is to be useless” [iv. 9.] (59).

There is ecological wisdom that seems “crazy” in this madness. Modernity is hopelessly utilitarian, dangerously focused on exploiting “the useful” in nature (and humans), ignoring or cutting away the useless. Having lost the wisdom of seeing things “in the light of the whole,” we are blind to the fact that each thing we label “useful” is attached to and supported by millions

(myriads) of diverse others that we label “useless.” Judged useless, we decide they need not be preserved. Thus the ecological wisdom of Thoreau: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” The process of evolution as well as the creative, self-renewing energies of the biosphere are in danger of being shut down due to our exploitation of the “useful.” Indeed, we know the usefulness of the useful but we have not yet learned the usefulness of the useless.

A modern variant on the “realism” of Hui Tzu holds that an ever-expanding, self-enclosed human world, powered by an ever-increasing extraction of “resources,” fed by animals and monoculture crops raised on the destruction of grasslands and forests, about to drown in its own byproducts and waste--is sustainable. Chuang Tzu, however, might note that today’s hypothetical “feet,” standing on “useful” ground, are themselves expanding even as increased technological power cuts away the “useless” earth around them at an alarming rate!

THE WAY OF COOK DING

For Chuang Tzu, freeing ourselves from culturally conditioned self- and earth-destructive mindsets and behaviors does not leave us in a nihilistic, meaningless, and absurd world. There is the Cosmic Way (*Tao*) and there are human ways (*taos*), and when they fit together, life is nourished, creative possibilities unleashed, and the Great Harmony restored. Chuang Tzu was confident that once we open our minds and free our spirits we can find ways of living and acting that are personally enriching and ecologically wise and rediscover our embodied harmony with the energies and patterns of the Way.

Yet modern technology presents an immense challenge to this realization at the societal level. Ecophilosopher Hwa Yol Jung has pointed out that “Technology, which is the vehicle of material progress . . . offends and violates the Sinitic conception of nature as *ziran*” [*tzu jan*: spontaneous, self-so]. Jung notes that for Chuang Tzu “when man works like a machine his heart grows like a machine and he will lose his simplicity as well as his communion with ‘ten thousand things.’” Jung adds that modern technology “is inherently anthropocentric” (W.E.). This implies that a change in one requires a change in the other. This shift away from a violent anthropocentric technology and towards one that serves and helps integrate ecological and human well-being,

while a great challenge, may provide a way (*tao*) that is also spiritually renewing.

Perhaps cook/butcher Ting in “Cutting Up an Ox,” offers us some insight. His Prince is awestruck at the graceful rhythm and timing of the butcher’s movements:

Out went a hand,
Down went a shoulder,
He planted a foot,
He pressed with a knee,
The ox fell apart
With a whisper,
The bright cleaver murmured
Like a gentle wind.
Rhythm! Timing!
Like a sacred dance,
Like “The Mulberry Grove,”
Like ancient harmonies! [iii. 2.] (45)

Thinking to praise his cook, the Prince expresses admiration for his “method.” Laying his cleaver aside, the cook replies: “What I follow is Tao/Beyond all methods!” (45).

A method or technique is a formulaic, standardized way of doing things that can be mastered by most people through practice and repetition. Able to be applied in a variety of situations, it shares certain characteristics with a machine. The cook rejects both the mentality and methodology. This does not mean that the cook had not mastered a set of skills. Perhaps an analogy from the arts would be helpful. If a pianist lacks technique, she will not be able to play Mozart, no matter how sensitive she is to the composer’s music. On the other hand, good finger dexterity and correct execution do not guarantee great music. If Mozart is to play through a pianist, as the *Tao* played through the butcher, both excellent technique and spiritual sensitivity are needed. The former, however, must move with and be responsive to the latter, as the description of Ting’s craft as dance and music indicates. Following the *Tao* changes everything, from how one perceives the ox to how one experiences the swishing of the blade. It is the art of harmony and harmonizing, *theoria* as well as *praxis*: a wisdom born of and nurtured by lived experience, by a relationship with Life. A *tao* that follows the *Tao* engages body, mind, spirit in a flowing circulation of energy (*ch’i*). But not at the beginning.

The cook chronicles his own transformation in terms of his changing perception of the

ox. When he began, he saw the whole ox as “one mass” in front of him; three years later the single mass had given way to a myriad of “distinctions”; now, it is not simply what he sees that has changed but the nature of “seeing” itself. Seeing is now an act of apprehending or experiencing with his “whole being.” In this mode,

My senses are idle. The spirit
Free to work without plan
Follows its own instinct
Guided by natural line,
By the secret opening, the hidden space,
My cleaver finds its own way.
I cut through no joint, chop no bone. (46)

While there are differences in translations and interpretations of this passage among scholars, there is a general consensus that in ancient Chinese thought there is no dualism between spirit and body or spirit and mind. In fact, the Chinese notion of “body” differs from the Greek and subsequent Western concept. Francois Jilian has shown that for Chuang Tzu, and most Chinese of his time, body-mind-spirit indicates an increasingly subtle modulation of a single actualization (*hsing*) of a cosmic energetic (*ch'i*) process or *Tao*. When aligned and coordinated in a concentrated fashion, it opens up a mode of spontaneous, effortless action (*wu wei*). Spirit is not a separate reality but an exquisitely subtle mode of perception and awareness that can direct the energies (*ch'i*) throughout the body in accord with a “holistic contact” with the patterns of Nature—in an ox, for example. So to follow *Tao* is to follow subtle, spiritualized sensitivities that are in accord with heavenly patterns (*t'ien li*). In this situation it means to effortlessly, flawlessly, follow the lines of the ox, finding the openings and spaces. The cook goes on to explain that the level of a butcher’s art can be inferred from the keenness of his blade. A good cook changes cleavers once a year (“he cuts”); a poor cook needs a new cleaver every month (“he hacks”). But Ting’s cleaver has cut up thousands of oxen over a nineteen year period and “Its edge is as keen / As if newly sharpened” (46).

But why should this matter to us? What light might it shed on our technological problem? Cook Ting does not think of the cleaver as a tool separate from himself or as an efficient instrument with which to accomplish the goal of preparing meat for dinner. Technology changes

when placed within this context of an aesthetic-spiritual performance. It is the polar opposite of modern “autonomous” technology that is an end in itself and that reshapes humans in its image and wields its own powerful impact. The blade is an extension of the moving energy (*ch'i*) of the cook and not alien to the integrated movement of the whole person. The keenness of the edge reflects the cook's *tao* and not merely metallurgical strength. Thus, the blade responds to the cook's sensitivity and finds the pattern of the ox, uniting the cook's art with the ox's body. Hackers and cutters not only have no *tao*, they leave waste and a bloody, mutilated body behind. “Small” is not only a more appropriate technology, its use can be “Beautiful.” The butcher moves like a dancer, flowing to hidden music. As *wu wei*, the performance proceeds effortlessly with a minimum of wasted energy and without a mutilated carcass. The perfectly channeled energy of the cook's body extends through the blade and enters into the body of the ox.

Likewise, humankind's technological activity will become more integrated with earth's patterns as our perception of the earth becomes more subtle and nuanced. The body of the earth, like the body of the ox, is a network of geological, biological and atmospheric patterns. As Francois Jullien notes, “the ox's body, which had initially been at the stage of a perceived object or a banal presence, enters into a partnership with the butcher's internal perception, with which it evolves in concert” (V.N. 90). The ox has been “relieved of its opacity” and “has been opened up for him.” Similarly, humankind can change its perception of and relationship to the earth. Like Cook Ting, we will need an expansion and refinement of human faculties to make them “sharper and more alert,” thus permitting a greater degree of flexibility and a more finely tuned way (*tao*) to deal with a diverse, complex and dynamic planet (Ibid).

Perhaps a new contemplative ecology is needed, one aware of the earth's marvelous wholeness, yet attuned to its diverse nuances: a human wisdom joined with Earth wisdom. This wisdom will incorporate science while opening it up to its wider cosmic meaning and ecological relevance, and freeing it from its servitude to ideologies of domination and technologies of conquest. Merton reveals this more Taoist and Sophianic understanding when he observes that the world,

. . . though “external” and “objective,” is not something totally independent from us, which dominates us inexorably from without through the medium of certain fixed laws which science alone can discover and use. It is an extension of our lives, and if we attend to it respectfully, while attending also to our own freedom and our own integrity, we can learn to obey its ways and coordinate our lives with its mysterious movements. The way to find the real “world” is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our own inner ground. (C.W.A. 170)

Note that Merton suggests that we follow not the “laws” but the “ways” (*taos*) of nature and that we “coordinate our lives with its mysterious movements.” We are being invited to a dance. Centered and free, flowing and responsive, we “discover [that] our own inner ground” opens out to a common ground. Like a tango, the human dance with nature will require us to “attend to it respectfully,” respond to it sensitively, and with our leaner, more agile body, move with it grace-fully. Cook Ting dances with a live ox!

NOTE

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONTEMPLATION & COSMOS: MAXIMUS TO TEILHARD

I. MAXIMUS

Anyone familiar with the life of Thomas Merton knows that the period from 1958-1961 was for him one of rapid spiritual growth, intellectual expansion, and a renewed engagement with the world. Among the many factors that contributed to this change, Merton's deep encounter with the Byzantine and Russian Orthodox traditions must be considered prominent. An important bridge to these traditions was Maximus the Confessor (d. 662).

The Incarnation was central to Maximus' understanding of creation since the very nature of the universe in its relationship to the Word/Logos prepares it for and anticipates the union of divine and human natures (and through Jesus all humans) in Christ's person. For Maximus and the Orthodox in general there never was a bare "natural" order separate from or opposed to the "supernatural" (and certainly not a "fallen" world). It is the process of *theosis* or deification that affects the history or movement both of creation and humanity into a more intense union with God (differentiation in union). Merton found in Maximus a way to affirm the hidden universal presence of the Logos both in creation and humankind. And, as we shall see, he found the Maximian contribution to the concept and practice of natural contemplation (*theoria physike*) a key to connecting the individual and communal, human and natural, both to and permeated by the divine. It was Sophia/Wisdom who during this period became a central symbol for him of the inner life of this interconnected totality.

Since 1957 Merton had been fascinated with modern Russian theologians such as Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Paul Evdokimov. All three in their own way placed the figure of the Sophia at the center of their theology identifying Her either with one of the persons of the Trinity, usually Christ/Logos, or with the inner nature (*ousia*) of God. But, as we have seen, she was more than a theological concept to Merton. She was haunting his dreams, breaking into his waking consciousness and gently nurturing a personal transformation. Sophia/Wisdom would often name the Presence felt by Merton at times and places in the woods around Gethsemani.

Merton had begun work in January, 1961 on a course in Western mysticism to be offered to a group of recently ordained Trappist priests (many sessions would later be held at his future hermitage). In the middle of this course, in a section on Maximus the Confessor and *theoria physike* (natural contemplation) Merton connects Teilhard to the “wisdom” tradition. While the comments on Teilhard are not extensive, their placement is significant. In addition, the style and tone of the notes for this lecture set it apart and suggest that these ideas had a special significance for Merton. As Christopher Pramuk notes,

Indeed, in these passages we are seeing much more than simply an excursus on the teaching of Maximus. Here we discover Merton discovering in Maximus the golden thread for bringing together many converging lines of thought into a single mosaic (or iconic) picture. (S.H. 147)

Maximus had been a contributor both to Merton’s movement towards a more integrative cosmotheandric vision and, through the Russian sophiologists, to his understanding of Sophia. Indeed, when speaking of natural contemplation, Merton states plainly that, “The vision of *theoria physike* is essentially *sophianic*” (I.C.M. 125). And though richly located in the Orthodox tradition, Merton finds it present in many areas, including its coordination with science in Teilhard. Merton himself was a testament to its potential for personal transformation.

Merton’s interpretation of *The Divine Milieu* should be placed within the context of a dynamic period of personal growth in large part shaped by his internalization of a wisdom tradition epitomized in its early phase by Maximus the Confessor and its latest phase by the thought of scientist-mystic Teilhard de Chardin. Our narrative follows Merton’s thought, avoiding a systematic comparison of the theologies of Maximus and Teilhard, yet trusting that the reader will catch glimpses of a similar wisdom and spirit informing both which, not by chance, are shaped and shared by Merton himself. Merton’s mode of comprehension, whether of Chuang Tzu, D.T. Suzuki, Maximus or Teilhard was to go deeply into their thought until he touched their spiritual core, to make it his own, and then to express it in a manner that invites the reader to taste something of those deeper waters.

At the beginning of Section Eight of his series of lectures to young priests, “Contemplation

and the Cosmos,” Merton cautions that the topic of *theoria physike* will be “very important.” He expresses a concern that, among the monks of his day, the lack of a capacity for “natural contemplation” (*theoria physike*) contributes to a “stunting” of their spiritual growth. He contends further that only with the “flowering” of natural contemplation can a person be “prepared for *theologia* without forms, beyond all ideas and symbols” (I.C.M. 121).

What, then, is natural contemplation? Merton claims that it is, among other things, a contemplation (*theoria*) according to nature (*physis*), a knowledge (*gnosis*) of the divine as present “in and through nature, in and through things He has created, in history” (I.C.M. 122). It is a human multiform wisdom (*multiformis sapientia*), a *gnosis* whereby one grasps “the wisdom and glory of God” as Creator and Redeemer. It grasps divine wisdom “in the *logoi* of created things, not their materiality.” In terms of spiritual development, natural contemplation is “not only the crown of the active life and the beginning of the contemplative life, but it also is *necessary to complete the moral purification* effected by the active life” (Ibid.122). The level and depth of the understanding and grasp of nature, then, is related to the condition of the whole person. One must go beyond a purely scientific understanding of nature which “is only intellectual” (Ibid.). This is where Merton sees Teilhard’s relevance.

Theoria physike is the integration of the mystical and passive with the natural and active, of nature with faith and a “manifest synergy” between the divine and human “in its action.” According to Merton, “*Theoria physike* [is thus the] reception of God’s revelation of Himself in creatures, in history, in Scripture” (I.C.M. 122). The *logoi* of created beings are not irrelevant to the life of faith but are “words of God” that can be a source of nourishment, just as are the words of Scripture. Merton quotes Maximus: “We must not believe that sin caused this unique masterpiece which is this visible world in which God manifests himself by *a silent revelation*. (St. Maximus, *Ambigua*)” (Ibid 123). Merton considers Maximus “the great doctor of *theoria physike*.” Uniting Plato and Aristotle, “he has the broadest and the most balanced view of the Christian cosmos of all the Greek Fathers” (Ibid. 124). This cosmos is one in movement from God to God with Christ/Logos as its origin, unifying principle, and fulfillment. Merton quotes Maximus:

The love of Christ hides itself mysteriously in the inner *logoi* of created things . . . totally and with all His plenitude . . . in all that is varied lies hidden He who is One and eternally identical; in all composite things, He who is simple and without parts; in those which have a beginning, He who has no beginning; in all the visible, He who is invisible. (Ibid. 124)

When Merton claims that *theoria physike* is “natural” to us, he means that it is a mode of awareness intended for humans by God from the beginning. It is “proper” to humans as children of God. This implies a fully human, whole person, “restored first of all to this ‘natural’ contemplation of the cosmos . . .” Through this natural contemplation we not only “see the inner meaning of things” but we also “regulate” our lives, our “use of time,” and our use “of created beings according to the mysterious norms hidden in things by the Creator, or rather uttered by the Creator Himself in the bosom of His creation” (Ibid. 122).

A positive awareness of the value of all beings flows from a purified mind and heart. Both the purification and the positive awareness, moreover, are motivated by and filled with love. “This *theoria*,” says Merton, “is inseparable from love . . .” (I.C.M.125). We live in a dynamic, unfinished cosmic-historical process that requires our wise participation. Natural contemplation “is demanded by the cosmos itself and by history” because if we cannot “know creatures by this spiritual gnosis they will be frustrated of their end.” Natural contemplation, therefore, is “a most important part of man’s cooperation in the spiritualization and restoration of the cosmos.” By it, we help “Christ redeem the *logoi* of things and restore them in Himself” (Ibid. 123). Wisdom and love should not be separated in ourselves because they are not separated in creation. Merton returns to the image of Sophia to identify this wisdom “playing” in Creation as reflecting the love and wisdom of God.

The vision of *theoria physike* is essentially *sophianic*. Man by *theoria* is able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in himself. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a *resplendent clarity* within man himself, and this clarity is the presence of Divine Wisdom fully recognized and active in him. Thus man becomes a mirror of the divine glory, and is resplendent with divine truth not only in his *mind* but in his *life*. (I.C.M. 125-6)

Wisdom, therefore, joins us with the rest of creation both in the act of knowing creatures and in the actions of our lives. Through our work we are called upon to exercise

“a spiritualizing influence in the world.” However, this influence will only be spiritualizing if it “is in accord with *the creative wisdom of God* in things and in history” (Ibid. 126). The recognition and apprehension of this creative wisdom at work in nature and history is the task of natural contemplation. “Hence,” says Merton, “we can see the great importance of a sophianic, contemplative orientation of man’s life” (Ibid.).

Such an orientation has implications for a religiosity marked by negativity. “No longer are we reduced to a *purely negative* attitude toward the world around us,” claims Merton, “toward history, toward the judgements of God” (Ibid. 126). The world should no longer be seen “as merely material,” “an obstacle” to our spiritual development, something we must “grudgingly put up with.” No, the world itself “is spiritual through and through,” the monk adds (Ibid.). As we shall see, this was also one of Teilhard’s core insights which gave rise to his own complaint about Christian negativity.

Yet things are not “fully spiritual” and thus God has ordained that they be further spiritualized through “our knowledge and love in our use of them” (Ibid.126). Ideally, we and they will both be transformed in accordance with the creative wisdom and action of God. However, some degree of mental and emotional discipline, even grace, is necessary. This is not because material, created beings are evil but because we are too easily “captivated by the sensible attractions of these things” and hence blind and deaf to their deeper *logoi* which we are called to “see” so that we can “‘transfigure’ material things” (Ibid.).

Using other language, Merton refers to this sensitivity to the inner meaning and direction of nature as being attuned to the “will of God.” “The ‘will of God,’” says Merton, “is no longer a blind force plunging through our lives like a cosmic steamroller and demanding to be accepted willy-nilly” (Ibid. 126). Rather, we are called upon to “*understand* the hidden purposes of the creative wisdom” of God in cosmic and human history so that we can “cooperate with Him.” Cooperation does not mean passive obedience to rules and laws. For those who are spiritually ready, God gives over “a certain creative initiative” of their own, whether in political life, art, spiritual life, or worship. The human being “is then endowed with a *causality* of his own” (Ibid.).

This, of course, propels us into the Teilhardian world where human initiative and labor are necessary to move the evolutionary process to its next level of realization. Co-creation is the will of God but requires a correct understanding of how the creative wisdom of God operates and what is expected of us. Teilhard, with the assistance of modern science, helps us to see how these hidden purposes are revealed in the very structure and direction of creation.

Creatures: Goodness, Value and Moral Use

Merton tells us that, for Maximus, the “vision given by *theoria physike* shows us that all creatures are good and pure” (Ibid. 128). This positive apprehension is “the complement of the active detachment in *apatheia*.” Active detachment does not mean indifference to creatures. Rather, it is an effort to remove the mental and emotional dispositions that value created things primarily in terms of their ability to satisfy our desires and appetites. Then, in line with Scripture, “all created things are seen to be good, made by God and reflecting His goodness.” Such seeing entails “*a positive awareness, by love, of the value of creatures, divinely given to them, placed in them by the Creator to reflect Him in them*” (Ibid.128). This positive understanding and valorization of creatures cannot be separated from the moral status of our actions towards them. As Merton emphasizes, “*The right use of creatures is essential to the proper understanding of them*” (Ibid.129). Natural contemplation is “a loving knowledge that comes along with *use* and *work*” (Ibid.). This means being attuned both to the *logos* of a creature which gives it intelligibility and to its *tropos* (manner of existing, way of acting) that informs our ways of acting, and hence instruct us about our behavior (Ibid.).

Thus, to attain “full maturity and integrity in the spiritual life,” to become a *holokleros* or whole person, we must unite *theoria* with *praxis* (Ibid.). Wisdom garnered through natural contemplation is both “speculative and practical” and therefore amounts to “a double illumination in the order of action and contemplation” (Ibid. 129).

Merton then asks, “How do the “*logoi* of created things find their expression in relation to the mystery of our salvation?” (I.C.M. 130). He reminds us that “all creatures not only ‘groan with us expecting the redemption of the Sons of God’ but enter directly or indirectly with us into the

great mystery of Christ” (Ibid.). Perhaps a hint is given by religious ritual. Therein, certain created material realities, through incorporation into a sacramental action, participate in the mystery of salvation. Thus they represent all creatures who groan for redemption by the children of God. Merton points out that in our age, unfortunately, this groaning and expectation of creatures and created things are too often frustrated because our knowledge and use of them are not sophianic and truly soteriological (I.C.M. 130). So, according to both Merton and Maximus, the great mystery of Christ and of redemption and the hope for eschatological fulfillment do not simply involve humans and their history.

This is where natural contemplation enters again, providing a fascinating link between the order of creation and of salvation, a link rooted in Christ/Sophia. If Christ is gathering the *logoi* and restoring them into Himself, then our cooperation in spiritualizing creation seems to require a special sensitivity to created beings that would allow us to recognize what it is about them or in them that tends towards or is the subject of this movement by Christ. “To see the *logoi* of creatures,” says Merton, “we are going to have to recognize in them this ‘groaning’ and this ‘eschatological expectation’ which depends on us—on our knowledge of them, on our use of them, with a directly sophianic and soteriological reference” (Ibid. 130). What do we have to sense in order to recognize and help realize their *logoi*? In a suggestive passage, Merton claims that we must “always be conscious of their mute *appeal* to us to find and rescue the glory of God that has been hidden in them and veiled by sin” (Ibid.). One must assume that it is human sin that veils this glory of God since Maximus asserts that all creatures are good and pure.

Merton contrasts the integral approach to nature rooted in natural contemplation with the technological approach that is “a special problem of modern time.” “[T]echnology, with its impersonal, pragmatic, quantitative *exploitation and manipulation* of things, is deliberately indifferent to their *logoi*” (Ibid. 130). Technology and those enamored of it, show little interest “in ‘what’ a thing really is” (Ibid.).

Things and people get caught up in “a demonic cult of change, and ‘exchange’—consumption, production, destruction, for their own sakes.” Destruction of the natural world is

central to this process. Technology, then, “leads to demonic pseudo-contemplation, [a] mystique of technics and production” (Ibid.130). In effect, it turns creation away from its divine destiny and, through either perversion or destruction, respects nothing, “saves” nothing (Ibid.).

II. TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Merton then introduces Teilhard as someone who, while sympathetic to modern aspirations, presents a more integral vision in the wisdom tradition that could preserve and save nature while offering an opening for human creative initiative.

The chief effort of Teilhard de Chardin in our time has been a noble striving to recover a view of the scientific world, the cosmos of the physicist, the geologist, the engineer, with interest centered on the logos of creation, and on value, spirit. An effort to convert the scientific view of the cosmos into a wisdom, without sacrificing anything of scientific objectivity or technological utility. (I.C.M. 130-131)

Merton then implies that Teilhard, like Gregory of Nyssa, had a sense for the *theoteles logos*, which is “that in the thing which comes from God and goes to God” (Ibid. 131). Natural contemplation would provide both a sensitivity to and a way of cooperating with this “movement of all things from God and back to God” (Ibid. 131). Science, as Teilhard has shown, can be incorporated into the sophianic mode of natural contemplation. Even technology is useful if subordinated to a recognition of “value, spirit” in creation and human history. Conversely, this positive vision sheds light on those obstacles that stand “*in the way of this movement*” having been placed there “*by philautia [self-love] and sin.*” These obstacles turn created things away from God and make them serve our immediate and short-term interests. We lose that “sense of *community with things in the work of salvation*” implied by *theoria physike* (Ibid. 131). As Merton notes:

The Word, [the] *Logos*, teaches us how the *logoi* are oriented to Him, how they are both *in* Him, and *for* Him. The *logoi* of things are in the *Logos*: they are created in the *Logos*. The *logoi* of things are then the *Logos* in things. (Ibid.131)

The Divine Milieu

In September 1960, Merton wrote to a friend that he had recently been sent a copy of Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Divine Milieu* and another work, (probably *The Phenomenon of Man*). He had immediately read and liked the former work. Merton then drew his friend’s attention to

a “French orthodox magazine” which had published his article on Mt. Athos (H.G.L. 397). This would not be the last time that Merton placed Teilhard in the company of Orthodox thinkers, Greek or Russian. In a 1966 letter to a Cistercian doctoral candidate studying in Rome, Merton states that he is “very interested in the possible parallel between Soloviev and Chardin” (S.C. 304). As late as 1967, in a review of Henri de Lubac’s *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin*, (L.L. 184-191), Merton expressed regret that de Lubac, an expert “in Origen and the Greek Fathers,” while indicating “deep affinities” between Teilhard and this tradition, did not explore that connection further. Merton notes that “this is a theme that could be profitably developed” (L.L. 188).

In the Fall of 1960, Merton wrote a review of *The Divine Milieu*. He sent it to Censors who failed to allow such high praise for a controversial theologian. Merton’s review was published posthumously. In his review of Teilhard’s *The Divine Milieu*, Merton characterized Teilhard as a person who spoke “at the same time with the objectivity of a scientist and with the fervor of a contemplative” and who “was perhaps the first Catholic thinker who successfully incorporated the modern scientific world view into an authentically Christian and even mystical philosophy of life” (L.L.171). The purported conflict between science and religion could not be resolved by some “absurd compromise” but could only be “completely resolved in a higher and contemplative wisdom,” writes Merton (L.L. 171).

The move beyond modernity into an age more in line with the vision of radical ecologists (an age of ecological ecumenism), requires revitalized if transformed resources from various wisdom traditions. But it is also true that the scientific underpinning for a new global cosmology and community embedded in the “New Story” of cosmogenesis is essential. Merton had mentioned the importance of Teilhard de Chardin for this task in his lectures on Maximus and Natural Contemplation (I.C.M. 130-131). Teilhard could show how a wisdom tradition could be rooted in the scientific world if properly contextualized. Hence it could also be brought with other traditions of “wisdom and love” into a new era (C.G.B. 83).

Merton describes *The Divine Milieu* as “a fervent and inspired meditation on the place of the created world in the spiritual life” (L.L.172). Indeed, at the end of the review, Merton claims

that Teilhard speaks as a scientist and a priest, but “above all as a mystic,” and he “speaks the language of Patristic wisdom which is basically contemplative and mystical rather than technical and exact” (L.L.183). Merton predicts that *The Divine Milieu* “will certainly exert a healthy force in the lives of those who read it intelligently” (L.L. 172). Perhaps the qualifier, “intelligently,” was meant as a subtle message to some of Teilhard’s—and Merton’s—critics.

At the beginning of his first section, “The Divine Center,” Merton agrees with Teilhard that too many Christians miss the real intent of Christian revelation—the experience of “a unified life ‘in Christ,’” and instead translate it into “a set of abstract doctrinal propositions” (Ibid.175). Their God becomes an utterly transcendent being “outside” of the universe or “above” the Earth. Perhaps alluding to his recent immersion in Orthodox thought, Merton asserts that the traditional Christian notion of divine transcendence holds that God “is at the same time infinitely ‘other than’ all that we know as being, and yet immanent in everything that exists, so that He is, in fact, the ‘center’ of every being and of all reality, including material reality” (Ibid). Thus, the divine “center” not only holds beings together from within, being their ontological “heart,” but also draws all beings “forward,” towards Itself.

Perhaps echoing the *logoi* and *Logos* categories and perhaps even *Sophia*, Merton explains that

. . . The divine center, to which all things point, toward which they all aspire, is at the same time a “divine milieu” which surrounds, sustains, and embraces them all together in harmony and in unity. All beings are “held” from within by their gravitation to the divine center (in the metaphysical heart of their own being) and moved from without by the divine power of the milieu which God has set all about them. The destiny of all beings is brought into a single focus and aimed in the same direction by the wisdom of God, and man’s vocation is incomprehensible unless it is seen precisely in relation to the world of matter into which he is born and in which he must work out “his salvation.”(L.L. 175)

This becomes more obvious when Merton criticizes those too influenced by the Platonic tradition who view humans as creatures fallen into a “prison of matter” instead of seeing humans as children of God meant to cooperate in the redemption of the material universe along with themselves (L.L. 176). Merton emphasizes that Teilhard’s perspective reflects St. Paul’s notion of “*the recapitulation of all things in Christ.*” Hence “the radiant focus of all reality is not only

the Divine Being but God Incarnate...” (Ibid.). Here we have a Christology of Light that is very prevalent in the Orthodox tradition.

Material reality, far from being an obstacle, is “indispensable for our service and knowledge of Christ” (Ibid. 176). Christ not only reveals Himself in Creation but “gives Himself” through and in matter when sacramentalized and sanctified by the powers given to the Church. Teilhardian spirituality is at its heart Eucharistic, claims Merton. And here, at least echoing the Orthodox tradition’s emphasis on the role of liturgy in the Christian’s relation to creation, Merton points out that, “receiving Christ in and with the world,” we redeem the material world by “using it in the service of Christ” (Ibid. 175). And for Teilhard, Christ is not simply the Risen Lord “dwelling in heaven” but is present “living and working in mankind” (Ibid.176). Christians are not only to be in communion with Christ through material reality in the liturgical celebrations but to “bear the fruits of that participation by a renewed and intensified communion with Christ in His creation” (Ibid. 175).

What stands at the heart of Teilhard’s spirituality for Merton is “his idea of man’s redemption of the world by creative activity in union with Christ” (L.L. 176). Thus the Christian, not simply by the liturgy and religious practices but “above all by action” can help realize St. Paul’s vision of a universe where all things are recapitulated in Christ. And, says Merton, Teilhard is not proposing action in place of contemplation. He realizes that “one cannot exist without the other” (L.L. 177). Action without the “contemplative dimension” can become “sterile and absurd” while a contemplation that has “no impact” on our world or daily life “is a puerile evasion” (Ibid.).

Merton ends this section “The Divine Center” with Teilhard’s words:

Let us establish ourselves . . . in the divine milieu. There we shall find ourselves where the soul is most deep and where matter is most dense. There we shall discover with the confluence of all beauties, the ultra-vital, the ultra-sensitive, the ultra-active point of the universe. And at the same time, we shall feel the *plenitude* of our powers of action and adoration effortlessly ordered within our deepest selves. (L.L. 177)

In “Creativity,” the next section of his review, Merton examines Teilhard’s view on creative action, its relationship to contemplation and to the destructive actions of humans toward creation and one another. Merton starts the section boldly: “All Christian life is meant to be at the same

time profoundly contemplative and rich in active work” (L.L. 177). To adequately respond to the call to create a better world, we must create “our own lives.” In creating our own lives, “we act as co-workers with God.” And our individual destiny is joined with “the great work.” Through this shared creative work, we “create at the same time our own destiny and a new world for our descendants” (Ibid.). In place of our present ecologically destructive actions, the creative work of human beings should be “a prolongation of the creative work of God Himself.” And, if we shun this “creative responsibility,” we fail in “that response to life” willed by the Creator (Ibid. 178).

Merton uses the term “active response” to characterize the essential duty as humans that marks our “fidelity to life itself” and to God who gives Himself to us “through our daily contacts with the material world.” Teilhard justly criticizes those “pseudoascetic ideals” that would seek to evade a responsibility that includes the “struggle against. . . [s]ocial injustice, ignorance, impossible working conditions, and war” (L.L. 178). These are evils not to be “accepted” or resigned to stoically. (We hear something of Merton’s own growing involvement with contemporary social issues, including, in the 1960s, environmental issues). Merton agrees with Teilhard that “purity of intention” is not enough when it comes to responding to the demands of life which are the demands of the Living One. Work is a mode of responding to life. Its quality and impact do matter (Ibid.). For the Christian, Merton notes, “work is a communion with God his Creator, in which he not only unites himself to God but also ‘saves’ and transforms the material world ‘in Christ’” (L.L. 179).

What Willis Jenkins says of Maximus the Confessor is relevant to Merton’s above remarks on Teilhard: “Maximus uses *theosis* to set the saving work of Christ within nature’s own immanent movement toward God and humanity’s active connection with the cosmos” (E.G. 191). At the end of his section on creativity and work, Merton quotes Teilhard:

. . . whatever our human function may be, whether artist or working man or scholar, we can, if we are Christians, speed toward the object of our work as though toward an outlet open for the supreme fulfillment of our beings. . . And this prodigy of divinisation is only comparable to the gentleness with which the metamorphosis is accomplished . . . (Ibid.179)

Merton’s next section, headed with Teilhard’s phrase, “The Divinization of Passivities,”

dismisses the notion that Teilhard advocated an activism that eschewed the contemplative and spiritual life. Alluding to the section under the same title in *The Divine Milieu*, Merton claims that it could not have been written by an activist because a real activist does not respect what cannot be controlled by “reason and will.” Caught up in activism, such an individual simply ignores and devalues the “greater part” of their Being and Life which “is obscure, hidden, and beyond [their] control” (L.L. 179).

Merton praises the Teilhard who “gives free play to his admirable poetic gifts in one of his many soliloquies which echo St. Augustine and St. Anselm” and places him in the Christian contemplative tradition. Teilhard plunges into his own depths where, at the source of the welling up of his own being, he finds the same Presence that he senses in the divine milieu around him. Merton quotes Teilhard’s subsequent prayer:

O God, whose call precedes the very first of our movements, grant me the desire to desire being—that by means of that divine thirst which is Your gift, that access to the great waters may open wide within me. Do not deprive me of the sacred taste for being, that primordial energy, that initial point of support . . . (L.L.180)

“We should not merely ‘be,’ in Merton’s words, “but experience our being in its depths by freely willing to be, by responding to the gift of being that comes to us from God within us.” This is to attain “a ‘fontal communion’ with Him as the source and center of our life”. Of this page in *The Divine Milieu*, Merton claims that “No finer and more contemplative page has been written in our century” (L.L. 180).

At the beginning of his last section, “For Those Who Love the World” (a phrase from Teilhard’s dedication of *The Divine Milieu*), Merton points to the following passage from *The Divine Milieu* as capturing Teilhard’s whole attitude towards and “deep love” for creation: “The man with a passionate sense of the divine milieu *cannot bear to find things around him obscure, tepid and empty which should be full and vibrant with God*” (L.L. 181).

We are to love the world and influence it positively through our lives. “To be sure,” Merton says, “God is ‘in the world,’ but He is hidden in it, and unless we by our own free action and fidelity to His mysterious purposes cooperate with Him, His epiphany in the world, His

manifestation of Himself cannot be perfectly realized” (Ibid.182).

Human cooperation with the divine work in nature and history is essential if a “New Creation” is to be fully realized. This task is not reserved for prophets or mystics, but belongs to all people. The epiphany will be global or not at all. It will require the decision of billions of individual persons, responding to what seems on one level to be but the result of natural forces for unity exercised on a curved and finite planetary sphere. Yet, this movement is not haphazard, but follows the dialectics of Spirit (Ibid.). For Merton and Teilhard it is a movement when all peoples will experience a manifestation of the Divine Presence within creation and themselves (Ibid.). [In terms of deep or radical ecology, it is a fullness of ecoecumenism and of ecopiety (homopiety and geopiety)].

Merton notes that for Teilhard this expectation is central to Christian hope and to the Gospel. At this point in history, Christians acting in line with the creative dynamics of nature and history can hasten its realization. However, Christians must abandon their “tiny, obscure, and stuffy individual ways of salvation.” According to Merton, our era’s “dynamic developments are clues to the mystery of God’s will and of His action” (L.L.165). One would imagine that Merton would encourage the development of “natural contemplation” as a way to perceive and respond to the divine, hidden in these urgings and signs.

Merton reminds the reader that Teilhard had “profound sympathy for everything human and for every legitimate aspiration of modern [humans]” (Ibid.183). Merton ends his review with this passage from Teilhard:

The greater man becomes, the more humanity becomes united, with the consciousness of and mastery of its potentialities, the more beautiful creation will be, the more perfect adoration will become, and the more Christ will find, for mystical extension, a body worthy of Resurrection. (L.L. 184)

Teilhard’s vision of a united humanity that beautifies creation resonated with Thomas Merton’s words on his own vocation: “If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians” (C.G.B.21). Merton

felt that his task was to “clarify” something of the “tradition of wisdom and spirit” that lived in him and in which he lived; a tradition found not only in Orthodoxy and the West but also in other religions. This tradition, so powerfully birthed by individuals such as Maximus, Merton discovered alive and well in Teilhard. Rather than retreat before the march of modernity, Teilhard had the courage to assimilate the best of the knowledge and aspirations of the contemporary world and integrate them into a vision that gave both a cosmic dimension to humanity and a human dimension to the cosmos with both embraced and supported by Wisdom and Spirit (T.T.C. 195-208).

Merton, a year before his death, would write: “Teilhard is a genius, a unique, indeed a providential combination of the scientist and the mystic” (L.L.188). The illuminating spirit of the wisdom tradition was the source of Teilhard’s extraordinary contribution: “Teilhard does not reach his grandiose conclusions by sheer induction: on the contrary, it all starts with an intuitive and global illumination, elaborated into a scientific mystique” (L.L.186).

Thomas Berry

Years later it was Thomas Berry who, under the influence of his own “intuitive and global illumination” and utilizing his own “natural contemplation,” took the wisdom at the core of Teilhard’s thought and from it elaborated an ecological wisdom (eco-sophia) based on a simple principle with which Merton and Teilhard would be in complete accord: “The earth is not a collection of objects but a communion of subjects.” Thomas Berry stands firmly in the wisdom tradition of Maximus, Bulgakov and Teilhard. His understanding of what is needed to grasp the “continuing revelation that takes place in and through the earth” is consistent with Merton’s teachings on *theoria physike* (D.E. 137). Berry speaks of “the sensitivity required to understand and respond to the psychic energies deep in the very structure of reality itself” (Ibid.48). This sensitivity rests upon “the capacity for listening to what the earth is telling us” (Ibid.23). And, just as Maximus insists that “*theoria*” and “*praxis*” must work together, so Berry pleads for “a cooperative understanding and response to forces that will bring about a proper unfolding of the earth process” (D.E.48-49). Hence, says Berry, “human technologies should function in an *integral*

relation with earth technologies, not in a despotic or disturbing manner” (Ibid. 65). However, such a functioning, if it is to be successful, must go beyond a technological fix. In order to develop the sensitivity needed to understand the inner forces of reality and to wisely respond with appropriate technologies, a moral and spiritual discipline is required. Otherwise humans will “obstruct or distort these forces that seek their proper expression” (Ibid.49). Berry is optimistic, however, and this confidence rests on the awesome process itself that embraces and guides the cosmic- earth-human process. As Berry so eloquently expresses it:

If the dynamics of the universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the earth, if this same dynamism brought forth the continents and seas and atmosphere, if it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being the unnumbered variety of living beings, and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, there is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. ***Sensitized to such guidance from the very structure and functioning of the universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture.*** [Emphasis mine] (D.E. 37)

Merton would say that Berry’s vision of this “stupendous process” is *sophianic*. There is a wisdom evident in the process, and a wisdom that Berry has discovered within himself by which to understand and respond to it. This is a natural contemplation, claimed Merton, by which we are “able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom” in ourselves (I.C.M. 125).

NOTES

One of my earlier discussions of Maximus appeared in: “The Flowering of Natural Contemplation: Some Notes on *Theoria Physike* in Thomas Merton’s Unpublished *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*,” *The Merton Seasonal*, 23.2 (Summer, 1998), 13-16.

An earlier version of this chapter appeared as St. John, Donald “Contemplation & Cosmos: Merton on Maximus and Teilhard,” *Teilhard Studies*, No. 62. Spring, 2011.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

MOVING INTO THE 60S AND THE HERMITAGE

Between this world of birds and Zen and the movement of Logos in history, there was the world of the monastery and Merton's own *logoi*. The year 1959 found Thomas Merton still wrestling with himself, his place at Gethsemani and his desire to be more engaged with the world. His personal journals reveal sudden and sometimes dramatic changes in his thinking. They also contain some harsh judgments concerning Gethsemani and Dom Fox. This mix of emotions and their fluctuations: pain, anger, disillusion, and love resemble nothing so much as a marriage "on the rocks." Merton felt that he had outgrown the relationship and that the other "person" (Dom James Fox) had not changed and thus failed to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. What made matters worse was that underneath the hurt and anger there was still a residue of love.

During 1958 and 1959 several concrete alternatives to Gethsemani had presented themselves to Merton. Although he came to the conclusion that he did not really want to start a new Cistercian foundation in Latin America, he found himself increasingly attracted to the idea of being a hermit with a limited apostolate there. The Bishop of San Juan, Puerto Rico invited him to take over a mission on the island of Tortola, British Virgin Islands. It was a primitive place, the active Catholic population was small, and he would have much solitude there (S.S. 6/30/59). "Missionary solitude," as Merton coined the term, either on this island or on Corn Island off the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua, was quite appealing. To pursue this alternative, however, Merton would have to be released from his vows as a Trappist. There was another option, however, that eventually brought the whole Latin America project to a head.

Merton had heard of a Primitive Benedictine monastery at Cuernavaca, Mexico some years earlier and even had praised it in *The Silent Life*. Dom Gregorio Lemercier, Prior of the monastery, came to Gethsemani in May of 1959 in order to persuade Merton to apply for a transit. He argued that to remain at Gethsemani was neither good for the community or for himself. He also noted that monastic renewal "depended on the generosity of the few clear-sighted ones who could no longer be content with conventional 'institutionalism'" (S.S. 5/7/59).

The plan was for Dom Gregorio to ask his bishop to invite Merton there and then for Merton to appeal to Rome. In July, Lemercier again showed up at Gethsemani with a letter from his Bishop. Dom Gregorio volunteered to personally present Merton's case in Rome in September 1959. He convinced Merton that such a direct appeal was not wrong and that it would prevent the Abbot from undermining Merton's request before it got anywhere. Merton, reflecting on Dom Gregorio's initiative, realized that he both loved Gethsemani and that it was necessary to pull up his roots in response to what seemed to be God's will (S.S. 7/16/59). At the end of July, Fr. Lawrence Cardenal, a close friend of Merton's and the last of the Latin American postulants and novices in whom Merton had placed his previous hopes for a Latin American Trappist monastery, left Gethsemani for health reasons. Merton deeply felt the irony that a "so-called contemplative monastery *ruins* real contemplatives, or makes life unbearable for them" (S.S. 7/30/59).

Merton had written to a number of Bishops asking about the possibility of establishing a hermitage in their diocese. For various reasons, none of these plans worked out. Dom Gregorio stopped at Gethsemani on September 7, 1959 on his way to Europe. Merton penned a third and final draft of his letter to Larraona. Lemercier agreed to stop in Paris and talk with Fr. (later Cardinal) Danielou, a respected theologian from whom Merton had been seeking guidance and who was against Merton's plans to leave Gethsemani (S.S. 9/9/59). Both Fr. Danielou and Dom Jean Leclercq had written to Merton in the summer suggesting that he try to find the solitude he needed at Gethsemani. Likewise, during a July meeting with Dom James Fox, who knew nothing of the Cuernavaca maneuvers, Merton "got the impression that he was all ready to grant me permission to live as a hermit in the woods here" (S.S. 7/12/59).

Dom James was summoned to Rome in November 1959. Merton's Mexican request was discussed and the abbot left the final decision in the hands of his superiors. Merton himself was in turmoil and agony while waiting for the decision. He wrote to Ernesto Cardenal on November 24, 1959:

Gethsemani is *terrible*. Tremendous commerce--everybody is going mad with the cheese business. I want to leave very badly.

My mind is completely made up to totally cut off all ties that attach me here. It is *essential*

not just for my own peace but for the glory of God. I must advance in the way He has chosen for me & I am sure He will make everything easy.

. . . I'll send a telegram to Cuernavaca as soon as I am ready to leave & have freedom to do so. (C.T. 121)

Yet even as Merton lashed out at Gethsemani and tried to distance himself from it (perhaps as a way of further justifying his own departure), he found aspects of the place profoundly moving, especially the woods. Throughout the turmoil of 1959 Merton juxtaposed his fantasies about moving on with his fondness for the woods.

In May he admits that the attraction of leaving for the unknown often takes second place to staying for the wonderful quiet which surrounds “the straw in the woodshed “ and the space “under the pines by St. Teresa’s field” (S.S. 5/7/59). On a June day in the woods he finds a strong attraction in the idea of “simply staying here, in the woods – with great interior freedom, and applying myself to the main business” of his contemplative life and presumably his writing. These do not require a white sandy beach in the Caribbean, “only silence and a curtain of trees” like he already has (S.S. 6/11/59).

Later that month he confesses that if he is asked what he really wants he has already found in the “best afternoons of last week.” And what was that? “The long hours of quiet in the woods, reading a little, meditating a lot, walking up and down in the pine needles in bare feet.” He wonders though if maybe part of the pleasure in those experiences has to do with “escape from the routine of the community” and less with the interior life. As usual Merton questions (S.S. 6/21/59). Yet in November he is able to identify with this particular natural setting and place, stating that “[i]t hardly seems possible never seeing the woods again. Other woods will not be the same.” Like the “soft embrace” of a mother he has been comforted “by this gentle, circle of hills for eighteen years.” He has come to know their “secrets...better than anyone here.” He then revisits an old complaint of his that “so many of the monks hardly know that there is a forest around the abbey.” Then in a statement filled with honest pain, he singles out leaving the woods as “the one thing that will really hurt” (S.S. 11/21/59).

The many months and, indeed, years, of tortured questioning about his place in the Order

seemed nearly over. On December 17, 1959 while kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament in the novitiate chapel, Merton read Rome's reply. It was negative. As was his custom, Merton went for a walk in the woods to think it over. He then wrote to Ernesto Cardenal:

I received the decision of Rome without emotion and without the slightest anger. I accept it completely in faith, and feel a great interior liberty and emptiness in doing so. This acceptance has completely liberated me from Gethsemani, which is to me no longer an obstacle or a prison, and to which I am indifferent, though I will do all in my power to love and help those whom God entrusts to me here. (C.T. 122)

Despite Merton's definitive pronouncements that he had wanted "very badly" to leave and his declaration that his mind had been "completely" made up and that it was the will of God that he move, "essential" not only for himself but for the glory of God, Rome had spoken. Its decision now seemed so final that he was "not at liberty to take any further steps" to help himself, but could only "accept and obey." He must "stay here until the Church herself places" him somewhere else. He must wait "in darkness and in faith, without making any move." One is struck by the images of immobility and helplessness. Mother Church has spoken. To disobey is unthinkable. And so he promises "not to leave." And yet in some deep Koan-like way he neither stays nor leaves. Or, perhaps when the Church authorities played their final card, thinking the game over, Merton changed the game.

Solitude, Perhaps

But this was not the Merton of 1955. Inner and outer events, especially over the past year and one-half, had changed him forever. An inner freedom and maturity had been won through the hard task of facing squarely the monastery and Trappist life without illusions. There had been also a positive deepening of his own spiritual life, through reaching out to the wider world through his reading, writing and correspondence. He sought to connect his feeling of solidarity with the struggles of modern humankind with a solitude that he hoped would inform and inspire it.

The form his physical solitude would take was still not clear, but there was a new sense of freedom that signaled a deepening of inner solitude.

Actually, what it comes to is that I shall certainly have solitude but only by a miracle, and not at all at my own conniving. Where? Here or there makes no difference. Somewhere, nowhere, beyond all “where.” Solitude outside geography or in it. No matter.

Coming back, walked around a corner of the woods and the monastery swung in view. I was free from it. (S.S. 12/17/59)

Later in the same entry Merton writes about a “very great peace and gratitude at knowing that I have really, at last, found my definitive place (found it long since) and that I have no further need to look, to seek, except in my own heart.” (The search again turns inward). Merton notes that he is 45 years old and that the time has come to “be content” and to complete the work he had begun in this place, instead of “seeking a new one” (S.S. 12/17/59).

While it is certainly true that Merton did accept the letter from two Cardinals as binding, he still maintained that God was calling him to a deeper solitude while at the same time urging him to widen his horizons to the whole world. Merton’s identity as a monk, a writer, and Catholic were still essential. And although he was later to question the complicity of the Church in the many injustices in the world, he continued to see it as the only viable if flawed alternative to the secularism and materialism of much of his time. Yet he was also convinced that the Spirit of God must also be discerned in creation, in human history, and in other religions.

The tensions between solitude and community, contemplation and action, place and journey, writer and monk were never to be fully resolved by Merton in some final grand theory or overpowering insight. Like a spiral, each crisis brought Merton new insights into the nature of these tensions and into a wider understanding of the paradoxes in his own life. Merton grew, both by stretching higher and wider and by adding depth and stability to his roots. He also learned that some problems in life are never solved but left behind by other concerns and eventually lose their existential importance and urgency.

Perhaps Merton himself never fully understood all of the factors beneath these conflicting loyalties and dreams. Merton’s journal entries during this period reveal a man alternating between criticisms of and discontent with being at Gethsemani and declarations of love for it and happiness at being there. The spiritual presence found in Nature and its affect on his life on many

levels remained an anchor during these turbulent times. In the end, we must simply let Merton be Merton: a complex, brilliant man not content to stand still, growing in confidence at his own powers but also endeavoring to know and be honest with himself; a man trying to balance his desire for solitude with his increasing commitment to the dramatic issues of the world in which he lived: a man trying to carve out his own place while placing himself in the hands of God.

A Turning Point

In March 1960 a terrible fire raced through the Steel Building of the monastery. Dom James realized that this could happen to other buildings that were more vulnerable to fire damage. He moved to have the rest of the monastery gutted and fireproofed, including the Guest House. This construction forced changes. Merton was reassigned to a newly built room over the stairs near the infirmary. This secluded room had a large window that began near the floor and which provided Merton with a great view. By May 1960 Merton was more than satisfied with this substitute “hermitage”:

I sit on the edge of sky, the sunlight drenches my feet. I have a stool here, an old one, and a desk (my old scriptorium desk) by the bed--three icons and a small crucifix which Cardinal made. Reading in here is a totally different experience from anywhere else, as if the silence and the four walls enriched everything with great significance. One is alone, not on guard, utterly relaxed and receptive, having four walls and silence all around you to listen, so to speak, with all the pores of your skin and to absorb truth through every part of your being. I doubt if I would be any better off in Mexico! (S.S. 5/8/60)

Other plans, however, had already been set in motion that would render this room obsolete as a hermitage. Dom James had already decided to build a retreat center where dialogue with Protestant ministers and theologians might take place. The fire and reconstruction efforts allowed for an acceleration of these plans. Bellarmine College in Louisville had expressed an interest in helping with the building project. Merton, who was a member of the planning committee for this retreat center, wanted a small and rustic building, one easily convertible into a hermitage, rather than the large structure that the abbot had envisaged.

To complicate matters, in June Merton heard that maybe the decision on Mexico was not as irrevocable as had been thought. Yet he had mixed feelings because a possibility for more

solitude had opened up at Gethsemani (T.T.W. 6/21/60). Undoubtedly, Dom James had also felt the need to do something more for his restless monk following the negative response in 1959 to Merton's request to move to Mexico. His sense of urgency must have only intensified when two Mexican priests showed up at Gethsemani requesting to see Merton. The request was denied (T.T.W. 7/30/60).

Spurred on by Dom Gregorio, Merton considered various options and finally decided to write to Paul Philippe, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome, spelling out these options in order to get some clarification on whether the door was still open (T.T.W. 8/6/60). In August Merton heard from Dom Gregorio who had had a conversation with Paul Philippe and concluded (perhaps erroneously) that the door might be opened again should he write again to the Secretary but this time make an explicit request that permission be granted to make the move. Merton himself was not optimistic about developments at Gethsemani and complained to himself that his spiritual life there was "poor." He took to heart Dom Gregorio's characterization of his passive acceptance of the recent decision as "simply a compromise" and his injunction to exercise the courage needed to push for a change which he believed was the will of God as opposed to the will of churchmen. Merton admitted to himself that he had succumbed to a certain inertia. And so he wrote to Paul Philippe asking "if he really thinks change ought not to be made" (T.T.W. 8/19/60).

On September 3, 1960 Merton received a response from the Secretary stating that he "was strongly against my leaving Gethsemani." On the positive side, Merton notes that on the very same day he managed to talk his Abbott out of building a large house on the spot and persuaded him to build "a very simple shelter" (T.T.W. 9/3/60).

All of these recent events resurrected the old question of what God willed for Merton and how he would come to know it. On the one hand, shouldn't he follow the will of God even if it meant going against the will of his Abbott? On the other hand, didn't his vow of obedience imply that when there was doubt, should he not accept the will of his Superior as the will of God? Merton returns to a basic question: "My life must have meaning," but from whence does that

meaning come? He concludes that, “meaning springs from a creative and intelligent harmony between my will and the will of God.” All well and good, but “What is the will of God?” (T.T.W. 9/11/60).

I can no longer accept the superficial verbalism (going in circles) which evades reality by simply saying the will of the Superior is the will of God and the will of God is the will of the Superior . . . the will of the Superior simply defines and points out the way in which I am to try to act intelligently and spiritually, and thus clarify the meaning of my own life (“giving glory to God”).

Simply to go ahead blindly muttering “the will of God, the will of God” clarifies nothing and it is making me mentally ill...The fact remains that my obedience should bring clarity into my life, not confusion. . . . It has not brought clarity. (T.T.W. 9/11/60)

Merton was more convinced than ever that whether it was to be realized at Gethsemani or elsewhere, solitude was essential to following the will of God. The new advantage it offered was a chance to gain perspective on a changing world. Father Louis was becoming more involved with and writing on issues surrounding nuclear war, world peace and social justice. He was also asking himself rather serious questions about the Church and about monasticism regarding their stance towards the world of the twentieth century. He admitted that one of his own “*great moral problems*” had been turning his back on and developing a somewhat contemptuous attitude and “loud bluster” towards “the world.” He concludes that his refusal of political commitments is “absurd,” especially since the monastery itself is “deeply committed on a political level.” In fact, he feels like a “political prisoner at Gethsemani.” He has placed himself in the hands of an Abbot who basically smothers any “political conscience” or “socially productive spirituality. He is dedicated to evasion” (T.T.W. 8/21/60). Not only is Merton unable to act so as to make a difference in the world, he is finding that when he does speak out he upsets people in his Order—“and in others like it” (T.T.W. 9/1/60).

His writings were indeed under increased scrutiny, especially those dealing with the moral issues surrounding modern warfare including the possession and possible use of nuclear weapons given the Christian’s obligation as a peacemaker. But yet, Merton was also increasingly convinced that his silence on many of the crucially important issues of his day, some in which the Church and its leaders were involved, made him an accomplice. “Are the commitments of the church and

the Order such today that they necessarily involve one in a 'reactionary' social situation?" In other words, "What are the church's politics exactly?" (T.T.W. 6/5/60).

Solitude is necessary, not "as a withdrawal, a refuge: but for the sake of understanding, wisdom, widening necessarily" to embrace "a certain commitment." His solitude "is a search for perspective – and for commitment" not for an aloof position from which to criticize the world (T.T.W. 6/6/60). He needs time and space to study these issues "in order to form my conscience and take such practical actions as I can" (T.T.W. 6/6/60).

This requires a certain perspective which necessarily implies a withdrawal "to see better," a stepping back from the machinery of daily monastic life, solitude for study and thought, and a more individual development. Part of my vocation! (T.T.W. 6/5/60)

In Merton's journal, the name of the new building began to alternate between "Mount Olivet Retreat House" and "Mount Olivet Hermitage." In October he went out with a contractor to survey what Merton calls "the place on the hill." He immediately recognizes his deceptive use of words and states "--let's be frank: the hermitage." He admits that the plans had been cut back from the initial vision embraced by a lot of people "including myself, and is not longer a shiny, smart little pavilion but just a plain cottage with two rooms and a porch." Merton then states: "Clearly it is a hermitage rather than a place for conferences" (T.T.W. 10/3/60).

On October 8th "the slab was poured and the foundation was finished." Merton reports that in the evening the Abbot, who had been in Rome, "berated me for 'changing the plans'" which he insisted was a misunderstanding (T.T.W. 10/9/60). A week later Merton reports that the hermitage is growing but that so is his anxiety since the Abbot "keeps intimating that it is something he does not want me to have or even use except in a very restricted way. I mean, he is very clear about my not living in it, or sleeping in it, or saying Mass there." Merton is frustrated at the thought of having such a lovely place "tucked away among the pines—and to have to stay away from it." Whenever he is out near the hermitage he finds peace and is able to forget the "stupid mentality we cultivate in our monasteries." When he returns to the monastery, it seems even worse (T.T.W. 10/16/60).

However, whether through the Abbot's voluntarily softening his position or Merton's

subtle pushing of his own, or both, by December he had secured permission to use the retreat center/hermitage on a part-time basis as a place for prayer, reading and writing. He built a fire in the fireplace at “St. Mary of Carmel” on December 2, 1960. The first words he read there (in French) were, “Wisdom has built her house, she has set it on seven pillars . . . Come eat of the bread, drink of the wine I have prepared. Desist from folly and you will live. Walk in the way of Truth.” His cautions? “Not to be moved by guilt at having such a fine place to go! Not to take out my guilt on the community . . . There is no harm in being grateful—in having the *courage* to be grateful, and not fearing I am laying myself open to some manipulation by expressing gratitude.” He ends with an observation: “Good smell of burning pine and cedar” (T.T.W. 12/02/60).

Afternoons spent at the hermitage provide him with “[t]otally new perspectives on solitude” and make him rethink (again) his ideas on the relevance of Place to the spiritual life.

It is true, places and situations are not supposed to matter. This one makes a tremendous difference. Real silence. Real solitude. Peace. Getting acclimated to the surroundings. The valley in front. The tall, separated pines to the west, the heavy, close-set denser pine wood to the north-east, the sweep of pasture and the line of bare oaks on the east, various clumps of pine and poplar between east and south, bright sky through bare trunks of ash, elm and oak to the southwest, when a shoulder of hill hides the abbey. And a great dance of sky overhead. And a fire murmuring in the fireplace. Room smells faintly of pine smoke. Silent.

After having thought for ten years of building a hermitage, and thought of the ten places where one might be built, now *having built* one in the best place, I cannot believe it. It is nevertheless real – if anything is real. In it everything becomes unreal. Just silence, sky, trees. (T.T.W. 12/10/60)

In terms of his own life, the hermitage brought “the sense of a journey ended, of wandering at an end.” Then, in very telling and poignant words, he states: “*The first time in my life* I ever really felt that I had come home and that my waiting and looking were ended” (T.T.W. 12/26/60). As 1960 drew to a close, Merton reflected on the possible term of his own life, wondering if he would be around in twelve years—New Year’s 1973. “To live to be fifty-seven and nearly fifty-eight. Can such an age be possible?” (T.T.W. 12/31/60). Unfortunately, it would not be possible for Thomas Merton.

At the end of Merton’s beautiful praise of the hermitage and his admission that this place

“makes a tremendous difference” in his life, he registers a bit of apprehension over an upcoming visit by his major superior: “Worried that the Abbot General may close it down. But I say “*Nihil sollicit sitis* [Be anxious about nothing]” (T.T.W. 12/10/60). Yet, it was with some anxiety that Merton greeted the Abbot General of the Order in February, 1961. Dom Gabriel Sortais had not been a supporter of the hermitage idea. This time, however, he wisely saw a possible solution to the seemingly endless problem of his famous Cistercian monk wanting to leave. After all, he reasoned, Merton could only use the place for a couple of hours a day since he still was the Novice Master. Surely, such a modest compromise was in order! (T.T.W. 3/3/61). And so, Merton was permitted limited but much appreciated time at this non-hermitage in the woods. But, being Thomas Merton, he would gradually have most restrictions lifted.

In his reflections of the summer and fall of 1960, Merton articulates and defends a life of solitude, study and reflection aimed at a deepening of wisdom and a sharpening of insight into the modern world. He then uses his contemplative capacities to examine and to speak out on the heavy political and moral issues of his day. In fact, total silence and withdrawal as the ideal of solitude is rejected as is an activism that runs around on the surface of modern life. His recent studies led him to conclude that much evil can be done when people ignore the inner life and surrender themselves to causes that turn out to have been not just demonic but the total opposite of what the participants had originally envisaged.

What Merton is moving towards is a contemplative/prophetic dynamic analogous to the geopiety-homopiety dynamic of the Sinic world. Some sprouts of Merton’s radical ecology emerge in his reflections of the late 1950s and very early 1960s. Their growth was visible in the holistic thought that had developed dramatically under the influence of the Orthodox wisdom tradition including the personal power of Sophia and to the personal intensification of his own contemplative life which drew on both western and eastern traditions (*theoria physike* of Maximus, Zen meditative spirituality). But Merton also drew upon his own increasingly rich experiences in and with the natural world. As we are seeing with Merton, an individual’s personal history, including his or her particular talents, their struggles with meaning and identity,

including understanding their place in the human and cosmic process affect how at any point in time they engage in and promulgate the issues and principles of Radical Ecology.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALLEGRO BRILLANTE: DAWN AND SPRING

I. Dawn and Morning

Thomas Merton was a watcher of sunrises much as Thoreau was a watcher of snowfalls. In a letter to Jacques Maritain, the monk remarks that he finds sunrise to be “a wonder that is ordinary but if you are more attentive you find it an astounding event” (C.T. 33). Here Merton touches on what is core to his sunrise epiphanies: the qualities of wonder and awe, deep attention and awareness.

On Pentecost Sunday (June 5, 1960) Merton begins a journal entry: “The other day (Thursday) – the *full meaning* of lauds, said against the background of waking birds and sunrise” (T.T.W. 6/5/60). The monk then presents a narrative of the slow awakening of life in the forest using as a metaphor an orchestra whose instruments, one by one, join in and contribute to a slowly building crescendo that reaches an orchestral climax. The symphony begins at 2:30 in the morning when a lone bullfrog sounds a series of *Oms*; then around 3:00 a.m. a whippoorwill “begins his mysterious whoop,” sometimes from nearby, sometimes from a distance. Then, “the first chirps of the waking birds,” announce “*le point vierge* [the virgin point]” of dawn-- a “moment of awe and inexpressible innocence.” It is the moment when “the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it is time to ‘be’?” He answers “‘Yes,’” and then, “one by one,” they awake and sing: the catbirds, then the cardinals, and then some birds whose songs Merton admits he does not recognize. Later they are joined by song sparrows, wrens and finally doves and crows (Ibid).

With his hair (what he has) nearly standing on end and the “eyes” of his soul “wide open,” he is present on some deep level “in this unspeakable Paradise.” He is aware of a great secret--a secret that is both “wide open” and freely available, but to which “no one pays any attention (‘One to his farm, another to his merchandise’) [Luke 14:16-20].” Unfortunately, even monks are blind and deaf to this epiphany, “shut up under fluorescent lights,” their attention focused on “the big books and the big notes” and on one another. Merton sings, “Oh paradise of simplicity,

self-awareness – and self-forgetfulness – liberty, peace . . .” (T.T.W. 6/5/60). Paradise, then, is all around us, but is missed, not only in the cities and suburbs, but in the monasteries of men who left such places to find God.

What is eerie is that on July 2, 1960, in a hospital room in Louisville, less than a month after this journal entry, Merton is awakened by a nurse from his sleep at 5:30 a.m. As we noted, this was the inspiration for *Hagia Sophia*. Interestingly, the original journal account of the event ends:

Deep is the ocean, boundless sweetness, kindness, humility, silence of wisdom that is *not* abstract, disconnected, fleshless. Awakening us gently when we have exhausted ourselves to night and to sleep. O Dawn of wisdom! (T.T.W. 7/2/60)

In the account of the early morning epiphany in *Conjectures*, Merton does not utilize “O Dawn of wisdom!” but instead speaks of the wisdom present at dawn that “seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point,” the *point vierge*. It is “a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence” between night and day when creation “in its innocence” again asks permission to be, “as it did on the first morning that ever was” (C.G.B. 131).

Merton implies that if one can touch that point, enter that opening, one will stand again at the first morning of paradise, the mythic source of all mornings, full of fresh creative power and profound wisdom. *Le pointe vierge* of dawn points to the innocence of paradise and to the innocence within each person, the still-point where one’s being hangs suspended from God. One’s awareness of and presence to dawn resembles those other moments when one is wholly present to life, to another human, to an other-than-human being, to one’s own deeper, fuller self, etc. Nevertheless, being is given, not earned; is gift, not possession. Humans must free themselves from the myriad distractions in life and their own minds and answer the call to re-experience the dawn, to rejoin with creation and to rejoice in the given-ness of existence.

The contemplative experience of nature, whether dramatically at dawn or quietly at dusk, could stir the prophetic sensitivities of Merton. In contrast to Divine Wisdom, humankind’s so-called “wisdom” does not hear or respond to Dawn’s orchestral invocation to be. One of the major reasons for this is that humans “are fallen into self-mastery and cannot ask permission of anyone.”

We charge into our mornings with “undaunted purpose” (C.G.B. 130). In this “fallen” condition, our self-enclosed world is run by clocks. Hence, we arrogantly assume that we can “dictate the terms” to nature since *we* “know the time” and “have a clock that proves we are right from the very start” and have access to creation’s “hidden inner laws” (Ibid.). The birds, wiser than we are, actually have this access and awaken at the right time, at the moment between “nonbeing and being” (perhaps a Taoist/Daoist moment). Merton then subtly criticizes as “folly” his own original journal’s use of clock time to mark the moments when different birds were awakened. After chronicling the waking, he concludes:

Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off “one to his farm and another to his merchandise.” Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static. “Wisdom,” cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend. (C.G.B. 131-132)

We do not attend to, are not aware of, and, hence, have no sense of awe, wonder, and innocence at the reoccurring miracle that is Dawn and Paradise. The modern mind is caught in the world of linear, nonreversible time where successful exploitation of nature is defined as “progress.” In such a utilitarian world, “paradise” becomes a piece of land “ripe for development” and is judged worthless until transformed into products by human “busyness.” Merton implies that what our busy-ness really brings about is the interlinked destruction of paradise and of those spiritual dispositions needed to recognize it. And so, we repeat the myth that an angel with a sword blocks the return to the garden, but what halts a possible return is a mind enclosed in a human world of self-designed meanings and purposes. The secret revealed to Merton was simple: the sword is removed from the gates of paradise, but we have taken it as a sign of surrender, and have sent in the bulldozers!

In the predawn hours of Trinity Sunday, 1961, after Night Office, Merton set out for the “hermitage,” seizing a rare opportunity to spend most of his day there. As the sun rose, he observed the “[g]reat full moon over Nally’s hill, pale and clear.” Below, he saw a “faint mist” hanging over “the wet grass of the bottoms” (T.T.W. 5/30/61).

More and more I appreciate the beauty and the solemnity of the “Way” up through the

woods, past the bull barn, up the stony rise, into the grove of tall, straight oaks and hickories, and around through the pines on top of the hill, to the cottage.

Sunrise. Hidden by pines and cedars on the east side of the house. Saw the red flame of it glaring through the cedars, not like sunrise but like a forest fire. From the window of the front room, then, he, the Sun . . . shone silently with solemn power through the pine branches.

Now after High Mass the whole valley is glorious with morning light and with the song of birds. (T.T.W. 5/30/61)

Merton begins his reflection by describing the “Way” (Tao?) that he takes up the hill through the woods. Although the way is marked by beauty and solemnity, it is a “Way” intimately known by his--and no doubt, animals’--feet. The basic contours of this way are shaped by the land. But its changing qualities are conditioned by weather, time of day, season of the year, animal life, vegetation, and in terms of human experience, the physical and mental state of the person walking this path. He arrives at and enters what he calls “the cottage” or “the house” (not “the hermitage,” one notes). Gazing out through the front window, he observes the sun’s red flame “glaring through the cedars . . . like a forest fire.” Merton recognizes and names the hickories, pines, oaks and cedars along with their specific locations. These are not superfluous details but necessary elements of the full experience of Place as are the grand solemnity of sunrise and the “solemn power” exhibited by the silent sun borne also by the intense fiery glow piercing the woods. Merton boldly proclaims the primal importance of such experiences to the spiritual life:

It is essential to experience all the times and moods of this place. No one will know or be able to say *how* essential. Almost the first and most important element of a spiritual life, lost in the constant, formal routine of Divine offices under the fluorescent lights in choir – practically no change between night and day. (T.T.W. 5/30/61)

The journal entry reflects Merton’s growing intimacy with the natural setting of the hermitage and his recognition of the importance of being present to its daily and seasonal rhythms and “moods.” Merton’s insistence that a place--and not just a person--has “moods,” reflects a sensitivity to a natural place as having its own character and “spirit” and thereby is able to affect the character and spirit of humans who dwell there or frequently visit. In *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*, Merton changes “this place” to “one good place,” and eliminates references to “cottage”

and “house.” As we have seen, in his journal entry he speculates on “*how essential*” experiencing “the times and moods of this place” is to “a truly spiritual life.” In fact, it is “[a]lmost the first and most important element.” Interestingly, *Conjectures* states: “how truly part of a genuine life” is experiencing the times and moods “of one good place” (C.G.B. 179).

In both cases, Merton implies that the ability to experience the varied times and moods of one place is important to the development of an authentic human life. He emphasizes this point in both works when he contrasts a life rooted in the textures and contours of place and the rhythms of nature with one lived by “the abstract, formal routine of exercises under an official fluorescent light.” In the latter “way,” the former experiences are lost. The latter “way” does not grow out of the earth, so to speak, but descends from on high, through a hierarchical order. The latter carries an aura of institutional authority behind it, wearing an “official” stamp of approval. No matter how impressive it might be in some other ways, the more “formal routine of exercises,” as he describes it in *Conjectures*, forces an individual to adapt himself or herself to a uniform program and a set schedule. The “fluorescent lights,” being “official,” overrule differences and blanch out colors. This homogeneous pale light contrasts with the multitude of richly nuanced colors provided by sun and shadow and shaped by atmosphere, climate, vegetation and the sensitivity of the observer. The officially sanctioned “routine of Divine offices” seems to have become detached from its original integration into the rhythm of days, months and seasons.

Perhaps Merton is also suggesting that the unintended message being sent by the official religious establishment is that the actual experience of creation/nature is irrelevant to the development of a genuine human life. Thus the modern religious sphere conspires with its secular counterpart to downplay the importance of the natural world to the development of human qualities meant for a full life. While one side turns to ritualized channels for transformative power, the other turns to material wealth and secular success. One might also say that where affection for and closeness to the times and moods of place are absent, so is the development of “the ecological character of personhood.” Nor does the experience of “landscape” lead to an enrichment of “mindscape” and to a moral desire to *care* for the earth. As we see with Merton, an

intimate connection of person and place can spark moral contrasts with modernity's attitudes and actions. This is a form of radical ecological ethics that grows out of attachment to, care for and responsibility towards place rather than to abstract philosophical systems or human-only moral systems.

The very next morning the solemnity of sunrise again moves the monk and causes him to reflect further on the shields and walls placed around the modern heart and mind that block out humility-generating experiences that would re-mind us of and re-connect us to our cosmic-earth place and home (*oikos*). The Sacred is there if we are willing to open eyes and mind and heart and be present to it.

The great work of sunrise again today.

The awful solemnity of it. The sacredness. Unbearable without prayer and worship. I mean unbearable if you really put everything else aside and see what is happening! Many, no doubt, are vaguely aware that it is dawn: but they are protected from the solemnity of it by the neutralizing worship of their own society, their own world, in which the sun no longer rises and sets. (T.T.W. 5/31/61)

Merton is again enthralled by the "great work of sunrise." The word "work" evokes the image of a great symphonic work, for Merton immediately calls attention to its "awful solemnity" as well as to its "sacredness." The feeling of "awe" is, of course, an essential component of the experience of the Sacred as is evident to scholars such as Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade. If you approach this cosmic event with the attention it deserves, "if you put everything else aside," and actually "see what is happening," you will find that its full seriousness can only be grasped if your heart is full of a reverence similar to that which accompanies "prayer and worship." People who are simply awake may vaguely realize that dawn is occurring, but their attention is fixed on the "neutralizing worship" of their own social world. Thus enclosed within a blandly homogeneous world, they are shielded from the dawn's solemnity and any hierophany of the Sacred. Merton suggests that the distracting character of ordinary life often creates a mental and spiritual state that desensitizes us to wonder. As Merton's reflections strike a more critical chord, they turn back to the priorities for his own growing involvement in the world of the 1960s.

Again, the sense of the importance, the urgency of seeing, fully aware, experiencing what

is *here*: not what is given by men, by society, but what is given by God and hidden by (even monastic) society. Clear realization that I must begin with these first elements. That it is absurd to inquire after my function in the world, or whether I have one, as long as I am not first of all alive and awake. And if that, and no more, is my job (for it is certainly every man's job), then I am grateful for it. (T.T.W. 5/31/61)

This sunrise obviously awakens something in Merton. His profound experience of the sacred re-minds him that his primary "job" is to deepen his ability to **see**, to be aware, and to fully experience "what is *here*." His experience of a special "importance" and "urgency" to deepen his contemplative life should be understood in the context of Merton's "turn to the world." He recognizes the danger of compromise in his own life as he wrestles with his place and "function in the world." He fears that the world might cast its hypnotic spell on him and draw him away from his – and humanity's - most fundamental spiritual and human calling which is to be "alive and awake." If we are not to lose our genuine humanity, he is saying, we must practice the contemplative art of "seeing," of being "fully aware," and of "experiencing" as gift what has been given in creation. Merton suggests that we must get back to basics, back to these "first elements."

What is the use, Merton asks, of trying to find and live out your role or "function" in the world, if you are not "alive and awake?" People make a great fuss over what they assume they lack when all they need is "what is right in front of their noses" (T.T.W. 5/31/61). Here, Merton's contemplative voice intensifies and resonates with a more prophetic edge as he calls his fellow humans--secular and religious--to wake up, return to the basic values that ground human existence—values that we can experience when really awake and actually attuned to the "awful solemnity" of creation's grand liturgy.

Consumerist culture, as Merton intimates here and proclaims more loudly elsewhere, as in *Conjectures*, thrives on a manufactured sense of "lack," creating wants, turning them into needs, and pulling people away from the spiritual task of deepening their awareness of "what is right in front of their noses" with its consequent contentment.

Chanting With All "These Creatures, My Brothers"

In addition to the more spontaneous and contemplative experiences of sunrise and of mornings spent in nature, Merton sometimes used a mode of liturgical prayer as a way to

be “alive and awake” and to be aware of the living eco-community. He was a member of that community as well as of the monastic community. And so, on occasion, Merton found an ecological alternative to the official prayers of the Divine Office—and to his usual community. On a May morning in 1961, the monk joins the choir of “these creatures, my brothers,” a choir that includes plants, flycatchers, bulls and quails. Lifting his heart and voice with other members of the eco-community enriches the liturgical act, uncovering its more ancient cosmic roots.

Today, Father, this blue sky lauds you. The delicate green and orange flowers of the tulip poplar tree praise you. The distant blue hills praise you, with the sweet-smelling air that is full of brilliant light. The bickering flycatchers praise you with the lowing bulls and the quails that whistle over there, and I too, Father, praise you, with all these creatures my brothers. You have made us all together and you have placed me here this morning in the midst of them. And here I am. (T.T.W. 5/20/61)

Note that Merton refers to himself as being “placed . . . in the midst” of a rich diversity of natural beings, including plants, animals, insects, hills, and sky. “Place” as used here indicates both an ecological and liturgical quality to the web (or choir) of life. In the *Conjectures* version, Merton adds: “I too, Father, praise you, with all these my brothers, and they give voice to my own heart and to my own silence. We are all one silence, and a diversity of voices” (C.G.B. 177). The wording of this passage reflects Merton’s fondness for Francis of Assisi while its psalm-like tone witnesses to the Benedictine tradition. Both turn to song and voice (an echo of Sophia?). Merton is less the High Priest who stands above creation to represent the lower creatures, and more the fellow member of the earth community who offers praise in union with them. They stand as family members of one Father who is One Silence from whom the words—and voices—of creation emerge. Yet they also give voice to the silence within Merton that participates in the One Silence. Thus, added to the increased ecological good of diversity is the increased religious value of the many diverse voices offering praise, itself a Thomistic value.

In *Conjectures*, Merton is the solitary one who stands in the midst of creatures “as witness, as awareness, and as joy.” As awareness, Merton becomes “a kind of center” in whom nature and the divine intersect and mutually abide. This is a center “that is nowhere. And yet also . . . ‘here’ under these trees, not others” (C.G.B. 177). The center of the solitary’s being is shared with the

presences of sky, trees, flowers, cattle, etc. The center is open, expansive; it is not closed-in, not self-centered so as to exclude other beings. Merton's exploration of what could be termed a more "eco-centered" orientation or spirituality allows for both an identity-in-place ("I am 'here' under these trees, not others") and a "presence" that knows no limits ("a center that is nowhere") since it can expand to embrace all. Opening wide to the diversity of creation is made possible when one journeys inward to one's own center. Yet one does not thereby lose a sense of being "here" in this place "under these trees, not others" (Ibid.).

There is a "hidden wholeness" that facilitates, structures, yet energizes and makes possible this unity-in-diversity. Merton therefore suggests a circular, inclusive, and egalitarian model for an ecologically-grounded prayer. He recognizes the capacity for praise in other creatures, just as in Thomistic thought where creatures in pursuing their own good are oriented towards God as their ultimate Good. This eco-prayer of the cosmic community has a litany-like call-response, a resonating while undulating movement. Your heart moves outward to embrace your brothers and sisters who in turn "give voice" to your heart, while they move inward to find a place and voice in your center which opens to the Source. Flowers, trees, insects, birds, animals and even inanimate beings pray on behalf of humans who reciprocate by praying on behalf of them.

Sunrise Calls Forth Solemn Music

On a cold January morning in 1963, Thomas Merton stands frozen, wonder-struck by "the solemn music" of the rising sun. He discovers that wonder can open the mind to wider patterns of meaning and the heart to a more inclusive communion. But unlike the previous meditation that was spatial and emphasized the present community of beings, in this reflection the monk reaches back through time to embrace other beings, human and non-human. In the stream of time and history we are joined with those who have come before us, most of whom we never knew or will ever know about. But they are able to touch the present and find a voice through us in which to offer praise for the new day, if we open ourselves to them and allow our whole being to become attuned to the cosmos.

The following passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* varies only slightly from the

original journal entry (T.T.W. 1/21/63). Merton eliminates direct references to the “hermitage” and substitutes “woods.” But the theme of praise is strong with the word “praise” appearing six times in one form or another in the four sentences of the second paragraph.

We are on retreat. Very cold morning, about 8 above. I left for the woods before dawn, after a conference on sin. Pure dark sky, with only the crescent moon and planets shining: the moon and Venus over the barns, and Mars over in the west over the hills and the fire tower.

Sunrise is an event that calls forth solemn music in the very depths of man’s nature, as if one’s whole being had to attune itself to the cosmos and praise God for the new day, praise Him in the name of all creatures that ever were or ever will be. I look at the rising sun and feel that now upon me falls the responsibility of seeing what all my ancestors have seen, in the Stone Age and even before it, praising God before me. Whether or not they praised Him then, for themselves, they must praise Him now in me. When the sun rises each one of us is summoned by the living and the dead to praise God. (C.G.B. 280)

Perhaps it is not incidental that Merton mentions coming from a conference on sin. The conviction of sin frequently elicits the emotion of guilt and draws attention to the individual as the bearer of guilt and seeker of forgiveness. Merton’s experience, to the contrary, is rooted in cosmic wonder and evokes an invitation to forget one’s self and enter into the great stream of life. Even in the midst of very cold weather, Merton allows himself to be inwardly touched and warmed by the sunrise. The monk recognizes the timeless nature of his act and opens his mind and heart to those who have gone before him. He then invites this communion of saints--including the reluctant ones--to join him in an act of praise. Through this act of remembrance, memoria, he hopes to “save” his ancestors from the dark night of history and his sleeping contemporaries from the sin of forgetfulness. Nor does Merton forget his non-human relatives, raising them also from the dead and giving them life and a voice. Merton suggests that each day the sunrise should remind us of and summon us to our cosmic identity and vocation. We live in solidarity with all beings, human and non-human, living and dead (and yet to come). We do not exist in isolation and our spirituality as well as our morality should reflect this. The whole passage suggests an ecological spirituality that unites a wider cosmic sense of self with a humble acceptance of one’s place within the stream of creation.

The Place Nature Leaves Open

The same sense of participation in a communal act of praise reappears in a journal reflection in April of 1963 and leads Merton to celebrate the vibrancy of the natural world and to reflect upon his proper place within it.

Two superb days. When was there ever such a morning as yesterday? Cold at first, the hermitage dark in the moonlight . . . Then the sunrise, the enormous yolk of energy spreading and spreading as if to take over the sky. After that the ceremonies of the birds feeding in the dewy grass, and the meadowlark feeding and singing. Then the quiet, totally silent, day, warm mid morning under the climbing sun. It was hard to say Psalms: one's attention was totally absorbed by the great arc of the sky and the trees and hills and grass and all things in them. Attention would get carried away in the vast blue arc of the sky, trees, hills, grass, and all things. (T.T.W. 4/13/63)

The tone and sequence of the morning's events started from and built upon another sunrise epiphany. The writer carefully recreates the place, season, time of day and sequence of events. Nature's liturgy unfolds under the spread of the sun's life-giving rays as it moves across the sky: the birds piously conduct their early "ceremonies," feeding eucharistically in the still-dewy grass, while the meadowlark sings its hymn. The monk's own liturgical action (saying Psalms) becomes overpowered by the morning's liturgy. Caught up into the latter, Merton then exclaims: "How absolutely true and how central a truth, that we are purely and simply *part of nature*, though we are the part which recognizes God" (T.T.W. 4/13/63). This, of course, states explicitly what had been implicit in many of his meditations in and on nature. The implications of this simple *credo* are many, as Merton already sensed, for he extended his journal entry in *Conjectures*:

In solitude, one is entirely surrounded by beings which perfectly obey God. This leaves only one place open for me, and if I occupy that place then I, too, am fulfilling His will. The place nature "leaves open" belongs to the conscious one, the one who is aware, who sees all this as a unity, who offers it all to God in praise, joy, thanks. (C.G.B. 294)

Unfortunately, our special status as beings conscious of God does not guarantee that we know, or if we know, are willing to accept our place within creation. Perhaps a good starting point would be our humble recognition that when it comes to the will of God, other beings "perfectly obey God," which by implication places them ahead of most humans. Merton realized that, in fact, it was their spontaneous obedience that made it possible for him to find his own place. In

terms of religious orientation, the place and function of “the one who is aware,” is to experience the unity of creation with one’s self as part of it, and, full of love and reverence, to offer it back to the Creator “in praise, joy, thanks.” We are, then, called to be the attentive eyes and jubilant voice of creation, the part of nature that is self-conscious and through whom creation can consciously celebrate its existence.

Significantly, Merton begins his remarks by emphasizing that it is “in solitude” that he experiences this truth. Merton then reiterates the importance to an eco-liturgical consciousness of actually spending time alone in nature: “One has to be alone, under the sky, before everything falls into place and one finds his own place in the midst of it all.” In other words, the best theological and ecological setting for this special “awareness” is alone in the midst of nature. In such a place the possibility arises of a holistic insight (“everything falls into place”) and an ecological realization (“one finds his own place in the midst of it all”). Such a realization should not be thought of as something esoteric but as one of “the simple, normal, obvious functions” of a human being, without which that person is not fully human (C.G.B. 294).

Note that in the complete passage in *Conjectures*, Merton uses the word “place” five times. Things fall into place, that is, there is a satisfying intellectual and cosmological order to things. Within nature’s order one finds one’s own place (home, *oikos*) that is related to the respective places of all other beings. One’s place can have a theological dimension insofar as it means doing the will of the Creator, a will not ordered from on high but working in and through creation. Thus one follows this will by fulfilling those fundamental responsibilities to other created beings which are built into one’s own being and activated by one’s awareness of both the unity of all beings and each being’s orientation to the Creator. Thereby, humans fulfill their “simple, normal, obvious functions” which also include symbolically offering this eco-communal life, this whole, back to God “in praise, joy, thanks.”

In making the awareness that we are “*part of nature*” “absolutely central” to our identity as humans and claiming that it is in solitude that we most directly realize this, Merton is speaking as a contemplative. However, as often occurs, he shifts into a more prophetic mode and criticizes the

constellation of forces that makes such a realization difficult, if not impossible. This is “the world,” which in its contemporary configuration is at once a social, economic and existential reality constituted by humans and their technologies, “in which each individual is closed in upon himself and his own ideas – clear or unclear - his own desires, his own concerns.” In such a human-centered world “no one pays any attention to the whole” and, as a result, most people have no experience of and do not benefit from its guiding wisdom and transforming power (C.G.B. 294). That is why there is a need for contemplative awareness, for being alone “under the sky,” as a way to break the spell of this self-enclosed order and find one’s “own place in the midst” of the larger whole. Closed in upon himself and herself, separated from “the reality of creation” and assisted by powerful technologies, the individual can “act out his fantasies as a little autonomous god, seeing and judging everything in relation to himself” (C.G.B. 294).

“Worldliness,” then, is “a falsification and perversion of natural perspectives.” Given modernity’s alienation from and urge to dominate the natural world, attempts to blame the Christian tradition for this separation “from the cosmos, the world of sense and of nature” are misplaced at best (C.G.B. 294). The journal entry reads: “It is not Christianity, indeed, but post-Cartesian technologism that separates man from the world and makes him a kind of little god in his own right, with his clear ideas [an allusion to Descartes]; all by himself” (T.T.W. 4/13/63). We who would be simply human (and assumedly not pretend to be gods), “have to have the humility first of all to realize ourselves as part of nature.” The denial of this reality leads to the “madnesses and cruelties” we see all around us (C.G.B. 295). A radical ecologist would also say that our dedication to a post-Cartesian individualism and anthropocentric worldview combines with a commitment to a realm of (Capitalist) production and consumption that protects and expands its influence by sophisticated and powerful technologies.

Merton’s overall reflection in his journal and *Conjectures* began with a meditation on “one good morning” spent at the hermitage and with a contemplative insight and reflection on how central to our humanity is a humble recognition of our proper place as part of the natural world. Merton then contrasted this cosmic, basically religious and humanistic insight, with the mentality

characteristic of the artificial, self-enclosed, and human-centered world of modernity. True human fulfillment and liberation are impossible in such a world, despite its great technological and scientific advances. Functioning out of this distorted worldview, lacking humility born of a “natural” and contemplative perspective, we wreak “madnesses and cruelties” on nature as well as on one another, Merton contends. Meant to be a voice for all creatures, we loudly proclaim only our own superiority. This “one good morning” was for Merton, “a return in spirit to the first morning of the world” (C.G.B. 295).

In these passages, Merton is intuitively making contrasts that radical ecology will deliberately formulate into its critique of modernity and its homogenization of space, its ignoring and more often destroying unique ecosystems or streams or hills that constitute unique natural places to extract “objects” or “resources” and transform them into uniform bits and pieces for consumer use (Smith, 212). On the other hand, when one is open to the various aspects of natural places and the “others” present there, one recognizes “nature as an active participant in the production of self, society, and our ethical values” (Ibid.). And one can add that for Merton, place and nature play an important role in our spiritual lives, including developing and enriching our sense of wonder and humility at being participants in creation’s drama.

II. Spring and Paradise

Child Mind, Spring Mind

As we have seen, Merton loved to be outside, alone, as the dark of night gave way to the light of day. These moments placed him again at the mythic dawn of creation and the first morning in paradise. He also loved those special spring days when he could sense the turning of the year towards summer. As *point vierge*, dawn and spring both speak of “irreplaceable purity,” innocence, re-creation and a child mind. The time can seem so brief; sometimes it only takes a few days for the trees to bring forth their leaves. Thus it is important to be awake and attentive for “the precise days when everything changes . . . and the first green freshness of a new summer is all over the hills.” Spring, 1964 brings an experience that is intensified by the mixture of the sublime and painful.

I live in a mixture of heavenliness and anguish. Sometimes I suddenly see “heavenliness.” For instance, in the pure, pure white of the mature dogwood

blossoms against the dark evergreens in the cloudy garden. “Heavenliness” too of the song of the unknown bird that is perhaps here for only one or two days, passing through. A lovely deep simple song. Pure, no pathos, no statement, no desire, just pure heavenly sound. I am seized by this heavenliness as if I were a child, a child mind I have never done anything to deserve, and which is my own part of the heavenly spring. This is not of this world nor is it of my own making. It is born partly of physical anguish which is really not deep, though. The anguish goes so quickly. I have a sense that this underlying heavenliness is the real nature of things. Not their nature, but the deeper truth that they are a gift of love and of freedom, and that *this* is their true reality. (D.W.L. 4/23/64)

This passage is filled with interplaying opposites: darkness and light, winter and summer, night and day, silence and song, anguish and joy, and above all, “heaven” and “earth.” Just as the solemnity of sunrise can elicit an aesthetic-religious response, so can the subtle contrast of colors, such as the “pure, pure, white” of dogwood blossoms against the “dark evergreens.” The sense of a deeper mystery is suggested by Merton’s locating of this contrast in a “cloudy” garden. As a feeling, “heavenliness” contrasts with physical anguish, yet, just as spring embraces both winter and summer, he lives “in a mixture.”

“Heavenliness” begins as an intense aesthetic experience and develops into a spiritual realization. A “song” that is “lovely deep simple” and “pure” evokes a resonant meeting of inner and outer. Carrying no “pathos” or “desire,” this song does not appeal to the emotions nor does it carry an explicit message demanding conceptual operations. The inner song meets the pure, receptive mind, a child mind, perhaps a Zen mind. The child mind lies hidden beneath the tangles of the adult mind, hidden, like the unknown bird, seemingly alien to these parts and which, like the spring day, is a gift that stays but for a brief moment. Yet, in that moment, the bird’s song pierces the adult facade and makes one aware of one’s “child mind” full of innocence and purity, always there, but too often overlooked.

This “child mind” is pure grace, like the spring, like the song, and is the monk’s “own part of the heavenly spring.” This underlying heavenliness is also the “deeper truth” of things, their reality as “gift of love and freedom.” As such, they participate in the same mystery as the “child mind.” The world does not deserve the gift of spring any more than a person deserves the

“child mind.” Yet here they are, both gifts of love and freedom. The child mind allows the adult to experience a reality transcending the dualities of white and black, sound and silence, anguish and joy.

The next day, Merton is transported by “heavenliness—again.” This time the earth’s heavenliness is reflected in the body’s lightness:

For instance, walking up into the woods yesterday afternoon--as if my feet acquired a heavenly lightness from contact with the earth of the path. As though the earth itself were filled with an indescribable spirituality and lightness as if the true nature of the earth were to be heavenly, or rather as if all things, in truth, had a heavenly existence. As if existence itself were heavenliness. (D.W.L. 4/24/64)

The world here is experienced in its sacramental or iconic structure. Material, concrete entities become endowed with a universal, spiritual quality or presence. As Merton’s feet touch the path (and one must remember that Merton occasionally walked barefooted through the woods), the earth itself conveys an unusual lightness to them. The lightness of Merton’s body is a reflection and perhaps manifestation of the spirituality of the earth. Like his previous experience, this one is of Kentucky and paradise, or of Kentucky-as-paradise. Feet and path remain body and earth but with a light and heavenly quality.

Eight months later at Edelin’s Hollow, Merton experiences what he terms a “moment of angelic lucidity,” gripped again by a state of wonder that alters his sense perception and his mental reflection. Merton had gone out to explore some “wild” woods that lay several miles from the monastery for a possible hermitage site. Perhaps being in a strange place, away from the familiar routine and geography already prepared him for the unusual. The monk came down through the woods to a spring that was “absolutely pure and clear and sweet with the freshness of untouched water. No chemicals.” He had not tasted water like that in more than twenty-five years. Then, he looks up.

I looked up at the clear sky and the tops of the leafless trees shining in the sun and it was a moment of angelic lucidity. Said Tierce with great joy, overflowing joy, as if the land and the woods and spring were all praising God through me. Again the sense of angelic transparency of everything, and of pure, simple and total light. The word that comes closest to pointing to it is simple. It was all simple. But a simplicity to which one seems to aspire, only seldom to attain it. A simplicity that is, and has, and says everything just because it is

simple. (D.W.L. 1/6/65)

Note that it is a “clear” sky into which many dark, leafless tree branches reach. Yet, surprisingly, not only do they do not interfere with the sky’s “clarity,” but, reflecting the sun’s light, add their own “shining” quality to it. One might wonder whether ice clung to the branches, but Merton does not mention this. In order to emphasize the unique quality of this experience, Merton drops the term “heavenliness” and uses “angelic” and “lucid.” In both cases there seems to have been a sudden sense of wonder that sent feelings such as joy surging through his body and mind, altering his perception of his surroundings. That quality and feeling remains with him, turning what would have been a private act of saying Tierce, into a communal act with nature. Merton’s mind remains open to the larger light-filled world but now the liturgical mood adds a sense that “the land and woods” and watery “spring” praise God through his prayer. Throughout his choral performance, his “great joy” overflows and suffuses all beings in his environment.

Similarly, the “angelic lucidity” of his experience mirrors the “angelic transparency” in nature. Light, as it were, both fills Merton (lucidity) and lends a transparency to nature. Merton searches for an adjective to capture the main quality of this “sense of angelic transparency” and of pure, total light. “Simple” seems the word that comes closest. Here it means “a simplicity to which one seems to aspire, only seldom to attain,” a kind of simplicity that “is, and has, and says everything just because it is simple.” Perhaps it is a truth and experience to which one aspires unconsciously most of the time, in often-complex ways. But at certain moments the simple truth just appears. Nothing changes, yet everything changes. Paradise is not elsewhere; this is not a different place but a different state of mind and being. It is Edelin’s hollow, it is Eden; it is an adult mind, it is a child mind; it is human, it is angelic. But most of all, it is simple.

Conclusion

This was the time for epiphanies at dawn and chants with songbirds, of Paradise recovered and innocence uncovered, of *le point vierge* and of lucid light, of ancestors resurrected along with new possibilities, of joining a choir of creatures and a new communion of saints and angels, of earth and sky. Thus, it was a return to ancient revelations and sacred earth liturgies, to

the presence of Sophia and Logos, to sacraments of fire and water, to the Transfigured Christ, to the Zen Mind, and to the holy fool. Merton the mystic, opened by the secrets of solitude, was also Merton the prophet, a voice in the wilderness crying for peace and justice, returning from the wilderness with new visions, and Merton the poet, painting light-filled pictures of possibilities.

During these years, Merton moved closer towards the realization of his goal of total solitude. Yet, being Thomas Merton, he was simultaneously inserting himself into both the public debate over nuclear weapons, civil rights, social justice, eco-justice and the internal debates over ecclesial and monastic reform. Rather than uprooting himself he plunged his roots deeper allowing for a stronger, more expansive and more vigorous outreach. This balance would be tested and upset at times. What became increasingly important was to *see*, to be awake and aware, but also to *hear* the voice of God in the songs of birds in the woods and the cries of brothers and sisters in the streets.

This, of course, is the call to a deeper contemplative life, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Buddhist. The contemplative is one who is able to stay awake and free within the alienating structures, mechanical rhythms and trivializing routines of a technological, consumerist society. The contemplative life, as Merton presents it here, can place a person within a meaningful natural world that offers a deeper and wider context within which to gain perspective and experience a broadening of identity. Embracing it or returning to it also offers a center, grounding and state of awareness to one who wants to help turn modernity away from its currently destructive path. Nor is this simply a division between professional contemplatives in monasteries and the “half-asleep” in the society “outside.” Monastic society can become so absorbed in and defined by “what is given by men” that it lacks awareness of “what is given by God.” The latter gift can be experienced in a more immediate manner in the natural world.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LARGO: SENSES QUIET, EVENING FIRE, WINTER RAIN

Dusk in the forest is the time of the senses, of the damp coolness of evening touching the skin, of faint movements in the shadows, musk smells, the evening chant of birds, the rustling of small creatures. And, it is the time for listening, for opening to the surrounding sounds. The night embraces you, envelopes your life in the dark like a mother in the infant's dreams, embraces you like a lover under covers. In the cabin in the woods it is a time for the lamp and fire; in the camp, for the crackling of kindling and the smoky smell of pine. It is a time to recover the body, to return to place and ground, to surrender to the gathering dark: hearth and home, memories recovered and newly formed within the long evening's silences and sounds. While above in the dark, a sky of stars, light made more fierce by the absolute darkness.

Recovering the Senses

The environmental philosopher David Abram has pointedly written:

It may be that the new "environmental ethic" toward which so many environment philosophers aspire—an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature—will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us. (S.S. 69)

In this chapter we move with Merton through a recovery of the world of the body, a recovery of the world of sense and of the sensuous dusk. Merton's lovely "Fire Watch" was permeated with night and earth, with deep cellars and damp walls and with the swarming chorus of night sounds. Ironically, however, for most of his years at the monastery, Merton's experience of dusk and late evenings, of a light in the dark, was limited. But that was to change as the length and frequency of time spent at the hermitage increased and with it a new life-rhythm and a new level of sensorial awareness.

As early as June 1963 Merton was allowed to make a long retreat at the hermitage, even though he had to return to the monastery at night (T.T.W. 6/1/63). Not long thereafter he was

given permission to spend one whole day a week at the hermitage and even on occasion to sleep there. This transition to more frequent and sustained periods of time in solitude, including more late evening and night-time hours, helped Merton *recover* his senses and *uncover* submerged parts of his humanity. In turn, these changes enabled him to deepen the quality of his relationships with the natural world including with fellow members of his ecological community.

Even during his June 1963 retreat, Merton notices that he is developing a different sense of time connected to that place's different web of relationships and connected tempos: "Time here seems quite a different kind of measure . . . [f]or time is constituted by relationships and here all the relationships are different" (T.T.W. 6/3/63). The relationships are more real in the woods, he claims, because they are more immediate, natural, and simple, while those at the monastery seem unreal because they are too "artificial and contrived." At the hermitage, Merton has "a sense of being both fully relaxed and fully alive." Even his usual urge to read and write goes unheeded because of "the sweetness and fullness of time that is not good to lose." Also not good to lose is the quality of "*immediacy*" discovered in his relationship with "[t]he sun, the summer tanager (I finally connected the song with the bird), the clear morning, the trees, the quiet, the barely born butterfly from the cocoon under the bench, etc" (T.T.W. 6/3/63). This retreat took place about six months after Merton read Rachel Carson's seminal *Silent Spring* and wrote an important letter to her.

Merton discovers that immersion in solitude and being "saturated with silence and landscape" are necessary if one is to experience a "restoration of one's normal human balance." Once this saturation occurs, one can then move more deeply into the "interior work" of prayer and meditation; but "first the saturation." Mentally, life at the hermitage made him feel more awake, as if having awoken from a dream. Emotionally, the monk felt like one who was experiencing a "convalescence after an illness" (T.T.W. 6/4/63).

Solitude in nature would help him to *recover* his senses, *uncover* parts of his humanity, and *restore* balance and health to his life. But this would be an ongoing process of self-knowledge and transformation. In the spiritual life, finding oneself is the first step to losing oneself. Merton

felt that his “experienced relationship with nature in solitude” was restoring an identity that was “healthier” than his identity as a “writer or a monk.” (Note the emphasis on experience.) Nevertheless, even this identity would probably be transitional, like a cocoon stage “between what crawls and what flies” (T.T.W. 6/4/63).

Indeed, the increased solitude and simplicity provided by the hermitage were all the more necessary during the 1960s as a counter-balance to the increased complexity and anxiety he experienced as he “turned to the world” and reached out to address the major issues of his day. Merton admitted to himself that he felt a certain urgency to speak out, given the very serious international and domestic crises. But even as he judged the society of his day to be “gravely ill,” he recognized his own tendency to become too negative and at times to over-react to what he perceived to be society’s pathologies. Because of these tendencies, solitude would be all the more necessary in his developing a “reserve and caution and *silence* in my looking at the world and my attempts to help us all survive” (T.T.W. 6/4/63). One admires both his desire to speak out effectively and his ability to critique his own exaggerations by using solitude not only as a way to better *see* the serious flaws in modernity but to examine and check himself so that quick judgments appealing to the ego and its passions don’t betray or distort wisdom and deeper seeing. Reflecting on these days of a silent immersion in nature, Merton concludes that the “experience of solitude is important and most valuable.” He also recognizes that at this stage in his development as a hermit, he must necessarily engage in a process of rediscovering and recovering himself at all levels. However, if solitude is to be a truly transformative force, he will need to spend “*whole days*, and days *in succession* out here.” This block of time spent on retreat had convinced him that his “desire for solitude has been basically right, and not a delusion” (T.T.W. 6/6/63).

The retreat had provided Merton with a respite from his busy life as Novice Master and his involvement in communal (and international) politics. While he admits that he had found the liturgical round of prayer as well as his reading and reflection in preparation for teaching the novices and juniors to be spiritually enriching, he nevertheless is now convinced that he must “get away to the hermitage” if he is “to recover some semblance of a personal life of meditation

and prayer” (T.T.W. 6/6/63). Yet, he repeats his complaint that the length of time he is permitted to spend at the hermitage on any one visit is barely enough “to recover my senses” (Ibid.). (This recovery of the senses, as we shall see, is important for the type of experience in and of nature that Merton seeks).

At the present, “[i]t is not so much a matter of real contemplation as a necessary recreation, a breathing spell.” Not wishing to seem ungrateful, he hastens to add that “it is a joy,” even if, in truth, it is “not deep enough.” With “*more* time out here” he is certain that he can “go beyond that.” With more time, his prayer, filled now with “the silence and peace of nature,” will open him to something more “deeply interior.” He does not want to use “visible creation” simply as an “external medium” but suspects that at times he had (T.T.W. 6/6/63). However, as he continues his quest, Merton will uncover new depths within himself that at the same time intensify his presence to and experience of nature. In addition to and accompanying these, the increased time in solitude had been important for “a recovery of the real dimensions of the mystery of Christ” and of a “deep and primitive faith” which he considers pure gift. He is, indeed, grateful for all of this and relieved that his renewed spirit is “once again breathing after a long time of stuffiness and suffocation” (Ibid.).

Immediately following the journal notes and reflections on his retreat in the midst of “the silence and peace of nature,” are a set of intriguing suggestions on the recovery and renewal of the “Monastic Spirit.” Among other things, he calls for “a tradition that opens out in *full continuity* into a wisdom capable of understanding the mystery of the contemporary world in the light of *theoria*” (T.T.W. 6/6/63). Such an understanding requires the development of a “sensitivity” to the problems of modernity (justice, peace, and technology) and “*the great spiritual problem of the profound disturbances of ecology all over the world, the tragic waste and spoilage of natural resources, etc. . . .*” (Ibid. my italics). Again Merton uses strong language with which to emphasize the importance of contemplative (personal/spiritual) wisdom to an increased “sensitivity” to social (justice, peace, technology) and ecological issues and their interconnections. But he makes the point that ecological despoliation/destruction is also a “great spiritual problem.” The various

streams of a radical ecology are present here and are linked to a contemplative knowledge and wisdom that Merton sees as necessary for a sensitive understanding of both creation and history.

Re-inhabiting & Re-habilitating Body and Place

Solitude and natural contemplation do not have as their aim the soul's transport to esoteric realms or a mystical upward rupture of metaphysical planes. Rather, they lead one to re-inhabit body and place but with a transformed awareness. Bringing mind into body awakens the senses, drawing the sensible inward to enrich the mental and even spiritual "senses." One consequence of this "rehabilitation of the sensible" is that the whole self is opened to an inter-subjective field of awareness that deepens one's relationship with the world. Merton increasingly came to understand natural contemplation not as an apprehension of the esoteric and extraordinary but, functioning within the Incarnational model, as a deepening of our awareness of the ordinary.

Providentially, it was Merton's discovery of the French philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty that gave him a vocabulary and a way of seeing suited to the rehabilitation of his own senses and to his task of re-inhabiting body and place. Phenomenology also supported Merton's own criticism of modernity's embrace of the Cartesian *cogito* ("I think, therefore I am") which separates mind from body and both from any inter-subjective field of awareness and meaning. By logical and practical extension, this means separating humanity from nature. Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of the body as a neutral medium through which the mind communicates its already formed meanings to the world. Rather, the body itself is active in creating meaning and making "sense" of the world's meanings. The body is the instrument of its own life, Merton remarks, "*making sense*, by all its acts, of the world in which it is. The whole body is art and full of art. Corporeity is style. A deeply (religious) spiritual concept!! Corporeity—a sense and focus of intelligent convergences" (D.W.L. 1/17/64).

The thought of Merleau-Ponty resonated with Merton's own increasing sense of being-in-place. In such an experience, the conscious, aware body realizes itself as an integral part of a larger whole. The body is a porous membrane through which the human moves into the world

and the world moves into the human. For Merton, this accentuates the “[i]mportance of that solitude, which is a solitary, spiritual-material rehabilitation of the sensible . . . as ‘self’ known in and through me . . . the sensible around me being conscious of itself as me —allowing nature to return this virginal, silent, secret, pure, unrelatable consciousness in me.” This results in a “mutual exploration of silences and meanings . . . to which my body is present or in which it is present.” Merton’s choice of the following words: “The self-awareness of the great present in which my body is fully and uniquely situated” links this reflection to Zen Buddhism and provides insight into the contemplative dimension of his experiences in solitude in the midst of the natural world. He immediately corrects his use of the possessive “my” when speaking of body: “(‘my’? – not as ‘had’ by me, though!!)” (D.W.L. 1/20/64).

While common, the use of “my body” implies a dualism between the ego-self and its isolated consciousness and the body which it controls, fights with, owns. Such a self or mind would tend to separate itself from the meanings embedded in the self-world. Similarly, the use of “our” land or “our” planet” can imply a social, political, even religious order separated from and pretending to define and control Place (and its human inhabitants as with “Europeans” and “Injuns”).

As David Abram notes:

Ultimately, then, it is not the human body alone but rather the whole of the sensuous world that provides the deep structure of language. As we ourselves dwell and move within language, so, ultimately, do the other animals and animate things of the world; if we do not notice them there, it is only because language has forgotten its expressive depths. It is no more true that *we* speak than that the things, and the animate world itself, *speak within us*. (S.S. 85)

Indeed, the body’s gestures are themselves “part of a universal syntax,” Merton notes, a language that carries meaning (D.W.L. 1/17/64). For Abram, the movements and sounds of animals and birds are not sense-less but constitute a meaningful world. Through our bodily experience “we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that *speaks*” (S.S. 81). Our body is a meaningful, pre-reflective world that supports and informs us, and should not be thought of as separate from “higher” activities like meditation and prayer. Life (body) connects

and integrates spirit and matter, the internal and external, the human and divine (D.W.L. 1/17/64).

As Merton moves into a slower, more natural rhythm, he also rediscovers and recovers lost or buried aspects of his own humanity:

There is no question, once again, that I am only fully normal and human when I have plenty of solitude. Not that I “think” but that I “live” according to a different and more real tempo, live with the tempo of the sun and of the day, in harmony with what is around me. It would be infidelity to evade or deny the obvious truth that such a life is fully and completely right, and I cannot doubt it is the life I was meant for. (D.W.L. 9/22/64)

Merton agrees with Merleau Ponty’s statement that Marxism (and one would assume most western scenarios of “progress”) uses history as a way to demand “the immolation of the present,” forcing us to recognize its/our “nothingness” in the face of what humankind will eventually become (D.W.L. 1/17/64). Variations on this tension appear in many of Merton’s reflections during this period. His own contemplative experience, perhaps bearing the influence of Zen, is moving towards a more embodied spirituality and a deepening awareness of and openness to the “great present” in which the body is situated. (However, one must always balance this with Merton’s view that the present as “realized eschatology” does not negate the sophianic view of cosmic and human history as a joint movement towards this eschatological fulfillment in God.)

Night and Self: Fall, 1964

In October 1964, Merton reports that Dom James “gave me permission to sleep at the hermitage, without any special restriction, though not necessarily all the time . . . Last night I did this for the first time . . .” (D.W.L. 10/13/64). The monk had had little experience of being awake at “night” in his twenty-three years at the monastery. He was discovering a newly-found appreciation for the night, for its unique mood and tempo, and for the skills needed to find one’s way around in the dark. He observes that “[s]leeping at the hermitage gives one a totally different sense of time--measured by the phases of the moon (whether or not one will need a flashlight, etc.). This in itself is important. The whole day has different dimensions” (D.W.L. 10/29/64). And the night sky brought its own delights:

Tonight the moon was shining in the west. And really new! Although men have seen

the same for a million years I suppose. That is one of the good things about being in the woods—this living by sun, moon and stars, and using (gladly) the moonlight...I am surprised how easy it is to follow a familiar path even by starlight. (D.W.L. 11/6/64)

Beginning in late November he occasionally spends a full day at the hermitage. He writes ecstatically of the effect of these new rhythms and tempos on his life. “Only here do I feel that my life is fully human,” he writes. “And only what is authentically human is fit to be offered to God” (D.W.L. 11/24/64). Thomas Merton had often written that one should not enter the life of solitude in order to escape one’s humanity--or that of others.

As he spends more frequent and longer periods of time at the hermitage, the monk begins to realize that the life of solitude requires that he develop new disciplines and new “rituals” to go along with its new tempos. One week he waxes eloquently about his new life: “How full the days are, full of slow and quiet, ordered, occupied (sawing wood, sweeping, reading, taking notes, meditating, praying, tending the fire, or just looking at the valley),” and contrasts it with the “artificiality” of life elsewhere (the monastery, the world) (D.W.L. 11/24/64). A week later he remarks on his need for “discipline,” the “need to get my solitary life more organized. I can see this is the big battle - to stay centered on something and not float out into space.” He affirms a “need for seriousness” (D.W.L. 11/29/64).

But there were also special moments when old feelings and memories resurfaced: “Will not easily forget the thin sickle of the old moon rising this morning just before dawn...” Under a cold sky, the “hard brightness” of the stars shone through the pines. Amid the “snow and frost” Merton experienced “exaltation on the bright darkness of morning.” He recaptured “the lostness and wonder of the first days when I came here twenty-three years ago, abandoned to God, with everything left behind. I have not felt this for a long time here” (D.W.L. 12/01/64). Life in the monastery had become too sociable, too comfortable and too busy. Brought “face to face with the loneliness and poverty of the cold hills and the Kentucky winter” he was again brought face to face with “the reality of my own life!” (Ibid.). The expression “face to face” suggests a stance wherein the monk sets aside masks and roles to risk an *immediate* naked confrontation with reality. He accepts vulnerability in the interests of wisdom and truth. “Face to face” also suggests

an embodied openness and presence to cold reality.

On the other hand, there was a certain stability provided by the fixed monastic schedule that he had followed for more than twenty years. Now in a relative short span of time there are large amounts of unstructured time. “In the hermitage,” Merton admits, “--I see how quickly one can fall apart. I talk to myself, I dance around the hermitage, I sing . . . And I suddenly remember absurd things: The song Pop had on the record forty-five years ago! ‘The Whistler and His Dog,’ Crazy!” (D.W.L. 12/04/64). The monk realizes that he could easily “go to seed” in his new life if he does not pray, especially at night. “One can pretend in the solitude of an afternoon walk,” he admits, “but the night destroys all pretenses, one is reduced to nothing, and compelled to begin laboriously the long return to truth” (D.W.L. 12/05/64).

Deep Listening, Total Attending

Merton struggled for years to discern the will of God. The divine “voice” was the traditional almost literal metaphor for the means by which by the Heavenly Father/Divine King proclaimed His Will and commanded obedience. Often a hierarchy of authority figures who claimed more direct access to these divine decrees was interposed between the individual and God. This model, even in its less anthropomorphic version, had become increasingly problematic for Merton. A more contemplative theology and spirituality sought metaphors and models that were more consistent with an intimacy with the divine presence, less dualistic, hierarchical, and one might say, patriarchal. Merton had claimed that one should not think of the will of God as some “blind force plunging through our lives like a cosmic steamroller and demanding to be accepted willy-nilly.” A more “sophianic, contemplative orientation” enables one “to *understand* the hidden purposes of the creative wisdom” and mercy of God. Such an understanding calls upon us to “accord with *the creative wisdom of God* in things and in history” (I.C.M. 125-26). The ability to understand and accord—or attune oneself--with this wisdom in creation and human history requires the development of an inner sensitivity to the divine presence and creative wisdom within one’s own being.

This type of “listening” is more easily developed in solitude. “The great joy of the solitary

life,” Merton writes, “is not found simply in quiet, in the beauty and peace of nature, song of birds etc., nor in the peace of one’s heart, but in the awakening and attuning of the heart to the voice of God – to the inexplicable [quiet] definite inner certitude of one’s call to obey Him, to hear Him, to worship Him here, now, today in silence and alone . . .” (D.W.L. 6/8/65). Obedience in this context does not mean obeying laws passed down from “on high” nor even fulfilling the duties or performing the religious exercises dictated by a monastic tradition. This different “work of the cell” means “obedience to the simple conditions imposed by what *is* here and now” (V.O.C. 6/8/65). Any distinct line separating sacred space, time and actions from their profane counterparts becomes harder to draw. Now the primary distinction is between the attentive person who knows how to listen and the one who is deaf.

The voice of God is not clearly heard at every moment; and part of the “work of the cell” is *attention*, so that one may not miss any sound of that voice. What this means, therefore, is not only attention to inner grace but to external reality. Hence, this implies also a forgetfulness of oneself as totally apart from outer objects, standing back from outer objects; it demands an integration of one’s own life in the stream of natural and human and cultural life of the moment. (V.O.C. 6/8/65)

We should note that Merton links attending and listening. Deep listening demands a total attending, a holistic receptiveness, a non-judgmental awareness involving body, mind, and spirit. Merton provided a partial glimpse into this mode of awareness when writing about a room at the top of a set of stairs that served as a temporary “hermitage” several years earlier: “One is alone, not on guard, utterly relaxed and receptive, having four walls and silence all around you to listen, so to speak, with all the pores of your skin and to absorb truth through every part of your being” (S.S. 5/8/60).

In his essay, “Is the Contemplative Life Finished?” based on notes for taped conferences, Merton has a section entitled “*The Discipline of Listening*.” He refers to the Martha-Mary story where Mary was criticized by her active sister for choosing the easier passive role of simply sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening. Merton, however, points out that “remaining quietly in the presence of God, listening to Him, being attentive to Him, requires a lot of courage and know-how.” The art that combines “listening” and “attention” is both “a very high form” of spiritual

discipline and one that is difficult to sustain. (C.W.A. 375). Basing himself on John of the Cross, Merton portrays the contemplative as one who waits “in this solitude, in this listening, in this tranquil attention” (C.W.A. 376). In a section on “*Attentiveness to God*,” Merton characterizes this type of contemplative discipline as one of “solitary listening, solitary attentiveness, interior purification, interior disposability, openness, readiness to be spoken to, and interior sensitivity, and interior awareness, all of which we cultivate in prayer.” (C.W.A. 384)

“Prayer” in this context does not entail the utterance of verbal formulas but an orientation of one’s “whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration” (T.S. 48). In such a state of being, Merton claims, “everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all” (T.S. 94). Yet he does not use them for his self-interest but lets their silence remain and his wordless state of prayer lets-be their being which is their prayer and his.

This orientation clearly guided Merton’s loving openness to and deep awareness of other living beings and natural realities. Awake, alert, and attentive in the moment, he listens with his whole being, not with strained concentration but with a relaxed receptive presence. His silence listens to the silence of other beings. “The beings that are in silence make silence real, for their silence is identified with their being. To name their being is to name their silence. And therefore it [this naming] should be an act of reverence” (T.S. 69).

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FRUIT: RAIN & THE RHINOCEROS

Rain and Whole Body Listening

John Hull was a man who had lost his sense of sight and all visual imagery, including images in the memory. To compensate, he shifted to a “whole body awareness” which included the other senses, repositioning “listening” as the primary metaphor for this awareness. And it was rain that opened this new, fuller world, a world resonating with the flowing of rich chords. Neurologist Oliver Sachs, writes in the *New Yorker*, that Hull

. . . speaks of how the sounds of rain, never before accorded much attention, can now delineate a whole landscape for him, for its sound on the garden path is different from its sound as it drums on the lawn, or on the bushes in his garden, or on the fence dividing it from the road.

Rain has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a colored blanket over previously invisible things; instead of an intermittent and thus fragmented world, the steadily falling rain creates continuity of acoustic experience . . . presents the fullness of an entire situation all at once . . . gives a sense of perspective and of the actual relationships of one part of the world with another. (Quoted in Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses*, 189)

Jon Kabat-Zinn, M.D. notes that Hull’s passage from a state where he “never before accorded much attention” to sounds to one where they “now delineate a whole landscape” shows the effects of increased attention to hearing. Attention can also be increased through the practice of mindfulness meditation, a basic type of contemplative practiced developed in Buddhism and taught in a therapeutic setting by Kabat-Zinn. Interestingly, when Merton uses “listening” to characterize a type of contemplative attention he also means whole-body awareness, not simply auditory sensation. Sachs also calls Hull a “whole-body-seer” because he shifts his medium and mode of “seeing” from his now imageless eyes to a holistic awareness that reshapes the relation of all the senses to one another. Though dominated by one sense, as Hull’s mode of “listening” to the rain is by hearing, holistic attention actually brings all of the senses—even his lost sense of sight—into the act of paying attention to sound. Merton’s own contemplative practice of attending to his inner landscape with his whole self and “listening” with it for the “voice” of God could be shifted and opened out into a mode of attending and being receptive to the wisdom present in the outer

landscape.

Kabat-Zinn notes that normally “we perceive across all our senses simultaneously . . . [t]he senses overlap and blend together, and cross-pollinate” (C.S. 190). This phenomenon, called synesthesia, occurs most of the time, but we are not aware of it because of our “alienation from our own feeling body and from the natural world” (Ibid.). The natural world can play a crucial role in the recovery of our awareness of and attention to synesthesia. Kabat-Zinn claims that, just as those who have suffered the loss of one or more of the senses can make adjustments in mind and body “to fashion a full life,” we can all deepen our own lives by “purposefully according some attention to the natural world, which beckons to us and offers itself to us through all our senses simultaneously.” He then reminds us that this is the “world in which our very senses were fashioned and honed, and in which we have been seamlessly embedded from the beginning (Ibid.).

Note that the doctor echoes the monk when he says that the natural world “beckons” (Merton’s “voice”) and “offers itself to us” (Merton’s “gratuity” and “gift”). As evolutionary biologists and psychologists have pointed out, humans evolved within the matrix of the natural world and their senses are attuned to nature’s colors, shapes, rhythms and movements. Survival often hinged on this whole-body awareness. The development of a more conscious, receptive and spiritual dimension to this awareness opens up new possibilities for experience and reflection. There seems to be an ecological wisdom (eco-sophia) that unites nature and humans. Our body-world already prepares us for and indeed calls us into a deeper exploration of these common ties and mutual depths. Not coincidentally, Merton connects his body’s “rehabilitation of the sensible” to “the sensible around me being conscious of itself as me” (D.W.L. 1/20/64). An eco-spirituality of this kind will “naturally” engage one’s whole being from the sensorial to the spiritual. In fact, the latter is an opening to a particular “sense” of the whole that paradoxically does not eliminate the diversity of other living and non-living beings. One recalls Sach’s claim that whole-body listening to rain “gives a sense of perspective and of the actual relationships of one part of the world with another” (in Zinn, C.S. 189).

Phenomenologists would reiterate that reason's ability to provide perspective, to analyze parts, and to relate them to a whole is itself grounded in and nurtured by patterns of meaning found in the body and the sensible world: not only reason but perhaps also our moral sense. To repeat the words of David Abrams, "it is not the human body alone but rather the whole of the sensuous world that provides the deep structure of language . . . [today] language has forgotten its expressive depths. It is no more true that *we* speak than that the things, and the animate world itself, *speak within us*" (S.S. 81, 85). Merton's listening for the voice of God speaking within when understood in the light of Abrams' statement sheds new light on Merton's claim that *theoria physike* is *sophianic* because by it a person unites the "hidden wisdom" of God in created beings with the "hidden light of wisdom" in his or her self. Not only does a person's mind but their life itself becomes full of this deeper truth (I.C.M. 125-126). Wisdom or this deeper pattern and presence of meaning suffuses nature and dwells within our whole being and is not, contrary to modernism, a singular product of the human mind.

Listening to the Rain

One evening in December 1964, Thomas Merton sat in his cabin *listening* to the rain. Out of this attentive listening came the wonderful essay, "Rain and the Rhinoceros." Merton's essay is both a profoundly personal, contemplative response to rain and a sober evaluation of contemporary humanity's alienation from the sensory world of nature and its rhythms. Merton invites the reader to listen with him and to reflect on what constitutes an authentic life.

Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By "they" I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something *actual* is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even the rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness. (R.U. 9)

Merton suggests that people can experience and value rain – and, one could add, the natural world – in two different ways. The first way values rain for its usefulness, its utility. A natural phenomenon is valued according to how it serves the needs and fulfills the wants of humans. The economic system or "market" purportedly determines this "real" value. The second

way, contemplative and moral, respects and celebrates the rain and the natural world as realities with a value of their own, an intrinsic value. The former consciousness is more Cartesian, rooted in the alienated individual who seeks power by manipulation and control. By contrast, the second mode of consciousness is rooted in the person who is open to communion with nature. Only the free person can appreciate the free gift that is rain; only a person in touch with his or her own truth can understand the deeper “meaningless” truth proclaimed by the rain.

Merton’s contrasting of the sounds of nature with the noise and artificiality of the city is paralleled by his comparison of the spiritually mature person with the shallow member of the herd.

The “uselessness” of nature is a reminder of the non-instrumental and hence “useless” nature of the free person. The uselessness of the person, posits Merton and Chuang Tzu, points to a spiritual freedom and identity that transcend the restrictive self-definitions created by society. “There is a time for warmth in the collective myth” and the “social womb,” writes Merton, “But there is also a time to be born” (R.U. 17). Socialization too often means keeping the person’s identity in utero.

The rain is also a reminder that natural rhythms have become foreign to many of us and, in fact, are antithetical and intrusive to the pace of life in a modern mechanistic society. Humans, like nature, have become grist for “the greed of machinery that does not sleep, the hum of power that eats up the night” (R.U. 10). We have become acclimated to “a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man” (R.U. 11). Merton points to nature’s wonderful power of self-renewal, a renewal that often symbolizes and sometimes nurtures the renewal of the human spirit. (See his discussion of Mencius’ “Ox Mountain Parable” and the effects of nature) Such self-renewing power is not present in a machinelike society and economy whose wheels can only continue to turn if it devours nature’s resources, breaks apart its web of self-renewing ecosystems and damages air, water and land with waste.

But rain renews, and night renews, and the forest provides a place for the alienated one to

feel at home (oikos) and renewed.

Here I am not alien. The trees I know, the night I know, the rain I know. I close my eyes and instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part, and the world goes on with me in it, for I am not alien to it. (R.U. 10)

The rain speaks to the one who is listening, and “as long as it talks I am going to listen,” confesses the monk. Merton is awed by all of this free speech, “pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody.” The rain’s speech is “perfectly innocent speech” and “the most comforting speech in the world . . .” There is the talk that rain itself makes as it pours down across the ridges and the talk of “watercourses everywhere in the hollows!” (R.U. 10). Rain speaks its own truth which is its own being. There is no duplicity in such speech.

Merton’s poetic appreciation for the evening rain in this essay reminds one of a passage from his “Atlas and the Fatman,” a modern parable cast in mythic terms and contained in the same slim volume, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, as “Rain and the Rhinoceros”(R.U.91-107). Atlas is at home in the natural world and both his habitus and identity contrast with Fatman who rumbles in stadiums and cities.

When it is evening, when night begins to darken, when rain is warm in the summer darkness and rumors come up from the woods and from the bank of rivers, then shores and forests sound around you with wordless solicitude of mothers. It is then that flowering palms enchant the night with their sweet smell. Flowers sleep. Thoughts become simple. Words cease. The hollows of the mind fill with dreams as with water.

In the sacred moment between sleep and staying awake, Atlas speaks to the night as to a woman. He speaks freely to the night he loves, thinking no one is at hand.

He speaks of his heart at the bottom of the ocean, he speaks of the spirit at the center of the world. (R.U. 92-3)

The December rain also speaks the language of innocence, and hence of paradise. Its words collect together to form a kind of “virginal myth,” and a “whole world of meaning” (R.U. 10). The city has its own myth, a myth of “a world outside the world, against the world” of meaning that rain and nature embody and express. For restless city dwellers, it is not enough to “be a part of the night, or merely of the world” of nature (R.U. 11). In that fabricated world, objects have no value that is not human-made and assigned to them. In some cases, a tree’s

existence in the city might be justified by placing a sign on it “saying it is for health, beauty, perspective; that it is for peace, for prosperity; that it was planted by the mayor’s daughter” (Ibid.).

To listen deeply so as to comprehend this “virginal myth,” we must break through the collective social myth that obscures both our own and nature’s identity and truth. “Now if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity,” claims Merton, “if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth.” In fact, society conspires with us in the creation of this illusion (R.U. 15). The city conspires in “one basic lie: only the city is real.” And with no little sarcasm, Merton suggests “(Just a simple little operation and the whole mess may become relatively tolerable. Let business make the rain. This will give it meaning.)” (R.U. 12). Yet, fortunately, there are still people in the woods, listening to the rain, for no reason. “Just being in the woods, at night, in the cabin, is something too excellent to be justified or explained! It just is” (R.U. 13). “Thoreau sat in his cabin and criticized the railways. I sit in mine and wonder about a world that has, well, progressed” (R.U. 12).

The hermit notes that in Ionesco’s play, *Rhinoceros*, all the people have become rhinoceroses, members of a herd, except for one man who maintains his humanity. But, says Merton, “to be the last man in the rhinoceros herd is, in fact, to be a monster.” Ionesco’s point is that “solitude and dissent become more and more impossible, more and more absurd” in the contemporary world (R.U. 20). “ ‘In all the cities of the world, it is the same,’ says Ionesco. ‘The universal and modern man is the man in a rush (i.e. a rhinoceros), a man who has no time, who is a prisoner of necessity, who cannot understand that a thing might perhaps be without usefulness; . . .’ ‘If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless . . . one cannot understand art. And a country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots. . . .’ (Notes et Contre Notes, p. 129) ‘Rhinocerotitis, he adds, is the sickness that lies in wait “for those who have lost the sense and the taste for solitude” ’(R.U. 21).

For Merton, this means that we must first free ourselves from the hold that the myth of the herd has on our sense of identity, recover our wild inner self and thereby our own and nature’s truth. “The discovery of this inner self is an act and affirmation of solitude,” for “if we take our

vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth” (R.U. 15). The collectivity increases its power over us first by stimulating our needs and then by demanding conformity in order to satisfy them. In the herd we find security and an illusion of power but our inner freedom is never realized and our deeper capacities “never liberated” (R.U. 16-17). Hence, saving nature and saving our humanity are intertwined.

“The rain has stopped” Merton observes the next afternoon. His senses come alive in new ways in this new milieu. His eyes capture the afternoon sun slanting “through the pine trees: and how those useless needles smell in the clear air!” (R.U. 23). He notices that a blooming dandelion in an unorthodox, out-of season move, pushes its head through some leaves, and he listens to the “totally uninformative talk of creeks and wild water” and the absolutely useless and therefore invaluable “sweet whistling in the wet bushes” of the quails. “Their noise is absolutely useless,” he approvingly notes a la Ionesco and Chuang Tzu, “and so is the delight I take in it.” He would not exchange it for any other sound because there simply “is nothing I would rather hear,” he claims. This is not because it necessarily “is a better noise than other noises, but because it is the voice of the present moment, the present festival” (R.U. 23).

The Deep Hearing of No-Hearer

In the 1966 preface to the Japanese translation of *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton explores the mystery and deeper meaning of hearing:

No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees. These pages say nothing more than to echo the silence and peace that is “heard” when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forests. But what can the wind say where there is no hearer? There is then a deeper silence: the silence in which the Hearer is No-Hearer. That deeper silence must be heard before one can speak truly of solitude.

. . . [The solitary] is attuned to all the Hearing in the world, since he lives in silence. He does not listen to the ground of being, but he identifies with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself. (T.S. 111)

Although undoubtedly influenced by the spirituality and language of Japanese Zen Buddhism, this passage nevertheless seeks to evoke a recognition of an experiential unity, a

common sound—or ground—between the Buddhist and Christian traditions. All men and women meet in this unity of Being and Silence, which is also Person and Love. Yet, to the extent that we are members of Ionesco's herd, we are simply individual objects, mere numbers to be studied and manipulated and set off, one against the other. In one answer to the hypothetical question of why he lives as a hermit in the woods, Merton declares: "I live in the woods as a reminder that I am free not to be a number. There is, in fact, a choice" (D.S. 31). The solitary is not an "individual" in the usual sense. He or she has become a person and hence he or she transcends the rule and power of being numbered. "And what is the person?" Merton asks. The person "is one in the unity which is love." The person is not divided within nor isolated from others, but is "open to all" because the one Love that is the source and ground of all "is one in him and all." Paradoxically, the one who is "truly alone," the solitary person, "is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one" (T.S.112). And so, as the hermit deepens his capacity to listen to nature, he "identifies with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself." Open to love, the solitary develops as a person thereby realizing a unity with and love for all (Ibid).

In a letter to a group of Smith College students who had been reading and discussing his works, Merton wrote about presence, listening, and happiness. He applauds them for understanding something of what he had intended to say in his writings, something of what he considers "to be most precious – and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma . . . or Silence." They can come to learn for themselves "the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing) we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations" (H.G.L. 115). It is a cause of great joy for Merton to realize that he and the Smith students can be together "in this metaphysical space of silence and happiness, and get some sense, for a moment, that we are full of paradise without knowing it" (H.G.L. 116).

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ANDANTE: CONSONANTIA IN THE AFTERNOON

Being Attentive, Aware and Present To Place

By late February 1965 Merton could write that “[e]verything about this hermitage simply fills me with joy.” He was delighted in “the place God has given me after so much prayer and longing” and could not imagine a greater joy on earth “than to have such a place to be at peace in, to live in silence, to think and to write, to listen to the wind and to all the voices of the wood... to prepare for my death...to love my brothers and all people” and to pray for peace. One gets the sense of a person who has reached a point in life where things have finally come together. “So it is ‘my place’ in the scheme of things,” he observed, “and that is sufficient!” (D.W.L. 2/24/65). Even more, this place, this hermitage, also made him realize “that the universe is my home and I am nothing if not part of it” (D.W.L. 2/3/65). And to more fully become “part of its fabric and dynamism,” he must destroy “the self that seems to stand outside the universe.” Merton uses “fabric” to emphasize his being interconnected and interwoven with everything else in creation, and “dynamism” to indicate his participation in the creative and ongoing cosmic, ecological and historical process (D.W.L. 2/3/65). His search for participation in this complex fabric and dynamism is also part of his search for “true being in God.” One indication that this new sense of interrelatedness is not just an illusion, is the recovery of his ability to sleep. Even the frogs whose croaking had kept him awake at the monastery are now experienced as “a comfort, an extension of my being” (D.W.L. 03/02/65).

Another source of support both for Merton’s life as a hermit and for his respect and close connection with nature came from his readings on Celtic and Celtic Christian spirituality. Monica Weis, in her wonderful and important work *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, notes how during this period of the mid-1960s, Merton’s journal and Working Notebook 14 “indicate how charmed he is by Celtic nature poetry, its reverence for the raven as a symbol of second sight, and the ancient legends of St. Columba’s and St. Brendan’s nautical journeys” (E.V.T.M. 138-9). He read deeply into Celtic nature spirituality, and was especially taken by Kenneth Jackson’s, *Studies*

in *Early Celtic Nature Poetry*. The model set by ancient Christian Celtic hermit living in the woods of Ireland resonated with Merton and assured him that he was on the right track. Weis quotes several important passages from Jackson's work copied by Merton that she rightfully claims spoke to him:

The solitary hermitage in the wilderness, the life of rustic purity and humble poetry, the spare diet of herbs and water are the distinguishing marks of rich Irish poetry. . . . The ultimate significance of the hermit's relationship with nature is something that transcends both hermit and nature alike. . . . Birds and hermit are joining together in an act of worship; the very existence of nature was a song of praise in which he himself took part by entering into harmony with nature. (E.V.T.M. 140)

This certainly was an experience and belief that Merton witnessed to many times. In his *Day of a Stranger*, Merton notes:

. . . I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of "place" a new configuration. (D.S. 33)

Merton's sensitivity to the hermitage and its natural setting elicits a "poetics of space" at once aesthetic, psychological and ecological. The front of the hermitage is order and light: an open space marked by a wide valley, fields, and "tame woods." This light and spacious front Merton calls the "conscious" area. The "unconscious" zone that lies behind the hermitage is full of "brush, saplings, vines, fallen trees, honeysuckle, etc.!" This wilderness area is a "lush tangle of life and death, full of danger, yet where beautiful beings move, the deer, and where there is a spring of sweet, pure water—buried!" (D.W.L. 4/3/65). (As Merton was later to find out, much to his physical discomfort, the water was anything but pure--a thought that might have made this analogy with his own psychological depths slightly unnerving).

To continue to grow holistically while living in the same place--experiencing a more intense topophilia--one must develop, among other things, an increasingly subtle sensitivity to its different "moods" and awareness of the consistency and variations in the "dance" of its various beings. "One has to be in the same place everyday," explains Merton, "watch the dawn from the same house, hear the same birds wake every morning to realize how inexhaustibly rich and

different is ‘sameness.’” Living in the hermitage gives the monk a fuller appreciation for the vow of “stability.” Unfortunately, the monastic common life can “distract you from life in its fullness,” Merton notes (D.W.L. 5/28/65).

Yet, as he had realized that winter, if he were to benefit from this fullness, he had to perfect the art of paying *close attention*. Developing this discipline was central to all aspects and levels of his life.

In solitude everything has its weight for good or evil, and one must attend carefully to everything. If you apply yourself carefully to what you do, great springs of strength and truth are released in you. If you drift or go inattentively, automatic and obsessed, the strength is against you and becomes a storm of confusion, and dashes you on the rocks. And when the power, the energy of truth is well released, then everything becomes good and makes sense... (D.W.L. 12/07/64)

This passage lauds the positive effects of a close, careful attention to what one does in solitude and hints at why increased solitude could lead to an increased but non-frenetic engagement with the world. He also notes that “as a result of solitude, the psalms in choir . . . have all their old juice and much more too, a new mystery” (D.W.L. 12/7/64).

To reach and maintain such a state of attention demands serious work since solitude is not to be trifled with. In fact, Merton likens her to a stern mother who will toss him out if he engages in nonsense (D.W.L. 2/26/65). The antidote to becoming silly or going “to seed” is to perfect the contemplative art of being attentive, aware and present. As might be expected, progress in this new “work of the cell” is uneven. In March, following a bout with a cold, the monk notes that he is determined to get back “into some serious meditation.” And he means “*Serious*—not part hanging around quietly.” Returning to the analogy of opening up a spring, he remarks of his interior life, “Here too is a spring to be cleared, and I am not going deep enough these days!” (D.W.L. 3/31/65).

Wherever I Stand is All the Truth

One important impetus to his motivation to dig deeper is his reading of *The Study of Good* (or, *An Inquiry into the Good*) by the Zen philosopher Nishida Kitaro. Merton praises it as “One of the most remarkably helpful things I have read in a long time—and apart from his pantheistic

concept of God, very close to home” (D.W.L. 3/31/65). He finds Nishida’s philosophy to be “most satisfying.” It is

. . . a spiraling deepening of his basic intuition of pure experience which becomes “absolute nothingness as the place of existence,” and “eschatological everyday life” in which the person, as a focus of absolute contradiction (our very existence opening on to death is a contradiction), can say with Rinzai “wherever I stand is all the truth.” This hit me with great force. (D.W.L. 4/3/65)

One should not wait to arrive at the Buddhist Pure Land or the Christian Heaven to experience Truth. If it is the Truth of Being-- and not of mathematics or of empirically derived facts--it is accessible right here where you stand and right now in the present. Merton confesses that his own meditation had been “building up to this.” With the help of Nishida he has come to realize that doubt “arises from projection of the self into the future, or from retrospection, and not grasping the present. He who grasps the present does not doubt.” Therefore, to “be open to the nothingness which I am is to grasp the all, in whom I am!” (D.W.L. 4/3/65).

The Rinzai Zen of Hakuin seems iconoclastic and a rejection of any Buddhism of faith such as Pure Land with its savior figure of Amida Buddha who promises his devotees an eternity in the Pure Land or Heaven. But for Zen, the Pure Land is here and eternity is now. What does a Christian contemplative do with his belief in a Heaven with its promise of a full direct knowledge of God in the future while his spirituality focuses on the present and the now? In the rainy but rich December of 1964 the hermit had returned to his study of the Orthodox thought of Vladimir Lossky. Merton poses a question to himself: if he had to choose between “contemplation” and “eschatology,” which would he choose? He admits that he would “always be committed entirely to the latter” (D.W.L. 12/22/64). His faith is not “merely a means of penetrating the mystery of divine presence resting in Him now.” However, he is obviously uncomfortable with such a simple solution. He insists that, “because my faith is eschatological it is *also* contemplative, for I am even now in the Kingdom...” He does not wander through life simply waiting for “some imagined fulfillment (for my present seeing is the beginning of a real and unimaginable fulfillment!). Thus contemplation and eschatology are one. . . . They complete each other and intensify each other. It is by contemplation and love that I can best prepare myself for the eschatological vision...” (D.W.L.

12/22/64).

The union of contemplation and eschatology is clear in the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . This is our contemplation: the realization and “experience” of the lifegiving Spirit in whom the Father is present to us through the Son, our way, truth, and life. The realization that we are on our way, that because we are on our way we are in that Truth which is the end and by which we are already fully and eternally alive. Contemplation is the loving sense of this life and this presence and this eternity. (D.W.L. 12/22/64)

If we look at the entries on Nishida and Lossky, we are struck by Merton’s refusal to abandon the validity of either Zen with its contemplative emphasis on presence and awareness or of Christian eschatology. Unwilling to settle for a dualism between present and future or contemplative awareness and faith he reconciles them within himself. Realized eschatology is present and presence as well as future and fulfillment.

Contemplation, Eschatology, and Ecology

Doubt arises, as he noted, when self and its concerns are projected into the future. For many modern believers, bereft of contemplation or the experience of the Presence of the Spirit, the End becomes not only a projection of the fulfillment of the individual self, but of modernity’s obsession with material progress. Acting out this obsession may unfortunately destroy much of the natural world (creation) in the name of some fanciful eschatological fulfillment. The fact that for some “modern” Christians, technological and economic “progress” can be embraced as a movement towards the eschaton is unacceptable to Merton (D.W.L. 4/15/65). He interprets much of this as simply a Christian reaction to a growing secular belief that the Church is irrelevant and that history and progress will leave religion behind. For him, “Christian thinkers” must disassociate themselves from any identification with “obsessive modes of thought about secular progress” (D.W.L. 4/15/65).

Merton then asks a question of great urgency in this context: “In other words, where is our hope?” The “false eschatology of the ‘new heaven and new earth,’” places its hope in technological and political progress, in “the power of science to transform earth and heaven...” (D.W.L. 4/15/65). Naïve Christians placing their eschatological hope in progress, end up aligning themselves with “the stupidity and barbarism of those who are despoiling His creation in order

to make money or get power for themselves” (D.W.L. 4/15/65). Already the ecological prophet, Merton warns that “the true prospect” is that “the stupidity and pride of man will ruin the earth.” Therefore, one’s (ecological) hope should not be placed in the holders and wielders of technological power and economic growth. In response to the destructive impact of “progress” upon humans and the earth, those whose hope is in God will protest against this “barbarism of power” even when such protest seems useless. For it will be the poor and the “remnant” (those who remain committed to actualizing a peaceful and just reign of God), through their love and their tears, who will become instruments of divine creative action and real eschatological fulfillment (Ibid.).

One should note that, in terms of ecological activism, Merton is advising that people of conscience act fearlessly and with hope, because there is a dynamic Presence (Wisdom//Christ/Spirit) within nature which moves it (and one’s self) towards the greater end. And if, as Merton had said, “contemplation and eschatology are one,” then the contemplative quality of one’s *seeing* in the here and now (already a participation in eschatological seeing and being), should make one more alert to the message and mechanisms of false eschatology because of one’s sensitive presence to the earth and hence to the forces ruining and despoiling the earth, to use Merton’s terms. So sensitized, one does not give up hope. Rather, like the poor and the remnant, through one’s tears and love, one fights what to some may appear to be a hopeless battle. The groaning of nature for liberation can be felt in the present but the liberation yet to be realized needs human action. Nature reflects and participates in the divine Wisdom being both a promise and a foretaste of its fullness.

In a paradoxical way, real eschatology both depends on and demands spiritual authenticity, including the development of a deep contemplative life. As for himself, Merton writes in April about the “need to keep working at meditation—going to the root” (D.W.L. 4/4/65). While this requires that he move beyond a passive resting in meditation, he realizes that he must not force things. A “wordless deepening” is called for if he is “to grasp the inner reality of my nothingness in Him who is.” Catching himself, Merton admits that his description of this

experience has little “to do with the concrete reality that is to be grasped.” There is just the peace and the struggle “in silence, to be aware and true,” beyond himself; to go outside the door of himself, not because he wills it, but because he is being called and must respond (Ibid.).

In one of his more important essays on Zen Buddhism, “A Christian Looks at Zen,” Merton would write that “Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to *explain* but to *pay attention*, to *become aware*, to *be mindful*, in other words to develop a certain *kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception* by verbal formulas—or by emotional excitement” (Z.B.A. 38). This effort to be mindful, present, and aware would increase during Merton’s years in the hermitage. It is essential if one is to hear and respond to the dual call to explore one’s inner landscape as well as the deeper levels of the outer landscape. Thus, the cultivation of contemplative practices is central to Merton’s mission “to live the hermit life in simple direct contact with nature, primitively, quietly...” (D,W.L. 4/15/65). Complementing this aspect of his vocation that connects self with nature (geopiety), is his calling to extend himself to the human community and to do “some writing, maintaining such contacts [with outside people] as are willed by God” (homopiety). The two mutually nourish one another as they are grounded in and activate the dynamics of Wisdom (Ecopiety). Joining and running through both of them is God’s desire that Merton bear witness “to the value and goodness of simple things and ways, and loving God in it all.” However, he must confess that he does not “always respond with simplicity” (D.W.L. 4/15/65).

Silent Awareness, Interior Awareness

Merton did respond with simplicity to sunrise on Easter Sunday, 1965. His experience was filled with “peace and beauty.” The woods were turning green. A soft wind pushed through the deep grass. While Merton recited Lauds, a wood thrush sang “fourth-tone mysteries in the deep ringing pine wood” of the unconscious space behind the hermitage. At dawn, this “unconscious” wood had a long moment of “perfect clarity,” moving “from being dark and confused” to becoming clear and distinct, “a place of silence and peace with its own order in disorder” (D.W.L. 4/18/65). This movement towards clarity and away from confusion, towards a

place of peace and silence may also have described Merton's mental state.

As the hermit notes in a letter to Jacques Maritain, contemplation can be defended as a way of living in the present and as a way that brings fullness to human experience. (Perhaps this fullness of living in the present also helps the "poor" to whom Merton referred earlier who protest against ecological and human injustice in their hope-filled determination to carry on.) Merton rejects those critics who dismiss contemplation as "mere withdrawal, negation, shutting out the created world . . ." Revealingly, Merton says that instead of "contemplation" he now prefers to use such terms as "silent awareness" and "interior awareness" because they "emphasize the sense of presence, vigilance, adoring attention and so on" (C.T. 51). This immediate state of presence and awareness is at once an open receiving of the world into one's being and a wide, all-embracing identification with the world. Furthermore, "adoring attention" suggests a combination of a mental state of mindfulness with a reverential opening of the heart. From what we know of Merton, contemplation is anything but "shutting out the created world," unless what is meant is shutting down those ecologically destructive creations of the human world.

"One lovely dawn after another. Such peace! Meditation with fireflies, mist in the valley, last quarter of the moon, distant owls – gradual inner awakening and centering in peace and harmony of love and gratitude" (D.W.L. 5/23/65). The hermit's own inner awakening joins with the outer awakening of nature: his natural contemplation (*theoria physike*) allows him to resonate with the sights and sounds of this time and place. The contemplative awakening centers his whole being and brings about a deep feeling of *harmony* (a perfect ecological term). Experiences such as these provide all the support he needs to reject one theologian's claim that contemplation is "a manifestation of narcissistic regression!" Drawing again upon the language of awakening, Merton argues that, to the contrary, contemplation is a "complete awakening of identity and of rapport!" (D.W.L. 5/23/65).

Exploding out of the narcissistic ego, one discovers one's true identity as an individual being that includes a being-in-rapport with others. Contemplation is "an awareness and acceptance of one's place in the whole, first, the whole of creation, then the whole plan of

Redemption.” Both are united in the one great mystery of fulfillment which is “the Mystery of Christ.” Rather than being a state of confusion (“*confusio*”), contemplation as this Zen-like experience of presence and awareness opens out into the Mystery of Christ-Sophia who unites the human and cosmic and moves them through time towards “the great mystery of fulfillment” and co-presence. One is called to find one’s “place” within this harmonious yet dynamic movement of creation and redemption, nature and grace. In other words, “*Consonantia* [harmony] and not *confusio* [confusion]” (D.W.L. 5/23/65). We are back to the Buddha and the Christ, Merton has “come to see that only these days of solitude are really free and ‘whole’” for him. (D.W.L. 5/25/65).

August, 1965: Moving In

Several days before officially becoming a full-time hermit, Merton wonders if he will be able to cope with the unmasking that solitude demands.

The solitary life: now that I really confront it is awesome, wonderful, and I see I have no strength of my own for it . . . It seems to me that solitude rips off all the masks and all the disguises. It does not tolerate lies. Everything but straight and direct affirmation is marked and judged by the silence of the forest. (D.W.L. 08/10/65)

Interestingly, the forests mark and judge the authenticity of human utterances just by their being what they are, the silence of their being, their authenticity in their living the solitary life in the presence of and as intended to be by God. This integrity of being seems to even suggest a moral aspect, as does Merton’s inability at times to get rid of the masks. This makes him realize, again, that his whole life must be totally oriented toward God. The enemy is distractedness, but what is required as an antidote is “only *being present* . . . working seriously at all that is to be done—the care of the garden of paradise!” (D.W.L. 08/10/65). Contemplation and action, mindfulness and work: an attentive caring for the natural world.

Thomas Merton moved into the hermitage on August 20, 1965. He relinquished his post as Novice Master and embraced the eremitical life. He felt an “*immense relief*” because “the burden of ambiguity is lifted, and I am without care . . .” (D.W.L. 8/21/65). And there were other blessings:

The blessing of prime under the tall pines, in the cool of early morning, behind the hermitage. The blessing of sawing wood, cutting grass, cleaning house, washing dishes. The

blessing of a quiet, alert, concentrated, fully “present” meditation. The blessing of God’s presence and guidance . . . (D.W.L. 08/25/65)

Peace surrounded and filled his life: “This place is marked with the blessed sign of my covenant with Him who has redeemed me” (D.W.L. 8/25/65). While inner freedom “is not limited to places,” since it is grounded in the deep will and wisdom of Spirit, “solitude, these pines, this mist are the chosen focus of freedom in my own life” (D.W.L. 7/28/65).

Merton sees “over and over again” that the eremetical life is proving to be all that he had “always hoped it would be and always sought” (D.W.L. 08/25/65). “Sought” is the operative word here. From the time of his arrival, Thomas Merton had consistently pushed for more solitude—either at Gethsemani or elsewhere. He had worked hard to assure that the proposed “conference” center could be converted into a hermitage. And he was not without resources in frequently nudging his Abbot to seek final approval for him to be Gethsemani’s first full-time hermit. But it is also true that at times Abbot Fox knew Merton better than Merton knew himself. What the monk had not been ready for in 1955, he now enters with more maturity in 1965. For the present, he would go to the monastery daily for High Mass and the noontime meal. Eventually a chapel would be added to the hermitage and Merton was permitted to say Mass there.

While Merton certainly felt that this was what God had willed for him, he also recognized the difficulties that this new situation might pose. Soon after his definitive move, loneliness became a sign of his new existence. “Now that everything is here, this work of loneliness,” as he called it, “really begins, and I feel it.” Though Merton glories in this new life and gives thanks to God for it, “I fear it,” he admits. It is not “something lightly to be chosen.” In fact, if he had not been convinced that this life had been chosen for him by God, he “could not stay” in it (D.W.L. 08/28/65). He fears becoming attached to some “idiot idea” of himself as a hermit and to the hermitage as “his” home, taking “this stupid little cottage” as if it were his whole life. (D.W.L. 08/25/65). Being a diarist, a popular spiritual writer, and an autobiographer, Merton had to do battle with self-consciousness over the years. He realized how easy it would be—and perhaps already had been-- to mistake the attractive image of himself as monk or mystic or writer or hermit--for who he really was. Unfortunately, the “true” self that he suggests we all seek could

turn into an ideal or image and hence simply perpetuate the inner division its realization was meant to heal. He was both delighted with the hermitage and cautious about objectifying or romanticizing it and becoming attached to it and to a phony image of himself (D.W.L. 8/28/65).

Merton is to combine the simplicity of personal life with a unity with the people who inhabit the world around him.

In a sense, a very true and solitary sense, coming to the hermitage has been a “return to the world,” not a return to the cities, but a return to the direct and humble contact with God’s world, His creation, and the world of poor men who work. Andy Boone is, physically, more my neighbor than the monastery . . .

I do not have an official “space” – sanctified, juridically defined . . . My space is the world created and redeemed by God, and God is in this true world, not “only” and restrictively a prisoner in the monastery . . . It is crucially important that the monastery abandon the myth of itself as a purely sacred space – it is a disaster for its real “sacredness.” (D.W.L. 9/11/65)

This is an important passage. Traditionally, the monk was one who turned away from the world and entered the monastery as a sacred space within which to “find” God. Praise for this special space can be found in many of Merton’s early writings, including poems, as we have seen. In that context, to “return to the world” would mean to abandon monastic life and sacred space and return to the secular world and profane space. Merton’s “leaving” the monastery could imply his returning to the world. Yet that is not what Merton means. His new definition of “the world” reflects his recent struggles, experiences and growth. The world is now “God’s world, His creation” with which he has direct contact along with his poor neighbor, Andy Boone. Nor is he leaving sacred space for profane space. The world to which he is “returning” is sacred because it is God’s dwelling Place. The monastery for Merton has no monopoly on “the sacred.” His life is now primarily one of solitude and contemplation in nature. In this place and places he can rediscover himself as well as encounter God in a more simple and direct way.

That he is a scandal to many might be proof that this is, indeed, his genuine vocation: “Here I see my task is to get rid of the last vestiges of a pharisaical division between the sacred and secular, and to see that the *whole* world is reconciled to God in Christ, not just the monastery, not only the convents, the churches, and the good Catholic schools” (D.W.L. 9/11/65). Immediately

following these reflections, he notes that a rainstorm has begun and that he has just seen “a hawk up there flying against the wind in the dark and in the rain, with big black clouds flying and the pines bending.” He allows himself a moment to sink into a hermit’s life in this storm and in this place:

It is good and comforting to sit in a storm with all the winds in the woods outside and rain on the roof, and sit in a little circle of light and read and hear the clock tick on the table. And tomorrow’s Gospel is the one about not serving two Masters, and letting the Lord provide. That is what I must do. (D.W.L. 9/11/65)

Merton wrote about many storms that September, some quite dramatic and dangerous, some simply a pleasure despite their drama. That month he could confess to Jacques Maritain that “Though I am not what one would call a hermit temperament (because I am sociable and love to be with people), it does seem that this is really what God has wanted for me all along, and by his grace I am fitting into it with great peace and I think much profit” (C.T. 46). To his friend and confidant Sr. Therese Lentfoehr he writes:

It is really a wonderful life, a revelation, even much better than I expected. It is so good to get back to plain natural simplicity and the bare essentials, no monkeying around with artificialities and non-essentials. It really gives a wonderful new dimension to one’s life . . . So I like being a hermit and I do have real solitude . . . just perfect” (R.J. 9/28/65).

A year later he would write to his friend Mark Van Doren, “The woods certainly agree with me as nothing else does and I am no longer able to imagine another form of life. So now I think I am stabilized in Kentucky, finally. (As if there were any doubt.)” (R.J. 7/25/66).

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FRUIT: “DAY OF A STRANGER”

By early summer, 1965, Thomas Merton was spending most of his days and all of his nights at the hermitage. His life gradually moved into a new set of rhythms and routines, some personal, some monastic and liturgical. One of Merton’s best-loved essays, “Day of a Stranger,” offers the reader a composite rendering of a day in the life of the hermit as stranger. A good discussion of the development of the essay can be found in Robert Daggy’s “Introduction” to the Peregrine Smith edition (D.S.7-26). The first draft of Merton’s essay was written in May 1965 for publication in Latin America (D.W.L. 239-42).

In July 1966, “*Día de un Extranero*” appeared in *Papeles*, a Caracas journal, as part of Merton’s effort to engage in dialogue with Latin American poets, artists, and intellectuals. Thus the first drafts of the essay were more political in tone and less descriptive of his “day” than the third and more familiar English version. Daggy notes that the Spanish term, *extrano*, is much richer and more suitable for Merton’s purposes than is the English word “stranger.” The former carries additional connotations of being extraneous or useless, a marginal person or an alien. *Extranero* allows Merton to identify himself with what the Third World perceived as marginal to the great economic and political powers of the First World. The term also allows him to identify with the artists, poets, and intellectuals in Latin America who were marginalized for criticizing both their own corrupt regimes and the imperialism of the North. In all versions, Merton is the stranger, the person living physically and spiritually on the margins of the great technological behemoth. Feeling increasingly marginal to the Catholic mainstream of the mid-1960s, Merton was paradoxically finding himself growing in popularity with the new community of “marginalized” persons and groups on the wider American scene, such as folk singers and poets, Zen Buddhists, African-Americans, New Leftists, hippies, and anti-war protesters.

The spirit of protest is caught near the beginning of the essay: “I live in the woods as a reminder that I am free not to be a number. There is, in fact, a choice” (D.S. 215). But he does not have any intention of living in the wilderness “like anybody” or “unlike anybody,” including John

the Baptist, Thoreau, the Desert Fathers, or the Biblical prophets; nor is he exercising some right to be himself, since, as he says, “there is very little chance of my being anybody else” (Ibid). When people try too hard to be themselves they run the risk “of impersonating a shadow” (Ibid). As for his freedom, Merton admits to another paradox: “It is a compelling necessity for me to be free to embrace the necessity of my own nature” (Ibid). In doing this, it is necessary for Merton to walk under the trees. The hermit, therefore, is “both a prisoner and an escaped prisoner” (D.S. 216). This is one of a series of paradoxes, contradictions and tensions that Merton realizes characterize his status as a hermit. Rather than waste time in an attempt to resolve them, he learns to live with them and to benefit from their creative interplay—as well as occasionally to suffer from their opposing demands.

Merton’s Day, Merton’s Place

To those who would ask whether he spends his “day” in a “place,” Merton responds as follows.

I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of “place” a new configuration. (D.S. 216)

This is a revealing comment. Using “ecological balance” to qualify “harmony,” Merton envisions *place* as a living community of plants, animals and humans that form an ecological whole, despite different “nests” and ways of moving and eating. Natural beings co-create and co-constitute place. Hence, Merton’s experience of them is not one in which they are submerged into an amorphous or mystical oneness. Even as he feels a deep rapport with other realities, he is respectful of them as “other.”

Radical ecologists such as Mick Smith have argued that an ethics of place grows out of lived relationships, out of feeling, consciousness, and conscience; out of a willingness to be changed by the other. The modern alienation of the human and cultural from the natural, accompanied as it is by a human sense of superiority inevitably results in the “instrumentalization of the nonhuman environment.” Care, on the other hand, requires relationship and mutual

presence.

Only when we come to *sense* the presence of otherness in and around us, whether in the sand beneath our feet, the hare's leap, or the swallow's soaring flight, will we start to care. Only through care and consideration will the Earth become a place worth living in, a "garden" for everyone to share. (E.P. 212)

Smith's comments reflect Merton's own pattern: sensing and respecting the presence of others, allowing these beings to be, caring for them and their habitat based on his sharing this place with them as a fellow member of a community. Thomas Merton, a "stranger" to the technological world, had found a home and a community among those who themselves had become increasingly marginalized by modern society. The dignity of the fellow members of one's eco-community must always be kept in mind, even by a hermit-priest who sometimes fancies himself their chaplain.

Sermon to the birds: "Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: be what you are: be *birds*. Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!"

Reply: "Even this is one sermon too many!" (D.S. 220)

The birds consider it not only presumptuous of Merton to preach to them, but at the same time an unnecessary proliferation of words. Merton is taught/teaches himself a lesson in humility. Crows are the only members of the community that Merton finds difficult to fit into his harmonious choir. They remind him too much of humans: violent, loud, "self-justifying," and always at war with other species and among themselves (D.S. 216).

In addition to the many "voices" of plants and animals that make up the ecology of the hermitage, there are human voices who form what Merton calls its "mental ecology." Among these voices are: Rilke, Zukofsky, Nicanor Parra, Kung Fu Tzu, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu; also, the voices of Camus, Sartre, and John of Salisbury. Women's voices blend in, too, "from Angela of Foligno to Flannery O'Connor, Theresa of Avila, Juliana of Norwich, and, more personally and warmly still, Raissa Maritain" (D.S. 216). Merton's hermitage choir, then, is rich in a variety of human and other-than-human voices, voices from present and past cultures, from both hemispheres, voices both male and female. Place has a new configuration and many levels.

Time also has a new configuration and rhythm for the hermit, although he weaves the

traditional monastic hours into it. Merton cooks for himself and takes responsibility for his home, inside and out. He retires early and rises around 2:30 a.m. He prays the hours appropriate for that time of day and then spends an hour or more in meditation. Merton's meditation is not reflective or filled with images. Rather, he seeks an ever-deeper awareness of the divine presence beyond words, at the center of his being. Over the years his prayer had become integrated into his very being and breathing. And if asked about what he is doing at the hermitage, he responds: "What I do is live. How I pray is breathe. Who said Zen? Wash out your mouth if you said Zen. If you see a meditation going by, shoot it" (D.S. 217).

Zen had helped Merton simplify his life. "Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament," he continues, "that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it" (D.S. 217). The essence or spirit of a religious document such as the New Testament can be captured by those who open themselves appropriately to what is right before their eyes. Scriptural revelation and natural revelation are joined with one's own spirit and wisdom in that being, that breathing.

Following his meditation, Merton reports that he usually has a light breakfast and reads until sunrise. The moment of dawn had always been special to him. And just as he would find it *necessary* to walk under the trees, it is also necessary, he says, "for me to see the first point of light which begins to be dawn. It is necessary to be present at the resurrection of Day, in the blank silence when the sun appears" (D.S. 219-20). After hours of meditation and reflection, Merton's mind is alert and receptive to the daily epiphany of dawn. "In this completely neutral instant I receive from the Eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word 'DAY,' which is never the same. It is never spoken in any known language" (D.S. 220). In the dawn's early light, another "ritual," not quite so sublime, takes place. Merton washes out his coffee pot in the rain bucket and then proceeds to the outhouse. The basic ceremony unfolds.

Approaching the outhouse with circumspection on account of the king snake who likes to curl up on one of the beams inside. Addressing the possible king snake in the outhouse and informing him that he should not be there. Asking the formal ritual question that is asked at this time every morning: "Are you in there, you bastard?" (D.S. 220)

After reciting more Psalms, Merton cleans up the hermitage and then ritually opens and closes certain windows depending on the time of year. He writes some letters and prepares to go down to the monastery. “Pull down shades. Get water bottle. Rosary. Watch. Library book to be returned. It is time to visit the human race” (Ibid). The water bottle would be needed until a well was eventually dug.

Consonantia: The Chant of All Beings

Merton uses various musical metaphors throughout “Day of a Stranger” to characterize the “harmony” of the ecological chorus of which he is a member (D.S. 216). For Hwa Yol Jung, phenomenologist and environmental philosopher, an ethics or philosophy that wants to re-sonate or re-sound with ecology must use metaphors of music and sound.

Ecological ethics may be justified in terms of such musical notations as harmony and mood. As the pitch of musicality, harmony is a *gathering* of many as an ordered whole: it is an orchestration of differentiated many. By using the term *differentiated*, we mean to emphasize the idea that all things, [the] myriad of things, cannot be reduced to a single equation or a formula of equivalences. As such it describes the condition of *cosmic reality as social process*. It may be called ecopiety. (W.E. 212)

Merton’s ecopiety and ecospirituality involve receptive listening and an inner state that resonates with the harmony of the outer world. Internal and external environments must be in tune and “in sync” if an all-encompassing harmony is to exist between humans and nature. And just as the external world is constituted by a variety of places, it can also be said to vary in its musical atmosphere or mood. To live in harmony with nature is to engage in a kind of musical performance. As Merton sought language to express and direct his deepening solitude in nature, and as his own sensate world expanded, he reached for metaphors of sound and music. In “Day of a Stranger,” one particular word that Merton uses to capture nature’s harmonious diversity-in-unity is the Latin term *consonantia*. The term first arises during a discussion of Gregorian chant. Merton notes how the *alleluia*, sung in the second mode, “built on the *Re* as though on a sacrament, a presence . . . keeps returning to the *re* as to an inevitable center” (D.S. 221). Though there can be many notes sung between one *re* and another, “suddenly one hears only the one note” (Ibid).

Mysteriously and wonderfully, this *re* blends together all of the other notes without erasing their “perfect distinctness” (D.S. 221). Since the notes in Gregorian chant are sung sequentially and in unison, Merton cannot use “harmony” or *consonantia* here in its modern musical sense to refer to the resonance among notes sung simultaneously at different pitches. Rather, he wants us to think of a “spiritual” unity among notes that rise up and return to a foundational note. This *re* tone is like a presence that pervades and exercises a mysterious influence on all of the other notes. All notes start from and return to *Re*, just as all words spring from, are centered on, and return to the primordial Word or Logos. Echoes of Eucharistic theology can be heard when Merton calls *Re* a “sacrament” or a “presence.” Likewise the many beings of creation rise up and resonate with the presence of Christ/Logos/Sophia.

Merton also uses *consonantia* to capture the many sensual tones that come together in the eco-aesthetics of a hot afternoon. Having walked up from the monastery, the hermit seeks out the cooler back room of the hermitage. There he sits in silence as

all meanings are absorbed in the *consonantia* of heat, fragrant pine, quiet wind, bird song and one central tonic note that is unheard and unuttered. . . . In the silence of the afternoon all is present and all is inscrutable in one central tonic note to which every other sound ascends or descends, to which every other meaning aspires, in order to find its true fulfillment. To ask when the note will sound is to lose the afternoon: it has already sounded, and all things hum with the resonance of its sounding. (D.S. 222)

As the hermit attentively listens to the sounds of the enveloping natural world they seem to organize themselves according to a familiar pattern of *consonantia*. Birds, insects, wind, pine, heat, are individual “notes” related to one another through a central tonic note whose reverberating waves exercise a harmonizing and unifying presence. Merton images the relationship of the various high and low notes to the central tonic note using two different models, either as notes ascending and descending from a tonic *re* as in the Gregorian second mode or all sounding together in a rich harmony with a tonic note as their place of unity. In either model, “all is present and all is inscrutable” (D.S. 222). All diverse created beings seek their ultimate meaning and fulfillment in Being, in Unity. A musical metaphor richly conveys the theological notion that in seeking their own good, created beings also seek the ultimate good and

in some manner express it. Aquinas would have sung out his approval. In fact, given Merton's fondness for James Joyce and Thomas Aquinas, it is not surprising that he should use a term that links the two together. In his *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce refers to Aquinas's aesthetics as he sets forth his own thoughts about beauty.

To finish what I was saying about beauty, said Stephen, the most satisfying relations of the sensible must therefore correspond to the necessary phases of artistic apprehension. Find these and you find the qualities of universal beauty. Aquinas says: *Ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur integritas, consonantia, claritas*. I translate it so: Three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony, and radiance. Do these correspond to the phases of apprehension? (E.J. 394)

Merton's use of wholeness and harmony in their musical sense is not far from these. Joyce's Stephen denies, however, that by the use of *claritas* (and probably the other terms), Aquinas meant "the artistic discovery and representation of a divine purpose in anything or a force of generalization which would make the aesthetic image a universal one, make it outshine its proper conditions" (E.J. 395). This, however, may be close to what Merton means in this context. The tone *re* mediates meaning and unity but also allows for concrete distinct notes. A being finds itself by entering into a chorus and community beyond itself. A unitive presence, like a deep-sounding tonic note, makes everything vibrate.

Consonantia and *resonantia* dance in and through all beings, joining them in one rhythm and vibration. Merton intuitively realized what eco-philosophers would later assert, that metaphors based on sound and hearing capture the unity-in-diversity of ecosystems better than do those based on sight and seeing. Since we see only one thing at a time, the ego-self tends to isolate and give object status and substance to each being, which means that the common experience of seeing presents itself as a more controlling and defining activity. Hearing, on the other hand, being primarily receptive and open, allows sounds to enter one's body and mind simultaneously and reverberate within one's self. Yet, Merton would also hold that there are ways of *seeing*, such as Hopkins' *inscape*, Rilke's *outgazing* and Zen's penetrating awareness, as well as types of *theoria physike*, that can provide deeply penetrating ecological *insight* that both opens one to a deeper level within and goes beneath the surface features of the "other."

Returning to Merton's day, the afternoon finds him in the cool back room of the hermitage where he does some reading and writing. Then he prays another canonical hour, meditates for an hour or so, and prepares a light meal. In the early evening he might "sit in the back room as the sun sets, as the birds sing outside the window, as night descends on the valley" (D.S. 222). As the day draws to a close, he is joined by friends, old and new.

I become surrounded once again by all the Tzus and Fu's (men without office and without obligation). The birds draw closer to their nests. I sit on the cool mat on the floor, considering the bed in which I will presently sleep alone under the ikon of the Nativity.

Meanwhile the metal cherub of the apocalypse passes over me in the clouds, treasuring its egg and its message. (D.S. 222)

Note that Merton's "ecopiety" is obvious here: the ancient Sinitic community of

Tzu's and Fu's (the *yang* of homopiety) complement the nesting community of present-day Kentucky birds (the *yin* of geopiety) (W.E. 129). The virtue that permeates piety is "reverence" functioning within a context of reciprocity. Piety is "the sacrament of coexistence in which man attunes himself *reverentially* to other people and things" (Ibid). The Latin word *pietas*, meaning "absolute reciprocity," is associated with *religio* and indicates "a natural circle of giving and receiving, which is at once both spiritual and bodily" (Ibid). Interestingly, a hint is given as to Merton's grounding of the two phases of ecopiety, when he mentions that his own nesting will take place beneath the *ikon* of the Nativity. The dynamic creativity of creation through the Logos births within us an inner word that is the real name of each of us but that also joins us and all humans into One Body.

Ecology and Non-ecology

Yet Merton also indicates by his ominous image of the metal bird carrying its nuclear egg that there are powerful modern forces aloft that can destroy all harmony, human and natural. The "bird's" appearance takes the reader beyond actual birds and planes to metal cherubs and apocalyptic destruction. The "metal cherub" with its "message" reminds Merton that he is still "in the world" even as he lives in the woods as part of an eco-community. Modern technology (and not just the apocalyptic type) has the awful capacity to destroy mutual presence, to tear apart

webs of reverence and reciprocity running through both biotic and human communities. In the first draft of “Day of a Stranger,” Merton laments the climate of “non-ecology” that is destroying not only the local ecological community but also the local human community. Environmental destruction and the erosion of the local were obvious to Merton--and obviously connected.

There is also the non-ecology, the destructive unbalance of nature, poisoned and unsettled by bombs, by fallout, by exploitation: the land ruined, the waters contaminated, the soil charged with chemicals, ravaged with machinery, the houses of farmers falling apart because everybody goes to the city and stays there. . . . There is no poverty so great as that of the prosperous, no wretchedness so dismal as affluence. Wealth is poison. There is no misery to compare with that which exists where technology has been a total success. . . . Full bellies have not brought peace and satisfaction but dementia, and in any case, not all bellies are full either. But the dementia is the same for all. (D.W. L. 240)

The “non-ecology” of the natural world wrought by a triumphalist technology and consumerist economy contrasts with an ecology of balanced harmony. The dementia brought about by “full bellies” yields an irrationality that could explode into nuclear madness or as Merton anticipated (via Rachel Carson, perhaps), poisoned ecosystems, soil and crops covered with chemicals, land torn apart by modern farm machinery and local communities of rural America already collapsing, something which Wendell Berry, Kentucky fellow poet, essayist and novelist, would later chronicle. When Merton was “most sickened by the things that are done to the country that surrounds this place,” he would “take out the prophets and sing them in loud Latin across the hills and send their fiery words sailing south over the mountains to the place where they split atoms for the bombs in Tennessee” (D.W.L.240). Merton shifts from his role as Adam the caretaker of the garden to Amos or Micah proclaiming a word of judgment on the sinful and sacrilegious defacement and destruction of creation as well as its possible destruction via nuclear weapons

Thus the drama of the Fall repeats itself. The prophetic voice calls but no one listens. Where human noise and hubris drown out the sounds of nature, the prophetic voice must turn up the decibels and boom out the word of judgment “in loud Latin across the hills.” Not so the hills will hear, but so that the humans who are ravaging them might. But the prophetic voice is not often welcomed.

The illusions that grip modern society are deep, perverse and pervasive and the deafness to radical voices is profound. In the twenty-first century, the unresponsiveness to climate change warnings issued by environmental prophets is profoundly disturbing but in line with what radical ecologists, including Thomas Merton, have been sensing, and shouting about. “Day of a Stranger” vibrates with the tension between the values and visions of past and future, margin and center, personal ethics and eco-communal morality, the dynamics of spiritual life and ecological wisdom (*eco-sophia*), of artistic expressions and prophetic damnations. And through it all, it presents us with glimpses of a day in the life of an exceptional cultural figure: monk, priest, hermit, prophet, essayist, and eco-poet whose voice calls for a healthy harmony between the human and ecological communities.

NOTE

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NUCLEAR WINTER, *SILENT SPRING*

The writings of Thomas Merton took on a more socially critical and prophetic tone in the late 1950s and early 1960s, engaging issues of war and peace, social justice, civil rights, an increasingly technological society, a naïve faith in an ill-defined “progress,” alienation and dehumanization. In this context and at the end of the year of the Cold War Letters (1961-1962), Merton encountered *Silent Spring*, the seminal environmental work by Rachel Carson. He immediately began to make connections between the issues with which he had recently been dealing and modernity’s escalating war on the natural world. Merton told Carson that her work offered him a further insight into the “*consistent pattern* running through everything we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life” (W.F. 70). This radical (*radix*, root) search for the underlying root system weaving its influence on spiritual/ personal and economic/social life would take on added significance when connected to the desacralization of nature and the technological attack on creation’s integrity, stability and beauty-- to paraphrase Aldo Leopold.

In order to appreciate more fully the role that Rachel Carson’s seminal work *Silent Spring* played in Thomas Merton’s growth as a radical ecologist, and to set the stage for a close examination of his letter to her, we will undertake a quick review of the important changes taking place in Merton’s intellectual and political interests in the years immediately prior to December of 1962 when he first heard of Rachel Carson’s work.

During this period Merton had been studying the history and politics surrounding the rise of Nazi Germany, the moral and human toll of the Holocaust, the ethical implications of the Allied bombing of German and Japanese cities, especially the shocking death toll from the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Against that background and in the presence of disturbing current events he was becoming increasingly aware of and troubled by the escalating tensions sparked by the mounting rhetoric and propaganda of the Cold War. Merton could not avoid drawing connections between the silence and complicity of the German Churches during

Hitler's rise to power and the current silence of many American Bishops and theologians over the moral issues surrounding the escalating preparation for and possibility of a nuclear war.

In his essay, "Christianity and Totalitarianism" (D.Q. 102-117) Merton presents us with a striking analogy. Looking back, he sends a message: if a State promises to "defend the faith" with a strong arm attached to a "nailed fist" and if such protection involves the use of "secret police and concentration camps," the Church and Christians in general should not accept such protection. Turning to the present he warns, "if that system offers to 'defend the faith' by the atomic bombing of defenseless civilians, we cannot accept its protection" because "such defense is a mockery and desecration of God in His image." For the Church to accept such a defense policy and alleged protection, would be to participate in the "renewal of the Crucifixion of Christ, in those for whom He died" (D.Q. 116). Hence, love, the central principle and value of Christian life requires the safeguarding "of the liberty and integrity of the human person" (Ibid.).

But by 1960 the American Catholic Church felt that it had "arrived". The election of John F. Kennedy verified its mainstream patriotic standing rather than its old image as an immigrant European Papist organization. Merton and a few other outspoken Catholics opposed American foreign policy, internal racist conditions, and unjust domestic programs. Merton and Catholic dissidents like Dorothy Day were considered a threat to that new image and often, as with other dissidents, were accused of being communist sympathizers if not communists themselves.

Frustrated, Merton asked Dorothy Day in the summer of 1961 why there was "this awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, lay people on this terrible issue on which the very continued existence of the human race depends?" (H.G.L. 139). When theologians did speak out, it was in convoluted language that basically accepted the status quo. In the summer of 1961, Dorothy Day's *The Catholic Worker* published Merton's poem, "Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces." The Narrator is an Auschwitz commandant, an unsympathetic figure who, in a cold detached voice using antiseptic imagery, describes the operation of a death camp. At the end he warns contemporary readers not to consider themselves superior because "you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing

what you have done” (N.V.A. 262).

In an August 1961 letter to Dorothy Day, Merton expressed concern that the censors “would be entirely negative” in their judgment of the poem. One can catch a glimpse of the seriousness of Merton’s inner battle when he suggests to her that a person might have to change their situation if forbidden to speak out, “being in a situation where obedience would completely silence a person on some important moral issue on which others are also keeping silence—a crucial issue like nuclear war . . .” (H.G.L. 139). Merton doesn’t feel that he can “in conscience, at a time like this,” simply go on writing about meditation, monastic studies, etc. “I think I have to face the big issues,” he says, “the life-and-death issues: and this is what everyone is afraid of . . .” (H.G.L. 140).

Merton began to write passionately against “war madness” and the Cold War mentality. His controversial “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra,” sent to the Latin American poet in September 1961, excoriated both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. That Fall, *The Catholic Worker* published two strong statements by the monk on war and war madness in the U.S. “The Root of War is Fear,” a longer version of a chapter from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and “Shelter Ethics,” a response to a Jesuit who had condoned a family’s taking a gun into its fallout shelter and shooting any neighbor who tried to enter. At that time, Merton was also working on an essay on Mahatma Gandhi and one on the U.S. civil rights movement.

Interestingly, it is also during this period that Merton begins to spend more time at the hermitage and to experience a deepening of his contemplative life. In October, 1961 he announces that it is the “[f]irst time I have had fire in the fireplace at the hermitage” (T.T.W. 10/20/61). The next day he writes about his deepening *awareness* of the divine presence: “To become attention from head to foot, to become all joy in hearing the Word of God. A deep pleasure of monks . . .” (T.T.W. 10/21/61). Then he comments on another pleasure: “Pleasure of fire in the grate at St. Mary of Carmel. The only talkative being, this child, this fire . . . outside—cold, damp, foggy day.” He changes tone and brings in the active side of his life, referring to a letter from Jim Forest at *The Catholic Worker* warning him that a swirl of controversy will most likely surround the publication

of his “Shelter” piece. Forest tells Merton about the insanity sweeping the country: whole towns are building fallout shelters and inhabitants are arming themselves just in case people from the neighboring town would storm their shelters. Merton asks rhetorically what the Soviets have to fear. All they need to do is set off a false alarm and U.S. citizens will start shooting each another and thereby save the Soviets a lot of trouble. “A nice testimony to democracy and individualism!” Merton sarcastically notes (T.T.W. 10/21/61).

During this period, the everyday life of Thomas Merton was filled with contrasting if not contradictory impulses. He was able to handle the conflicting winds by deepening the roots of his spiritual life. An October 23, 1961 journal entry begins, “I am perhaps at a turning point in my spiritual life: perhaps slowly coming to the point of maturation and the resolution of doubts—and the forgetting of fears.” His major fear concerns “[w]alking in to a known and definite battle.” Interestingly, Merton uses the term “spiritual life” to include both the life of solitude, silence and contemplation at the hermitage and the more prophetic life of speaking out boldly against war (T.T.W. 10/23/61).

“I am one of the few Catholic priests in this country,” Merton ventures, “who has come out unequivocally for a completely intransigent fight for the abolition of war, for the use of non-violent means to settle international conflicts.” What surprises and disturbs him is the fact that “*no one* in the Order” is supposed “to be concerned with the realities of the world situation in a practical way—and this in the greatest moral crisis in the history of man: this seems to me incomprehensible” (T.T.W. 10/23/61). What makes it worse is that the Order’s policy is to block, through censorship, most written expressions of concern over this “crisis.” When he did speak to someone with influence in the Order about this situation, “it was like talking to a wall” (T.T.W. 10/23/61).

Merton’s journals of the early 1960s contain passages that express his sense of wonder and spiritual enrichment in the presence of nature’s “infinitely varied dance of epiphanies,” and passages, sometimes within the same entry, filled with critical comments and moral indignation at current events and attitudes concerning civil rights, social justice, war and peace. Early 1962

saw a flurry of Merton's works such as "Original Child Bomb," a sardonic poem on the dropping of Atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; essays such as "Red or Dead: The Anatomy of a Cliché," "Target Equals City," and especially controversial pieces such as, "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility," "Christian Ethics and Nuclear War," and "Religion and the Bomb." In the Spring of 1962, Merton was working on a book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. The book would not be published during his lifetime.

Merton's writings were increasingly attracting negative attention from conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy in the U.S. and from certain members of his religious order. In April 1962, Dom James Fox, Merton's abbot, under orders from the Abbot General, told the monk that he could no longer publish anything having to do with war and peace. (Even though Dom James had received the letter in January, he waited until April to inform Merton of its contents). In an April letter to Jim Forest which became one of the published *Cold War Letters*, Merton characterized this censorship as "transparently arbitrary and uncomprehending," adding that he nevertheless had "to make the best of it" even though he was losing respect for his Order (C.W.L. 132).

It reflects an astounding incomprehension of the seriousness of the present crisis in its religious aspect. It reflects an insensitivity to Christian and Ecclesiastical values, and to the real sense of the monastic vocation. The reason given is that this is not the right kind of work for a monk, and that it "falsifies the monastic message." Imagine that: the thought that a monk might be deeply enough concerned with the issue of nuclear war to voice a protest against the arms race, is supposed to bring the monastic life into *disrepute*. Man, I would think that it might just possibly salvage a last shred of repute for an institution that many consider to be dead on its feet. (C.W.L. 132-133)

Merton insists that although "spiritual renewal, uninterrupted, continuous, and deep" is essential for the Church's mission, such renewal must take place within the present "historical context, and will call for a real spiritual understanding of historical crises." This will require "an evaluation of them in terms of their inner significance" including their contribution to human growth "and the advancement of truth in man's world." This type of critical insight into historical events is essential for the primary historical mission of the Church: the establishment of the "kingdom of God." The irony of the Order's contention that a monk has no business writing

about war and peace is that “[t]he monk is the one supposedly attuned to the inner spiritual dimension of things.” If, instead, the monk “hears nothing, and says nothing, then the renewal as a whole will be in danger and may be completely sterilized” (C.W.L. 133). Merton also held, as we have seen, that a special part of the vocation of a monk and, indeed, any true Christian, is to be “attuned” to the divine presence and movement in the natural order. Merton’s linking of the cosmic and historical, of creation and redemption, and his insistence on the development of a mode of knowing and seeing that is both contemplative and prophetic will become a hallmark of his radical ecology that includes and connects both human and ecological justice (and peace).

Not until the publication of Pope John XXIII’s historical encyclical *Pacem in Terris* did the official restrictions on Merton begin to loosen, largely due to the recognition that the Pope’s encyclical supported many of Merton’s positions. During this period of censorship, Merton mimeographed essays (officially unpublished!) and sent them to friends and even an article or two using a pen name. But he also wrote many letters on the issues of war and peace and the nuclear arms race. Many of these were collected together as the “Cold War Letters.” Two “editions” of this mimeographed collection were circulated, one with 49 letters in April 1962 and the other containing 111 letters in October 1962 (C.W.L.).

Cold War tensions threatened to burst into a nuclear apocalypse during the Cuban Missile crisis in October of 1962. The Soviet Union had placed missiles in Cuba that could reach much of the eastern U.S. including the Nation’s capital. First denying them, then capitulating under photographic evidence, the U.S.S.R. nonetheless sent more ships to Cuba. President Kennedy ordered a naval blockade of Cuba, thus initiating a very dangerous face-off with Nikita Khrushchev. Finally, through backdoor negotiations, a deal was struck and Russia on October 29, 1962 turned its ships around and promised to remove the missiles. Merton’s last Cold War Letter was written against that apocalyptic backdrop. In December he received notice of *Silent Spring*, a new book on another emerging crisis written by Rachel Carson.

Silent Spring

In a December 1962 journal entry, Merton writes: “Very cold. Some snow. Bright, silent

afternoon.” Then he launches into the subject at hand.

I have been shocked at a notice of a new book, by Rachel Carson on what is happening to birds as a result of the indiscriminate use of poisons (which do not manage to kill all of the insects they intend to kill).

Someone will say: you worry about birds: why not worry about people? I worry about *both* birds and people. We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally, and in every way. (T.T.W. 12/11/62)

He then makes this important diagnosis: “It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together.” Much of the letter is similar in tone to Merton’s responses to issues and events connected to war, civil rights, social justice, etc. His immersion in these issues made him sensitive to connections between them and the violent, destructive behavior of humans, especially in industrialized countries, towards the natural world. Note his instinctive joining together of humans and birds, identifying with these other members of the earth community caught in this environmental crisis as he is expanding his compassion and concern for all fellow humans in the global nuclear crisis. Ethically he is saying that we should “worry about both birds and people.” Note also that he connects our destruction of “everything” with our present self-destruction or at least self-destroying tendencies. Because we are “in” (not above or next to) this world and “a part of it,” there is a feedback loop between our destructive behavior towards the earth and towards one another. Carson’s book chronicles that dynamic. Merton’s sense of urgency can be felt: “I want to get this book,” he declares. Then, playing his own interrogator, he asks, “Why?” His response is quick and unequivocal: “Because this is a truth I regard as very significant and I want to know more of it” (T.T.W. 274-5). In the face of all of the other burning issues with which he was concerned at this time, Merton calls this ecological or environmental issue “very significant.”

By early January 1963 Merton had finished reading Carson’s book and was ready on the 12th to write her a letter. He consciously connects his message to her with what he had been dealing with over the past year, writing on the top of his carbon copy of the letter, “Appendix to Cold War Letters.” (W.F. 70).

Merton’s heartfelt gratitude for Carson’s seminal work is reflected in his thoughtful and generous response. *Silent Spring* not only resonated with the monk’s love for the earth and his

observations regarding the growing human abuse of it, but its global perspective allowed him to connect the gradual ecological destruction of “paradise” with the very real threat of its more immediate destruction as a consequence of a nuclear exchange.

“An Awful Irresponsibility”

At the end of his opening greeting to Rachel Carson, the monk compliments her for such a “fine, exact, and persuasive book.” Merton recognizes the high quality of the author’s work, both in terms of its research and the manner in which she clearly and eloquently draws out the implications of her findings. But the second reason for his writing was his conviction that her work would prove “much more timely” than even she or he realized. Perhaps it was his recent efforts at understanding the deeper dynamics at play in the Cold War, dramatically manifest during the Cuban Missile Crisis that forced the conclusion that Carson’s work was not just an analysis and commentary on certain negative environmental effects caused by human misjudgment but a work that struck at the core of the pathos of the times. Merton suggests that by her presenting in such great detail this destructive aspect “of our technological civilization,” Rachel Carson is “perhaps without altogether realizing, contributing a most valuable and essential piece of evidence for the diagnosis of the ills of our civilization” (W.F. 70). The language of illness used in Merton’s letter to Carson mirrors the language in one of his journal entries on her work where he states that you cannot separate the concerns for humans from the concerns for the natural world. In fact, “we are destroying everything because we are destroying our selves, spiritually, morally, and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together” (T.T.W. 12/11/62).

Merton, then, is not only praising Dr. Carson for revealing dangerous practices such as the widespread spraying of DDT and calling for action to be taken to ban the practice. In addition, he is drawing the scientist’s attention to the deeper systemic problems her work points to (and to which she was to some degree already aware). Here Merton is leaning towards a radical ecology critique, one that looks for the “root” (radix) of the problem, or using his medical analogy, the underlying sickness manifest in many areas through a variety of symptoms.

Merton begins to explore these connections in his letter: “The awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values is part of the same portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself.” The “awful irresponsibility” evident in the use of DDT must be seen as an expression of a larger, “portentous irresponsibility” displayed in the accumulation of and reckless threats to use nuclear weapons (titanic power) that would utterly wipe out much of human civilization and large swaths of the biosphere.

Merton suggests that “The same mental processes, I almost said mental illness, seem to be at work in both cases.” Perhaps he should have said “mental illness,” given his penchant for medical imagery. So, beneath the two forms of irresponsibility (and perhaps others) runs the same distorted or pathological way of thinking, but one that is accepted as “normal” by hundreds of millions of people. Carson’s book makes it even more clear to Merton that “there is a consistent pattern running through everything we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life” (W.F. 70). That this multifaceted pattern runs through “our whole way of life” means that our common mental “illness” is both reflected in and supported by our cultural and social systems. Somehow the pattern hides both the immoral and self-destructive nature of our behavior, assuring us that “the other” (whether human or nonhuman) can be eliminated while we escape with only minor injuries, if any. What he does say is that it is “most vitally important” for all people who are “concerned with our society,” albeit in different ways, “to try to arrive at a clear, cogent statement of our ills, so that we may begin to correct them” (W.F. 70).

Interestingly, throughout this discussion Merton includes himself as a member of the society that he is trying to understand. Merton was desperately listening for voices of non-violence in the Church and trying to wake people up to the insanity of the nuclear situation. But he was also, as evinced in this letter to Carson, reaching out to kindred spirits who point to problems expressive of this deeper illness. What becomes important for all concerned is the ability to distinguish between “purely superficial symptoms” and those “things related directly to

the illness.” (Note that “ills” now become “the illness” just as “mental processes” became “mental illness.”) For Merton, one obstacle to the critical and clear thinking so desperately needed is the mass media. He suggests in many places that one of the hidden functions of mass media is to provide so much information and so many entertaining diversions that people find it impossible to make the necessary distinction between what is a superficial symptom and what is a serious expression of the illness.

One of the dangers flowing from this confusion is that when time, energy and resources are spent on treating surface symptoms and allowing the deeper illness to go undiagnosed, the proposed treatments may make matters worse. Why? Because “our remedies are instinctively those which aggravate the sickness: the remedies are expressions of the sickness itself” (W.F. 71). The use of “instinctively” by Merton suggests that the illness so permeates our way of thinking that the latter seems “natural.”

Radical ecologists have also pointed out that, rather than face up to modernity’s whole sick orientation toward the earth, remedies are implemented that are themselves expressions of the sickness. Not only do such “remedies” distract us from facing the potentially terminal illness that afflicts us, they create other problems (hunger, soil erosion, water depletion) that in their turn will need superficial, quick solutions that will create other problems, and so on. Problems are defined and solutions sought within an agreed upon but limited and flawed conceptual framework that is never challenged.

And though the culture may not want to hear what they have to say, it needs the visionaries, prophets, and concerned scientists to speak out if what affects and infects everyone is to be recognized and named. Both Merton and Carson were to experience anger, ridicule, and threats from those who were vested in maintaining the present illusions (ideological, economic, psychological, political, etc.). They would rather blame the messenger or create and excoriate scapegoats than face the truth.

Merton understood this. As he said to Carson, we Americans display a “superficial optimism about ourselves and our affluent society.” The reality is that at the core of a modern life

of “plenty” claiming widespread “happiness” among its people, many people dwell in a state of spiritual (and for some material) poverty, even despair. Programmed to seek ever-higher levels of material affluence as the solution to life’s problems (even when the problems are produced by the growth in affluence), our modern “technological civilization” and its economic system undermine future well-being. In order for the state to which we have grown accustomed to grow, “we instinctively destroy that on which our survival depends.” It looks to Merton like an unconscious “hatred of life, carried on in the name of life itself” (W.F. 71).

The monk notes that our modern self-destructive ways, both nuclear and ecological, are, in a mythopoeic sense, a repetition of the “Fall” and of the loss of paradise. Merton could have mentioned that Adam, a human and earthling made from the humus, nevertheless gave into the temptation to become like unto the gods. Merton tells Carson that, like Adam, we today display the tendency to use our godlike technological power “to destroy and negate” ourselves at the exact moment when things seem at their best. We are managing to wrest defeat from the jaws of victory. Desiring “more,” we overstep our limits and those of the earth. Having brought up the topic of paradise, Merton claims that for religious thinkers, the whole of nature “has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a ‘paradise’ of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the wonderful interrelationship between them” (W.F. 71). When Carson is reminded that God’s wisdom is manifested in all creatures “down to the tiniest” Merton may be suggesting the targets of DDT and other toxic pesticides and herbicides. These reflections remind us of Merton’s own deepening experience of the divine presence in nature and his growing appreciation for the beauty and significance of all creatures that share the woods and fields with him, even the tiniest.

The monk then turns to the place of the human in creation. He suggests that humankind’s vocation is to be the “eye” or self-consciousness, so to speak, of “this cosmic creation.” Merton reveals in a letter to Ray Livingston that he recently used this metaphor in a sermon he gave to fellow monks on the feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8, 1962). He told them “that man is in a way in the universe as an eye in a body, and ‘if the eye be single the whole body will be

lightsome, but if the eye be darkened' . . ." In the sermon, he also used the image of humankind as a microcosm of the larger cosmos (W.F. 246). In the same letter about his sermon, Merton spoke of children and nature, confessing that it makes him sad "to think that there is all this richness in nature, which gets crushed and spoiled by our society as people grow up" (W.F. 245). Even at the monastery, what began as a single tractor has now multiplied into "many machines of all kinds." Merton finds this kind of easy surrender to modernity and its technological values disturbing. He believes that "it is the nature of a monastery to make a wise use of such means of production as are ordinary in the society of the time, a wise use of what the world uses less wisely. . ." He admits that he has abandoned his objection to "the machine as such," but thinks there should be "machineless" monasteries and that this issue demands serious reflection because it touches on "the whole nature of monasticism itself" (W.F. 246).

The monk suggests to Rachel Carson that "wise use" protects and sustains the "delicate balance" between humankind as a part of nature (sameness) and as transcendent to it (difference). Such transcendence is not radical, however. A correct understanding of the human place or "position" vis a vis creation must include the responsibility of humans to relate themselves and the visible universe to the Invisible or the Creator, "the source and exemplar of all being and all life" (W.F. 71). (Merton seems a little unsure what God-language to use here with Carson).

Returning to the metaphor of humankind as the "eye" of the earth body, Merton notes that unfortunately modern humanity has lost its sight and "is blundering around aimlessly in the midst of the wonderful works of God." Ironically, we are fooled by our "power and technical know-how" into believing that we see, when, in fact, we have lost our "cosmic perspective" and the "wisdom" that comes with it (W.F. 71).

This theme will run through much of Merton's analysis of technology and instrumental rationality in *Conjectures*. Interestingly, Merton mentions the Bushmen of South Africa as an example of a people who maintain contact with the wisdom of a cosmic perspective that modern society has abandoned. Examples of Merton's growing interest in so-called primitive and archaic religious traditions, including the spiritual vision manifest in ancient cave paintings, can be found

in his journals and notebooks as well as in *Conjectures*. In the latter, he asserts that, while our sophisticated technologies enable us to uncover parts of nature heretofore invisible, the irony is that unlike these archaic people, “we no longer see directly what is right in front of us” (C.G.B. 308). “Technics and wisdom,” however, need not be at odds, claims Merton. He suggests to Dr. Carson that “the ‘vocation’ of modern man is to unite them in a supreme humility which will result in a totally self-forgetful creativity and service” (W.F. 71).

This is an important statement for several reasons. First, it reflects one of Merton’s more moderate positions on technology, one grounded in the hope that science and technology, when unchained from the worst aspects of modernity and either integrated into or dialectically related to wisdom and love can further the ongoing work of creation. It reflects his assessment of Teilhard de Chardin, a modern scientist who Merton claims strives “to recover a view of the scientific world, the cosmos of the physicist, the geologist, the engineer with interest centered on the logos of creation, and on value, spirit.” Teilhard thereby is able to transform “the scientific view of the cosmos into a wisdom” (I.C.M. 62). Merton has less difficulty with science than with modern technologies. He is willing to allow that science can play a creative and positive role both in relation to society and to nature if sufficiently strong cultural values and spiritual resources emerge to control and guide technological thinking and action.

Second, the statement insists that if modern humanity positively responds to its vocational “call” to unite wisdom and technology, it must adopt an attitude of “supreme humility” (*humus*/soil, earth), meaning a return to its earth role and to its humane-ness. This will “result in a totally self-forgetful creativity and service” (W.F. 71). “Self-forgetful” may imply the loss of the modern Cartesian self and mindset with its aloof status and its need to manipulate and dominate nature to affirm its own reality.

Third, “creativity” requires that humans be sensitive to and cooperate with the broader and deeper movement in creation and history emerging from what Merton had named “the source and exemplar of all being and life” (W.F. 71). In the light of his other writings, Merton is claiming here that our creative acts should not find their worth only in terms of how they benefit

our species but how they sensitively enhance human life without destroying nature's creativity.

Fourth, the concept of "service" would, in the light of Merton's social justice teachings, mean service to our fellow humans and especially to the poor and disenfranchised. For the Christian, such actions also serve Christ present in our neighbor, in history and creation. These themes of cosmic wisdom and human liberation found in *Conjectures* and other future writings, are often connected with Merton's broader vision of Christian social action (see especially C.G.B. 82-83).

The monk then asks Carson the practical question of how we are to alter our course, since "we are not going in the right direction." Carson's book itself is "a most salutary and important warning" regarding the direction in which we are headed. He expresses his hope that her book will be read by those who can affect "public opinion on these vital practical matters" (W.F. 71). In addition to his hope that Carson's work will move the public to act, Merton hopes that "lawmakers" will take her work seriously and appreciate its deeper implications. It is very critical that they see the "terribly close" relationship between the dangers to the earth that Carson is presenting and the horrendous catastrophe that would be initiated by "nuclear war." Both forms of destruction involve "exactly the same kind of 'logic,'" he notes, returning to his search for a common pattern (W.F. 72).

Merton then uses an example that many in the 1960s could relate to—beetles (the Japanese kind, not the British). Since people find the Japanese beetle ugly, he points out, they are open to the sales pitch that the beetles are also "a dire threat." This leads people to conclude that they must exterminate these ugly pests "by any means whatever." Not much thought is given to the probability that other innocent creatures will suffer or be eliminated, or that our own children might be injured by our chemicals—or we ourselves. Defensively, we minimize the dangerous effects of our actions in order to justify our decisions. Similar dynamics are at work in war preparation, Merton observes (W.F. 72).

Both our careless use of highly toxic pesticides to exterminate natural beings that we consider dangerous and unpleasant and our preparation to exterminate our enemies with nuclear

weapons are examples of what Merton calls elsewhere, a “culture of overkill” (N.V.A. 230). Merton suggests that “the real focus of American violence is . . . in the very culture itself, its mass media, its extreme individualism and competitiveness, its inflated myths of virility and toughness, and its overwhelming preoccupation with the power of nuclear, chemical, bacteriological and psychological overkill” (Ibid.).

Merton tells Carson that he has made a decision to dedicate himself “entirely and freely to truth and to my fellow man” (W.F. 72). He warmly wishes her well, saying that he loves her book and he loves “the nature which is all around me here.” He expresses regret over “my own follies with DDT, which I have now totally renounced” (Ibid.). Five months after his letter to Rachel Carson, Merton reiterated his concerns in his journal: “Understanding the contemporary world means facing the problems of racial justice and peace but also of technology and “the great spiritual problem of the profound disturbances of ecology all over the world, the tragic waste and spoilage of natural resources, etc. . . .” (T.T.W. 6/6/63). Note that along with ethical issues concerning racial and international relations as well as the frightening and uncertain consequences of modern technology, it is the impact of humankind’s destructive and wasteful actions on the ecology of the whole earth that Merton identifies as “the great spiritual problem” of the modern world.

Unfortunately the monk’s correspondence with Rachel Carson never developed beyond this letter. She was fighting her own battle with breast cancer and would succumb to it and to the radiation used to treat it on April 14, 1964 at age 56. Her last year was spent defending her book and garnering public support that would eventually ignite the environmental movement and lead to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Her influence on Thomas Merton was to pervade his life and his writings both reinforcing and accelerating his attention to the importance of expanding his existing sensitivity to and contemplative awareness of the natural world to include a more “prophetic” and socially critical aspect of his radical ecology.

Merton would deepen and expand on his radical and “prophetic” critique(s) of the modern “form of life” and his inclusion of the contemplative and wisdom traditions in his

suggestions for a transformation both of individuals and societies. Here he not only meets one of the basic criteria of a radical ecologist but offers us a positive vision of alternative social values and a way of life that is wider and deeper than most.

Merton was concerned that there was “a loss of historical consciousness” (S.O.C. 156). This meant a loss of our understanding of the history of violence against the American Earth and its Indigenous peoples who lived in harmony with it.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND?

For most radical ecologists, such as Carolyn Merchant, a critique of modernity's general ideological and social patterns is necessary but not sufficient. Historical consciousness is also important. For example, an understanding of the history of the United States will uncover centuries of violence by immigrant Europeans towards the conquered land and its native inhabitants. From the Puritans to the pioneers to the frontiersmen and settlers, the dominant violent relationships with the North American "wilderness" and its indigenous peoples reflected certain European religious and political values and ambitions. Rarely has the link between the effects of a violent campaign against the natural world and the peoples dependent upon it been more clear.

And yet, as Roderick Nash and Thomas Merton agree, the generation of original perpetrators and their descendants (until recently) have been either unable or willing to face the brutal reality or learn the often-shocking lessons of their history. As the centuries unfolded, certain ambiguities and self-contradictions that were present in the early Euro-American mind and culture continued in different ways, having become traits of the American character. Merton could see these at work in the American war in Vietnam [and unfortunately we see them continuing even into the twenty-first century].

We will look at several "fruits" of Merton's growing awareness and critique of the history of Euro-American (religious and secular) violence towards the lands of the "New World" and its indigenous people. Merton's search for the roots and patterns that underlie, run through and guide American cultural pathology (as noted in his letter to Rachel Carson) continued past the mid-1960s as his review of the seminal work by Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, the important *Ishi* by Theodora Kroeber and *The Shoshoneans* by Edward Dorn demonstrate. This enabled Merton to shed new light on the propagandist rhetoric explaining and defending America's brutal war in Vietnam, thus deepening and expanding his grasp of these patterns and his growth as a radical ecologist. His short essay on "War and the Crisis of Language"

(1967) examines the continuity between the rhetoric of the past and the present used to justify violence towards the earth and its human inhabitants when both “objects” of violence are closely tied together. Thus, he anticipated both the Ecojustice and Environmental Justice movements.

I. Wilderness and the American Mind

As with many of his book reviews, Merton’s 1968 review of Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*, provides him with an opportunity to reflect on the work itself as well as on issues Merton considers crucially connected to it. One of Nash’s themes that Thomas Merton highlights is the irony of American attitudes and actions towards the continent’s natural world. Americans loudly proclaim their love for the land and wilderness (“America the Beautiful”) while proudly embracing a political ideology and economic system that depend on destroying America’s natural legacy and ultimately that on which their identity and survival depend on many levels. They continued the tradition embodied by the frontiersman who was at once “a product of wilderness” and “a destroyer of the wilderness.” The success of the pioneer likewise depended on his ability to be victorious in his battle against wild nature and hence turn the wilderness into “a farm, a village, a road, a canal; a railway, a mine, a factory, a city—and finally an urban nation” (P.A.J. 96).

Merton finds it disappointing that Nash barely touches on the “really crucial issues of the present moment in ecology.” Although Nash “does not develop the tragic implications of the nation’s inner contradiction concerning wilderness,” he does state them “clearly enough for us to recognize their symptomatic importance” (P.A.J. 96). In the present, as in the past, America confesses its “love and respect for wild nature” while being firmly attached to values that “demand the destruction of the last remnant of wildness” (P.A.J. 96-97). Merton points out that Americans, not characterized by the ability to recognize their self-contradictions, have labeled Rachel Carson an extremist for suggesting that there is something pathological about poisoning the natural world on which they depend for their own health (P.A.J. 97). This penchant for unconscious irony extends to modern western Christianity where “a certain popular, superficial, and one-sided ‘Christian worldliness’” carries implications that are “profoundly destructive of nature and of

'God's good creation' even while it claims to love and extol them" (P.A.J. 97).

Merton cautions against drawing sweeping conclusions about what genuine biblical teachings on wilderness are from the history of the politically and culturally self-serving interpretations offered in recent centuries. Nevertheless, he seems to agree with and affirm many of the observations that Nash makes about negative attitudes towards and at times a deep repugnance for wilderness and the Indians held by the Puritans and later adopted by capitalists influenced by them. The Puritans hated wilderness as if it were a person, says Merton, even "an extension of the Evil One" (P.A.J. 98).

Native Americans, then, were considered evil since they lived in this evil milieu and hence being "natural," were full of its evil contagion. Wilderness was "the domain of moral wickedness" because, among other things, "[i]t favored spontaneity—therefore sin" (P.A.J. 98). The imaginations of the Puritans, "haunted by repressed drives," fantasized that all kinds of "wanton and licentious rites" were taking place in those wild places. Nature was seen as fallen and corrupt, and hence the basic duty of the Christian was "to combat, reduce, destroy, and transform the wilderness." This could be summed up as "'God's work,'" says Merton (P.A.J. 98).

The Puritans considered their success in winning the battle against wilderness as a sign of their predestined salvation. Their reward from God was "prosperity, real estate, money, and ultimately the peaceful 'order' of civil and urban life" (P.A.J. 98). Merton mentions Max Weber's classic study of "the influence of the Puritan ethos on the growth of capitalism." The culture of American capitalism "is firmly rooted in a secularized Christian myth and mystique of struggle with nature" (P.A.J. 99). This mystique, like its religious counterpart, has as a central "article of faith"-- the belief "that you prove your worth by overcoming and dominating the natural world." Your existence is justified and bliss achieved (here or hereafter) "by transforming nature into wealth" (Ibid). Merton points out that according to the exchange value and use value theories of both Adam Smith and Karl Marx, nature is "useless and absurd" unless and "until transformed." Any individual who disagrees with this, Merton observes, is dismissed as a "half-wit—or, worse, a rebel, an anarchist, a prophet of apocalyptic disorder" (P.A.J. 99).

However, there arose opposite attitudes and views concerning wilderness and Indigenous peoples. A “cult of nature” arose in the nineteenth century accompanied by the image of the Indian as Noble Savage. Poets like William Cullen Bryant, novelists like James Fenimore Cooper, the Transcendentalists, and mystically inclined preservationists like Thoreau and Muir, reminded the country of the terrible consequences not only to the natural world but to the human spirit of this campaign to destroy that which is wild. The Transcendentalists especially sought to “reverse the Puritan prejudice against nature.” They taught that God was more accessible in the wilderness and that humans, rather than being evil and hence more corruptible in the wilds, were actually good by nature--and in nature. “The silence of the woods whispered, to the man who listened, a message of sanity and healing,” Merton writes, reflecting his own experience as well as that of the Transcendentalists. Cities were more likely to corrupt a human’s goodness. And, more often than not, “contact with nature” helped a person recover it and with it his or her “true self” (P.A.J. 100).

Merton calls Thoreau’s work “prophetic” because it went much deeper into the reality of the natural world than the popular “enthusiasm for scenery and fresh air” (P.A.J. 100). Thoreau already realized that “American capitalism was set on a course that would ultimately ravage all wild nature on the continent—perhaps even in the world.” Thoreau “warned that some wilderness must be preserved.” If not, humans would destroy themselves “in destroying nature” (P.A.J. 101). Merton points out that, contrary to the Puritans, Thoreau held that to overly domesticate and tame the wildness of the human being would “be to warp, diminish, and barbarize him.” Hence, “the reduction of all nature to use for profit would end in the dehumanization of man” (P.A.J. 101). Merton suggests that the “passion and savagery that the Puritans had projected onto nature turned out to be” within humans themselves (P.A.J. 101). Thereafter, urbanites turned green living wilderness into “asphalt jungles.” Absent the discipline of the wilderness, the savagery of urban humanity became “savagery for its own sake” (P.A.J. 101-102).

Merton agrees that the natural world is not responsible for the violent crimes perpetrated daily in urban centers; they are an expression of what lies in supposedly “civilized” souls. John Muir’s Scotch Calvinist father regarded it “as a feminine trait” in his son to enter wilderness

without an axe to cut down trees or a gun to hunt down and kill wild animals. “To leave wild nature unattacked or unexploited was, in his [father’s] eyes,” says Merton, “not only foolish but morally reprehensible” (P.A.J. 102-3). This gave Muir an insight into the need of the American male to prove his virility through an “aggressive, compulsive attitude...toward nature.” Merton felt that this attitude among most American males, did not reflect “strength,” but manifested a deep “insecurity and fear.” He claims that beneath the American “cult of success” there lies a “morbid fear of failure” which results in “an overkill mentality” that has “been so costly not only to nature but to every real or imaginary competitor” (P.A.J. 102-103).

Merton points out that the writings of “nature philosophers” such as Thoreau, far from being mere sentimentality or fancy poetic expressions, turned out to “have realistic and practical implications,” some of them quite dramatic (P.A.J. 104). He notes that the historical conflict between the wilderness mystique and the mystique of “exploitation and power” continues to act itself out in the American mind at a “tragic depth.” For example, “[t]he ideal of freedom and creativity that has been celebrated with such optimism and self-assurance runs the risk of being turned inside out if the natural ecological balance, on which it depends for its vitality, is destroyed” (P.A.J. 104).

What happens to the “pioneer mystique” when this is all taken away? Merton observes that in some American ghettos, the pioneer has become a policeman ready to shoot every black man that looks at him in the wrong way. Today’s “pioneer in a suburb,” is a tormented man always on the prowl for “projects of virile conquest” (P.A.J. 104). [As we can observe today, what of nature is allowed to exist in suburbia is under attack by an endless army of lawn mowers, weed whackers, chain saws, hedge trimmers, and heaven knows what else. Intense obsessions abound to tame and eliminate “wild” weeds at all costs and to carefully mark the edges of the lawn perfectly. One is reminded of Black Elk’s reflections on the white man’s penchant for square houses.]

One of the increasingly unfortunate legacies of our history is “the problem of ecology,” a problem that, Merton emphasizes, “exists in a most acute form” [and this was the 1960s!] (P.A.J. 104). The immediate causes of many of the concrete problems range from the heavy use of

pesticides and other dangerous chemicals, as he had praised Rachel Carson for pointing out. And, reflecting the world crises of his day, Merton points out that there are “more spectacular” threats to the earth’s life systems, most notably the “danger of fallout and atomic waste” (Ibid.). And yet, in spite of the fact that most of “the stupendous ecological damage” done in the last fifty years (1918-1968) “is completely irreversible,” states Merton, the American military and its industry “are firmly set on policies that make further damage inevitable” (Ibid).

Merton is aware of “the enormous struggle” to resist strip mining and early versions of mountaintop removal in eastern Kentucky. He notes that the terrible flooding that recently occurred due to the removal of growth from the mountains caused widespread concern. Yet, “when a choice has to be made, it is almost invariably made in the way that brings a quick return on somebody’s investment—and a permanent disaster for everybody else” (P.A.J. 105).

Merton then turns to Aldo Leopold and applauds his insight into how the erosion of the American land has also become an erosion of American freedom. The monk notes that freedom has come to mean “purely and simply an uncontrolled power to make money in every mindless exploitation” (P.A.J. 105). He then cites Leopold’s important question that resonates with Nash’s ironic tone: “Is it not a bit beside the point to be so solicitous about preserving American institutions without giving so much as a thought to preserving the environment which produced them and which may now be one of the effective means of keeping them alive?” (Ibid.).

Merton’s own sensitivities to nature and to the growing need for an ecological ethic shaped his positive response to Leopold’s message. “Leopold,” claims the monk, “brought into clear focus *one of the most important moral discoveries of our time . . . the ecological conscience*” (P.A.J. 105, *italics mine*). The ecological conscience “is centered in an awareness of man’s true place as a dependent member of the biotic community” (P.A.J. 106). This, of course, echoes one of Merton’s own insights, “How absolutely true, and how central a truth, that we are purely and simply *part of nature*” (T.T.W. 4/13/64). Merton identifies the “tragedy that has been revealed in the ecological shambles created by business and war” as one of “ambivalence, aggression, and fear cloaked in virtuous ideas and justified by pseudo-Christian clichés” (P.A.J. 106). This tragedy of pseudo-

creativity is “impregnated” with “hatred, megalomania, and the need for domination” (P.A.J. 106).

As for the cultural and psychological roots of the ecological tragedy, Merton points to the “profound dehumanization and alienation of modern Western man” who has substituted “the artificial value of inert objects and abstractions (goods, money, property) for the power of life itself” (P.A.J. 106). Merton quotes a basic principle of Leopold’s ecological conscience that reverses this value system: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (P.A.J. 106). Merton wryly suggests that if we judged recent “social, economic, and political history” in the light of this principle, “the last hundred years would be a moral nightmare” (P.A.J. 106). He admits that a few gestures have been made to counter that history, but with little effect. This is rooted in a basic American self-contradiction, reflected in the fact that it is too often the same people who make these gestures of goodwill that also “ravage, destroy, and pollute the country.” Honoring the wilderness myth, they “proceed to destroy nature” (P.A.J. 106).

Challenging the violence perpetrated on the Indigenous peoples, their land, and the wider biosphere, Merton states that “the ecological conscience” of Aldo Leopold “is essentially a peace-making conscience” (P.A.J. 107). Merton claims that this connection between violence towards humans and the earth is obvious in “the very character of the war in Vietnam (P.A.J. 107). But if less physically brutal and dramatically expressed, “the more abstract, more global, more organized presence of violence on a massive and corporate pattern” may be even more real and cause a greater variety in types of violence and the extent of suffering and destruction (F.V. 5). Some claim that perhaps when it comes to damage to the earth we are witnessing a short-lived historical phenomenon because we will learn from seeing the obvious deterioration of the living (and non-living) systems of the planet. On the contrary, writes Merton, and here again he is prophetic, even though most of “the stupendous ecological damage” already done “is completely irreversible,” leaders in the military and in the corporate industrial systems “are firmly set on policies that make further damage inevitable” (W.P. 104).

As Merton had stated, “the ecological conscience is essentially a peace-making

conscience” (P.A.J. 107). The current record of hot and cold wars does not bode well for either conscience. Yet Merton is hopeful that the connection between the two and the urgency of both will become more clear as people wake up to “the very character of the war in Vietnam—with crop poisoning, the defoliation of forest trees, the incineration of villages and their inhabitants with napalm” (P.A.J. 107). Merton ends by pointing out that some people--like himself--are wearing “the little yellow and red button ‘Celebrate Life’ and bearing witness as best we can to these tidings” (P.A.J. 107).

II. *Ishi Means Man*

Merton intensified his interest in the Indigenous peoples of the Americas during these years in the hermitage. Among other works, he read anthropologist Theodora Kroeber’s *Ishi in Two Worlds* (Los Angeles: Berkeley University Press, 1961) based in part on the work of her late husband Alfred L. Kroeber. It was subtitled, “A biography of the last wild Indian in North America”. Out of Merton’s reflective reading came an essay, “Ishi: A Meditation” which appeared in *The Catholic Worker* 33 (March 1967) and was reprinted in other volumes, including *The Nonviolent Alternative*.

Merton begins his essay on Ishi, a member the Yahi subtribe of the Yana people of California, with these words: “Genocide is a new word.” One could rightly claim, Merton observes, that this reflects the heightened power and effectiveness of today’s technology which makes it easier to destroy “whole races at once” (N.V.A. 248). Yet, this does not mean that genocide itself is new, but “—just easier.” The monk points out “that a century ago white America was engaged in the destruction of entire tribes and ethnic groups of Indians,” making little or no distinction between “good” and “bad” Indians, “just so long as they were Indians” (N.V.A. 248). Long before that, the Puritans, believing this land to be another biblical “Promised Land,” proceeded to “clear out” idolaters, identifying themselves and their mandate with that of the ancient Israelites. Theirs was a divine mission, as was also claimed by the Conquistadores in Latin America (T.M.R. 306). Biological and cultural genocides followed.

The religious myths that guided and justified the destruction of these “aliens” continue to

propel America in a secular form, Merton argues. But contrary to this ancient myth, “the United States has received from no one the mission” to police the world or to dictate to other peoples how they should live. (N.V.A. 196) [Or how they should die!]

The Yahi or Mill Creek Indians were a small band (or sometimes called a “tribe”) of the Yana people that had escaped conquest by hiding out in the forests and hills of California where they survived for fifty years. Ishi as the last living member of the tribe was also the last living “wild” Indian. He was rescued and became the subject of moving studies by anthropologists Alfred and Theodora Kroeber. The Kroebers asked how one can explain the ability of the Yahi to survive all those years in the hills and forests. They pointed out that the band had “remained incorrupt, humane, compassionate...with their faith in tact. One great source of their “endurance, courage, faith” was the “land” and the natural world. “The Yahi were on their homeground,” in Merton’s phrasing. He suggests that we “should reflect a little on the relation of the Indian to the land on which he lived. In this sense, most modern men never know what it means to have a ‘home ground’” (N.V.A. 252). Merton’s use of “home ground,” of course, brings us back to the notion of “Place” as a radical ecological value countering the homogeneity of Space and also of the constant mobility characteristic of modernity. Place is also, as we have seen, a central value and grounding reality for Merton himself. Much of the ongoing “conquest” of America [and the “Unsettling of America”-- using fellow Kentuckian Wendell Berry’s phrase] involves turning places with their concrete and unique human relationships to the land into spaces organized for profit. Small farmers are the latest victims.

“[In addition] the Indian lived by a deeply religious wisdom which can be called in a broad sense mystical, and that is certainly much more than a ‘mystique,’” claims Merton (N.V.A. 252). The author refers his readers to the works of William Faulkner, especially his hunting stories like “The Bear,” for insights into Native American wisdom (N.V.A. 252).

As Merton explained elsewhere:

The wisdom of the Indian in the wilderness is a kind of knowledge by identification, an intersubjective knowledge, a communion in cosmic awareness and in nature. Faulkner has described it as a wisdom based on love: love for the wilderness and for its secret laws;

love for the paradise mystery apprehended almost unconsciously in the forest; love for the “spirits” of the wilderness and of the cosmic parents (both Mother and Father) conceived as symbolically incarnate in the Old Bear. (L.E. 108)

Given the indigenous peoples’ intimate relation to wilderness and its inhabitants, the wanton genocide and biocide unleashed across the continent by Euro-Americans ranks both as sacrilegious (the “Holy Land”?) and a great crime both against humanity and the American earth with its biological communities. It should also alert us to the hidden motivations underlying our ongoing treatment of any “other,” whether human, geological or biological, which threatens our God-given right to land and to material and national progress. After all, “[w]e were the people of God,” quips Merton, “always in the right, following a manifest destiny” (N.V.A. 249). A mixture of pseudo-biblical and secular-nationalistic justifications still provide many with their rhetoric of war—whether with human enemies or nature. Given our tragic history we should have learned something. “Unfortunately,” Merton laments, “we learned little or nothing about ourselves from the Indian wars!” (N.V.A. 249). We certainly haven’t adopted the Indigenous peoples’ sense of a sacred earth with its accompanying morality of respect. It was obvious to us that we had nothing to learn from “savages” (or most other peoples). As Merton asserts, those termed “savages” often turned out to be truly human while those who called themselves “civilized” were often the real “barbarians” (N.V.A. 249).

Ironically, a source of strength for the Yahi (and for many Indigenous peoples) was precisely the unjust suffering inflicted on them by the outside invaders. The Yahi, like many, “found strength in the incontrovertible fact that they were in the right . . . They were not guilt-ridden” (NVA, 252). Merton then links his insights into these paradoxical effects of America’s war on its Indigenous peoples with the war it was exercising at the time in Vietnam. “Every bomb we drop on a defenseless Asian village, every Asian child we disfigure or destroy with fire only adds to the moral strength of those we wish to destroy for our profit . . . our own ideals look like the most pitiful sham” (Ibid.). In many ways, the Vietnam war “seems to have become an extension of our old western frontier, complete with enemies of another, ‘inferior’ race,” concludes Merton (N.V.A. 253). And the flora and fauna of the surrounding American forests or Vietnamese

jungles were subject to destruction, whether using older rifles and artillery or modern bombs and napalm.

III. *The Shoshoneans*

From Free Movement to Reservation: From Free Identity to Imposed Identity

In a May 1967 letter to Jonathan Williams, Merton announces: "I just finished a piece on Ed Dorn's Indian book. Thought you might like it..." (C.T. 5/19/67, 268). Here again, Merton uses the opportunity that writing a review of a recent work offers him to include his own reflections on certain themes as well as certain literary or artistic values expressed in the work itself. He often develops his own thinking on issues and spots new avenues that he might want to explore at a later date. "The Shoshoneans" first appeared in *The Catholic Worker* 33 no. 6 (June 1967): 5-6). It was a review of *The Shoshoneans: The People of the Basin-Plateau*, a book written by Edward Dorn but graced with rich photos by Leroy Lucas. Lucas was an African-American who, according to Merton, took part in a Shoshonean Sun Dance for Peace in Vietnam. He "danced for the full three days, fasting, in the hot sun" (I.M.M.8). This dramatically illustrated for Merton the connections he had and would make between the treatment of "Indians" and "Negroes" by the dominant American society.

Merton introduces his review with an excerpt from a mimeographed government document concerning the Indians of Fort Hill Reservation, Idaho:

Indians who are now principally on the reservation were the aboriginal owners of the United States. Placing them on reservations was an act to protect the white settlers from acts of depredation, which became more common as the Indians were pushed further back out of their original holdings. (I.M.M. 5)

This type of language with its not too subtle hidden agenda was always an invitation for Merton to exercise his sarcastic wit, noticeable in several places in this essay. He suggests that this "modest production of some very minor bureaucratic mind" not only deserves our attention but "perhaps an international prize for crass and impenetrable complacency" (I.M.M. 5). Since the document purportedly has to do with "Indians," Merton asks "What are Indians?" They seem to be those people the government says are living "principally" on "reservations." Merton admits

that, of course, Indians can choose to leave their reservation and live in a ghetto. If they stay on the reservation they are considered “wards of the government” (I.M.M. 5).

Once upon a time (long ago) they might have been considered “property owners”-- in a laughable way, quips Merton. They seemed to own the whole continent, “until we arrived and informed them of the true situation.” Their real status was that of “squatters on land which God had assigned to us.” The document calls them “*aboriginal* owners,” Merton points out, but *everybody* (tongue in cheek) really knows “how much of an owner that is.” In reality it means that the Indian was “no owner at all” (I.M.M. 6). European Christians who took over this land realized “[f]rom the first [that] it was quite evident that the manifest destiny of the Indian was to live ‘principally’ on reservations as wards of the true owners of the land, the ones for whom legal title had been prepared in some mysterious fashion from the beginning of time, or drawn up perhaps in Noah’s ark” (I.M.M. 6). And, of course, one must not forget the “depredations” initiated by those sneaky *aboriginal* owners just when the white man started to “develop the neighborhood, to make a little money on his investment” (I.M.M. 6).

In a 1965 letter to Alejandro Vignati who was lamenting the brutal history of conquest in Latin America, Merton was already pointing to the North and to the abuse even of reservations.

I agree with what you say about the religious values of the Indians. You are right a thousand times over. The history of the conquest was tragic, but not as tragic as that of this continent here in the North, where almost all of the Indians were exterminated. Some remain in silence, as an accusation; and each year the white people try to steal from them another piece of the reservation that remains theirs. (C.T. 7/23/65)

Perhaps Merton is thinking of his own earlier protest about a “recent violation of a very old treaty with the Senecas.” They were forced to leave so-called “inviolable” land that was now to be “flooded by a big dam.” Ironically, the first Catholic President, the recently elected John F. Kennedy, had refused to listen to the Seneca’s many-sided objections to the building of the Kinzua Dam on the Allegheny River which would destroy the historically and culturally significant Cornplanter’s Village and many other villages as well as rich farmland. This area was a revered place to the Seneca. It was also located in the Allegheny National Forest. Merton pointedly asked: “If we have no concern for rights and freedom in the concrete, how can we expect the world to

respond to the perfunctory mouthing of our ideals?” (W.F. 1/9/63).

In his review of *The Shoshoneans*, Merton realizes that forcing Indians onto reservations, an act of enforced physical confinement, points to perhaps the even more violent act of restriction and confinement directed at the Indian as a human being. America attempted to reduce the Indian's sense of inherent self-worth and even his or her human identity. This is “the reduction to a definition of him not in terms of his essential identity, but . . . a definition of him in terms of a relationship of absolute tutelage imposed on him by us.” Members of the Indian “race” were defined in terms of their relationship to the superior white race, the “obviously” superior race, and therefore, are who *we* consider them to be. Such a drastic and demeaning act “is of course extremely significant not only for the Indian (against whose human identity it is an act of systematic violence) but for ourselves”, writes Merton (I.M.M. 9). By this action, “we are also expressing a definition and limitation within ourselves . . . we are in fact defining our own inhumanity, our own insensitivity, our own blindness to human values” (I.M.M. 9-10).

We try to salve our conscience and express a bogus political largesse by giving the Indian the freedom to leave the reservation and to become like us, “by manifesting business acumen and American know-how, by making money, and by being integrated into our affluent society.” Merton sarcastically quips: “Very generous indeed” (I.M.M. 10).

The monk then asks what all of this really means and answers loudly in capitalized letters: “IT MEANS THAT AS FAR AS WE ARE CONCERNED THE INDIAN (LIKE THE NEGRO, THE ASIAN, ETC.) IS PERMITTED TO HAVE A HUMAN IDENTITY ONLY IN SO FAR AS HE CONFORMS TO OURSELVES AND TAKES UPON HIMSELF OUR IDENTITY” (I.M.M. 10). But given the fact that the Indian, like the “Negro,” differs from us in skin color and many other traits, “he can never be like us and can therefore never have an identity” (I.M.M. 10). Oh, we can announce that, in theory, he is human, but in practice the Indian is, “like the Negro, at best a second-class human.” And, despite his efforts to dress and act like us, he “never quite manages to make the grade” (I.M.M.10). “In one word,” proclaims Merton, “the ultimate violence” exerted on Indians and other races of color, especially the Negro, by Europeans and Americans “has been

to impose on them *invented identities*” and place them in a position of powerlessness where they believe that their actual identity is the one “conferred upon them” (I.M.M. 11).

There was one last effort by some Indian nations to reverse the complete takeover of their land, the loss of the great bison herds, and the push towards confinement on reservations and cultural reeducation through “Indian schools.” This was the famous Ghost Dance of the nineteenth century (ca. 1870-1890) that began in the far west, swept across the Plains, and made some Americans very nervous. The Ghost Dance was the last great attempt by Native peoples to liberate themselves (with the aid of “supernatural powers”) from American imperialism. The movement was dealt a great blow in 1890 with the massacre by the U.S. military of 152 Lakota (mostly women and children) in their encampment along Wounded Knee Creek on the Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Merton quotes *The Shoshonean* author Ed Dorn who wrote that the massacre “registered another small installment in the spiritual death of America” (I.M.M. 12).

Seeking access to traditional sources of power and vision, and hence identity, some Native Americans, including some Shoshonis, had embraced the Peyote Cult—but not all. Dorn reports that one man who spoke for the many abstainers told him that “it is very important for his people to work for their cosmic identities within the unaltered material of their own being, without the agency of an hallucinogen . . . His point . . . was that a man has as much potential as a plant and should grow by virtue of his own roots” (I.M.M.12-13).

Merton makes two comments. His first is a reminder that whatever the case, peyote had only been among the Shoshoni for about fifty years. He then remarks that “the Indian is still conscious, or able to be conscious, that he is close enough to his own roots to return to them in spite of the violence exercised upon his spirit by the white man.” Merton insists that, “in so far as a man returns to his own roots, he becomes able to resist exterior violence with complete success and even, after a certain point, invulnerably” (I.M.M. 13). However, in an asterisk footnote Merton does assert that the Peyote Cult “grew up as a desperate spiritual reaction against the policies of genocide and cultural destruction . . .” It was not merely an attempt at a psychological

escape but a spiritual power that could help the Indian recover “his identity and spiritual roots in a ground of messianic and apocalyptic vision.” Many Indians, as well as Merton, objected to its trivialization and abuse (I.M.M. 13).

Merton ends his review with an extensive quote from a young Ponca Indian, Clyde Warrior. The whole document comprised the last four pages of Dorn’s book and was a speech drafted for a conference on the War on Poverty. Merton introduces it with these words: “Its wisdom effectively balances the unwisdom of our opening quotation, and makes us feel that America would be better off if we had a few more articulate Indians” (I.M.M. 13). I invite the reader to read the bulk of the speech as presented in Merton’s review (I.M.M. 13-16). Here are a few passages on poverty and powerlessness that give one a sense for the power of the speech and also fit with Merton’s own comments.

. . . The indignity of Indian life, and I would presume the indignity of life among the poor generally, in these United States, is the powerlessness of those who are “out of it,” but who yet are coerced and manipulated by the very system which excludes them . . .

When I talk to Peace Corps volunteers . . . they tell me . . . that the very structure of the relation between the rich and poor keeps the poor poor; that the powerful do not want change and it is the very system itself that causes poverty. . . I hope that men of good will even among the powerful are willing to have their “boat rocked” a little in order to accomplish the task our country has set itself . . .

As I say I am not sure of the causes of poverty, but one of its correlates at least is this powerlessness, lack of experience, and lack of articulateness . . .

. . . I do not know how to solve the problem of poverty . . . But of this I am certain, when a people are powerless and their destiny is controlled by the powerful, whether they be rich or poor, they live in ignorance and frustration because they have been deprived of experience and responsibility as individuals and communities . . .

In the old days the Ponca people lived on the buffalo and we went out and hunted it. We believed that God gave the buffalo as a gift to us . . . And we felt ourselves to be a competent, worthy people. In those days we were not “out of the system.” We were the system, and we dealt competently with our environment because we had the power to do so.

. . . Democracy is just not good in the abstract, it is necessary for the human condition; and the epitome of democracy is responsibility as individuals and communities of people. There cannot be responsibility unless people can make decisions and stand by them or fall by them . . . (I.M.M. 14-16)

Merton’s final comment was: “The speech was never given. This was not permitted. The

ideas come too close to the nerve” (I.M.M. 16).

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CHAPTER TWENTY

PROPHETIC ECOLOGY

Uprooting Modernity

In his “Preface” to *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* (1965) Merton characterizes it as “a series of sketches and meditations, some poetic and literary, others historical and even theological, fitted together in a spontaneous, informal philosophic scheme in such a way that they react upon each other” (C.G.B. 5-6). Importantly it is “a confrontation” with the twentieth century by a committed monk who might mistakenly be judged as “something of a ‘bystander’” (C.G.B. 6). Rather, he wants to engage and address “concerns appropriate to an age of transition and crisis, of war and racial conflict, of technology and expansion” (C.G.B. 7). Some of the entries are drawn directly from his journals, some are modified journal entries, but, importantly, “these entries are not of the intimate and introspective kind that go to make up a spiritual journal.” They can be seen in their sum as “a personal version of the world in the 1960s.” Questions are “Not treated systematically” but more creatively “as they come to mind or when they fit in with the organic pattern of the book.” As a result, there are “many new ideas” added “throughout” (C.G.B. 7).

As we recall, Merton told Rachel Carson that her *Silent Spring* was of special importance both because of its groundbreaking and thorough examination of the destructive environmental impact of human pesticides and because it confirmed his own suspicion that “there is a *consistent pattern* running through everything we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life” (W.F. 70). Similarly, as one reads and reflects on Merton’s own diverse “notes” and his “sketches and meditations,” one begins to glimpse something of the “organic pattern” to which he alludes and perhaps also something of the “*consistent pattern*” that he told Carson runs through all aspects of modern life including its view of and actions towards the earth.

In addition to reaching back to some of Merton’s earlier reflections for clues to the content and dynamic shape of the patterns, we will also reach “beyond *Conjectures*” into relevant future reflections that develop more fully certain “sketches” found in *Conjectures*. Hopefully, adding

these threads to the tapestry will give us a fuller picture of Merton as radical ecologist, seeing his critique of modernity as one of its crucial elements and one that relates to its other principles.

Radical and Prophetic Ecology

A critical understanding of what radical ecologist Mick Smith terms the modern “forms of life” or “mode of existence” is essential if one is to grasp the more immediate causes of various ecological problems because these reflect social, economic and political/Military systems and events (E.P. 3).

During conferences Merton conducted at Gethsemani in December 1967 and May 1968 for contemplative nuns, he made it clear that they—and by extension all religious and lay people-- must take the call to the “prophetic vocation” seriously. To do this, “we have to realize that, whether we’re revolutionary or not, we have to be radical enough to dissent from what is basically a totalitarian society” (S.O.C. 133). Merton doesn’t use “totalitarian” to characterize the way American society’s political system functions, but to indicate “the way that it is economically organized . . . for profit and marketing” (S.O.C. 129). It is totalitarian “in the sense that everything important is really determined for people beforehand. What’s left is trivial” (S.O.C. 144).

Merton sees the true prophet as unwelcome in his day--as in the past, but for a different reason. “One of the central issues in the prophetic life is that a person rocks the boat,” Merton quips, “not by telling slaves to be free, but by telling people who think they’re free that they’re slaves.” Unfortunately, that message is totally “unacceptable” (S.O.C. 133). Prophetic leaders have to be authentic human beings who “can exist without a structure, who can create their own existence, who have within themselves the resources for affirming their identity and their freedom in any situation in which they find themselves” (S.O.C. 136). This means being able to “make a choice from your own deepest center” rather than “being predetermined by somebody else” (S.O.C. 133).

A central paradox--and Merton is following Marcuse here--is that Americans, who pride themselves on being free, are actually slaves to needs created by advertisers and the media. As a result, “everything else is put aside for the sake of fulfilling these needs” (S.O.C. 151). The reason

we cannot end war or poverty (or, one could add, environmental destruction) “is that we are so bound by the needs created by our economy that we have no choice.” The alternative to that is also “unacceptable.” We’d have to change drastically “and live a totally different style of life” (S.O.C. 151-152).

Herbert Marcuse also makes the point, says Merton, that popular culture’s widespread and abusive manipulation of language and thus its distortion of reality, makes it difficult for people to get “any kind of accurate perspective on what’s happening” (S.O.C. 152). This “abuse of language” makes awareness of what is behind the facts difficult. “Now an essential thing about the prophetic vocation is *awareness* of factors behind the facts. One-dimensional society doesn’t want this” (S.O.C. 156). This suggests that it is essential, therefore, that the prophetic or radical ecologist nurture a type of “awareness” that is able to see through what is presented by popular culture and its media as factual to the actual truth being cloaked by them.

Cogs in an Enormous Machine

Thomas Merton was deeply concerned with the negative effects of oppressive and unjust forces exercised by modern “modes of life.” In Merton’s words, humanity must be freed from its present role as “a cog in an enormous machine,” a “utensil for production” and an “instrument” serving political power. Thus there must be a strong rejection of the modern condition of alienation and dehumanization and a renewed “emphasis on the *human*” as opposed to “the merely collective” and the “technological” (C.G.B. 82). In order to accomplish this task, Merton insists that the immediate aim of real social action, especially any labeled Christian, must be to “liberate man from all forms of servitude, whether economical, political, or psychological” (C.G.B. 83). In this chapter we will examine Merton’s understanding of the nature of these forms of servitude and how they inhibit or divert us to serve trivialities rather than the expression and development of truly human qualities.

The Myth of Progress

Perhaps nothing captures and motivates the drive of the modern world more than the idea of progress, itself having taken on a mythic proportion and function. Myth here is used not to

indicate a story that is untrue, though there may be many assumptions and beliefs that are false, but to connote a grand narrative that is simply taken as true by a population and which is used to justify and legitimate major undertakings by social, political, economic and cultural institutions often without even being averred to. Accepted on “faith,” popular culture stigmatizes individuals who actually attack or critically examine this “truth.” To gauge its pervasive influence one might ask the simple question, “What if it is NOT true?”

For at least the last two centuries, “progress” has functioned as the basic interpretive and guiding myth of the West and spread to much of the globe. Progress has proven itself to be extremely flexible in terms of its content and consistently intractable in terms of analysis and verifiability. Eighteenth and nineteenth century faith in a progressive rational and moral improvement of humankind was dealt a severe blow by the wars and genocides of the twentieth century. Undeterred, the west redefined the meaning of progress by lowering its expectations and narrowing its instruments of measurement to the quantifiable: power, efficiency, and profit. Thus recast, the idea of progress has proven enormously successful at generating popular support for and justifying the negative effects of the west’s economic and political expansion. Paradise for the myth of progress is at the end of history not the beginning. We are always “just about to” enter the millennium when full happiness will be realized. Like a plane racing down the runway, we are always on the verge of a take-off, convinced that if we move just a little bit faster we will ascend to the heavens, unaware that our supply of fuel is limited and our wings are too heavy.

Merton seeks to highlight a set of connections linking the myth to the problematic pattern of technological culture, neoliberal economics, and modern social relations. The myth of progress, especially when defined in terms of economic growth and technological efficiency and power, attempts to provide the rationale for an irrational process whereby means become ends and their unfettered pursuit becomes not a state of sublime happiness but “an affliction” (C.G.B. 221). Nevertheless, the consumer is constantly bombarded by a rhetoric promising a better life and “proclaiming at every turn that he stands on frontiers of new abundance and permanent bliss” (C.G.B. 221).

Merton cites Lewis Mumford's critique with approval: "Too many thought not only that mechanical progress would be a positive aid to human improvement, which is true, *but that mechanical progress is the equivalent of human improvement*, which turns out to be sheer nonsense" (C.G.B. 222). Merton warns that we haven't "even begun to plumb the depths of nonsense into which this absurd error has plunged us" (Ibid.). He observes how Americans, especially, get excited over what they take as signs that progress is occurring and is, indeed, inevitable. Americans not only equate the "new" with the "better" in terms of consumer goods and technologies, but equate an increase in the *quantity* of goods produced and consumed with an increase in the *quality* of human life and happiness. Held captive by the spell of this myth, we become "convinced that our life, as such, is better if we have a better car, a better TV set, better toothpaste, etc." (C.G.B. 222). [One might add computer, iPad, electronic game, etc] This belief takes on a quasi-religious quality as we fall "into a senseless idolatry of production and consumption for their own sakes." As a result, we show contempt for "and destroy our own reality and the reality of our natural resources" (C.G.B. 222). We have lost touch with the positive qualities of our own being and "have plunged ourselves into *process* for its own sake" (Ibid.). In terms of ecological, moral and spiritual values, much of the process is "senseless, wasteful, destructive" and ultimately "suicidal" (Ibid.).

Merton is critical of a "complacent and naïve progressivism which pays no attention to anything but the fact that wonderful things can be and are done with machinery and with electronics" (R.J. 99). Ironically, two of the areas of greatest technological advance are medicine and weapons, "wonderful methods for keeping people alive and wonderful methods for killing them off." In each case, corporations make a huge profit (Ibid.).

Merton certainly saw the irony in the construction of ever more powerful bombs in the name of defense to the point where their use would be suicidal. Similarly he was beginning to see the self-defeating dynamic at work, as he had confessed to Rachel Carson, in the modern attack on the natural order using powerful chemicals and destructive technologies. He was seeking to diagnose some underlying "moral and spiritual disease" as its symptoms became "more and more

critical” (T.T.W. 12/11/62).

Modern Individualism

Modernity, claims Merton, preaches the “heresy of individualism: thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unit and asserting this imaginary ‘unity’ against all others.” The self is affirmed as “not the other” (C.G.B. 143-4). The hyper-individualistic ethic of the “self-made man” insists that we are “completely free autonomous” beings (like gods) with limitless possibilities and everything within our reach. With a little will power, some positive thinking, and hard work, we can have anything we want. The problem, claims Merton, is that most of the things we think we want and which can be had by our efforts are “not quite worth it.” What we *really* seek and need – “love, an authentic identity, a life that has meaning – cannot be had merely by *willing* and by taking steps to procure them” (C.G.B. 224). They are gifts and the only way to receive them is to be open to them. And the only way to be open to them is “to renounce ourselves, our autonomy, our fixation on our self-willed identity.” Put another way, we have “to relax the psychic and spiritual cramp” that is the “I” as we know it. Unable to relax this cramp, we are forced “to affirm our nothingness *over against*” other persons and the natural world (Ibid.).

This dualism of self and other is connected to a host of other dualisms: male/female, mind/body, white/black, reason/emotion, culture/nature. Humans are rational; nature is not. Humans have minds, nature does not. In the post-Cartesian world, the “thinking subject” or the “thinking reality” is at the center of this autonomous self, this “little isolated world of reality” which, having rejected interconnections, actually has less reality (C.G.B. 264-5). This thinking subject (“I think, therefore, I am.”), this supposedly autonomous self, looks out upon a separate, external reality of not-self from its “privileged autonomous position” (C.G.B. 265).

Through this act we both invent our own reality and dictate to the other what its reality is. “But,” says Merton, “this implies no real respect for reality, for other persons, for their needs, and in the end it implies no real respect for ourselves” because we settle for this “fabricated” identity. We do not confront “the deep mystery of ourselves” (Ibid.). To assume that my “superficial ego—this cramp of the imagination-- is my real self, is to begin by dishonoring myself and reality”

(Ibid.). Life, however, becomes a series of choices—either adjust to our constructed reality if the facts we face threaten it or rebel against the facts to assert the centrality of the ego. Either way we desperately attempt to keep our supposedly separate, autonomous self “as an *affirmation* not as a *negation*” (C.G.B. 266). To narrow my sense of being to a self-image pieced together by the thinking subject and then make life a series of adjustments to a rationally constructed external reality is to live an impoverished life, no matter how affluent. I lose the rich sense for mystery and hidden values within myself and the world in whose reality I participate (C.G.B. 265-6). In fact, unless I find a deeper affirmation in myself, my project, based on a seriously flawed conceptualization of self and world, proves “simply and utterly futile” (C.G.B. 266).

Consuming Our Way to Paradise

Merton recognized in the rapidly expanding post-war consumerist revolution the engine that would drive the American middle class and link this new articulation of human needs and desires to the world of corporate America – where economic growth becomes a means that is also an end. By the 1960s the “affluent society” and consumerism were in full ascent. Merton saw that one of the obvious culprits behind the increasingly aggressive attack on the earth was the growth in the west of a voracious appetite for consumer goods (legitimated by the belief that the “new” was both sign and proof of “progress”). We should remember that there had been a shift in post-war America from an emphasis on frugality, savings, and non-auspicious wealth to a lifestyle of spending, credit, and conspicuous consumption. Ever-new, “labor-saving” technologies and the “new improved” products of the biochemical industry spearheaded a corporate America where growth became an end in itself.

Nor should one forget Eisenhower’s warning about the “military-industrial” complex. Suburbs like Levittown had sprung up all over America on the rim of cities, encouraging the mass production of houses and automobiles, new highways, a cold-war Interstate system, radio and then television--both stimulants for purchasing new products, the strategy of planned obsolescence, growing baby-boom purchasing power, the Cold War competition for growth both economically and militarily (destroying the earth slowly or suddenly). Patriotism became

expanded to also mean loyalty to and hence the defense of a consumerist “lifestyle,” defined as the American “way of life.” A major cultural shift was afoot and Merton sensed that its effects could have serious ramifications both in terms of human society and the natural world.

According to Merton, cultural institutions, such as churches, that at one time might have strenuously objected to the materialistic values of modern society, had either been coopted or discredited. Clerics complained at length about sins of the flesh, Merton noted, but had precious little to say about the modern technological and materialistic values that had become the real enemies of the spiritual life (C.G.B. 46). Furthermore, the widening gap between the “abject misery of the poor” and the “absurd affluence of the rich” raised its own serious moral questions (C.G.B. 73). Merton suggests that this lack of criticism reflects a comfort with the relative power and prestige that the modern world has been willing to accord to a compliant religious sector.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CARING FOR THE EARTH COMMUNITY

Members of the earth community that lived on the land around Merton's hermitage were subjects of years of growing familiarity with and fondness for the natural world and its "critters" that made up his part of Kentucky. A quick retrospective might give one an idea of Merton's fondness for what the Lakota might call "the wingeds" and "the four leggeds"—each species or even sub-species named and related to as an oyate, people or nation: the deer people, the buffalo people, the bear people, etc. All are relatives living within the house of Father Sky and Mother Earth, members of the same family. Humans can learn from the activity and attitudes of different oyate.

Kinship with The Wingeds

Ever since he was named monastery forester, Merton had made it a point to familiarize himself with the various kinds of birds in the area. Gradually he came to recognize them either by their markings, their song, or both. Merton was to continue this interest in and study of birds for the rest of his life. In an early letter to Sr. Theresa Lentfoehr he reports:

I have seen a new bird book with pictures of all the birds, and in which I bet you will find your hawks. Did they come back? I have been watching birds a bit too, and I find I am amazed at the number of species that I did not know were around here--tanagers, yellow throats, swamp thrushes, and what not. I can't get close enough to the wild ducks that are attracted by the new lakes we dug. On one of them was seen a blue heron. . . (R.J. 7/12/55)

Merton could casually and with confidence also note to her that he had seen "a Mississippi Kite (a southern hawk), and a beautiful green heron [and] a bobwhite" (R.J. 8/21/57).

A quick perusal of entries from almost any journal would yield comments about a Berwick's Wren, Carolina Wren, Tanager, Myrtle Warbler, Pine Warbler, Siskin, White-eyed Vireo, Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Catbird, Mockingbird, Crow, Lark, Bobwhite, Dove, Titmouse, Meadowlark, Kingfisher, Woodthrush, Quail, Red-Shouldered Hawk, Towhee, Heron, Flycatcher, among others. Merton's love for and awareness of birds grew over the years. The sounds of birds could often give a day its particular quality or punctuate its uniqueness. "A joyful and exciting day, cool, with a great confabulation of crows in the east, and a woodthrush

quietly singing in the west” (T.T.W. 6/21/63). Merton could be deeply moved by the song of a bird: “A meadow lark was singing outside the window, in the sun, when I was finishing my Mass, and I thought I would go through the roof, it was so beautiful. Sometimes things are just too good, which reminds us that if we would let them be as God wanted them to be, we would be able to bear it . . . ”(R.J. 5/01/63).

Ecophilosopher David Abram talks about a “shift of attention” by which “one may suddenly come to hear the familiar song of a blackbird or a thrush in a surprisingly new manner . . . as active meaningful speech.” One who has learned to hear and notice “subtle variations in the tone and rhythm” of the whistling phrases of bird calls, catches something of their “expressive intention” so that “two birds singing to each other across the field appear for the first time as attentive, conscious beings, earnestly engaged in the same world that we ourselves engage, yet from an astonishingly different angle and perspective” (S.O.S. 81). Reading through his many journal entries inspired by birds, one can easily conclude that Merton frequently made such a shift in attention. For him this shift was part of his growing sensorial openness to the world around him as well as his contemplative attunement to a universe filled with intention and meaning.

Sometimes, however, this shift can be made without calls or whistles or chirps. On a July morning he notices a “Meadowlark sitting quietly on a fence post in the dawn sun, his gold vest – bright in the light of the east, his black bib tidy, turning his head this way, that way.” Rather than sound, there “is a Zen quietness without comment” (D.W.L. 7/2/64).

With an increase in the amount of time spent at the hermitage, Merton felt himself joining a new religious community living in the immediate environs of the cabin. Birds were important kin in this community as we saw him note in *Day of a Stranger*:

I know there are trees here, I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of “place” a new configuration. (D.S. 33)

As had his favorite saint, Francis of Assisi, Merton formed a close and affectionate

bond with the birds that shared this “place.” He speaks in warm terms of the “wonderful companionship” of the towhees and tanagers, who, in this circle of the woods “have their nests and I have mine.” Merton interrupts an evening meditation to watch several savannah sparrows outside his window (D.W.L. 5/1/65).

Even in winter, Merton can write warmly about his aviary neighbors. On a November day he notes that a “beautiful, small, trim” titmouse is “swinging and playing in the dry weeds” by the woodshed and recalls the “pure, lovely sound” of a quail’s whistling full “of perfect innocence!” (D.W.L. 11/2/64). To state that there was “a sense of total kinship with them” suggests something more than a pleasant analogy would. They shared something deep—being and love.

In the afternoon, lots of pretty little myrtle warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them. I was awed at their loveliness, their quick flight, their hissings and chirpings, the yellow spot on the back revealed in flight, etc. Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being? (D.W.L. 11/4/64)

Birds would come very close to the hermitage and to the hermit, especially when they learned to trust their new relative. This provided Merton an even more intimate familiarity with them. Flycatchers were becoming “tamer and tamer,” he notes, playing about on the baskets and chairs on his front porch right in front of his window. “[A]nd they are enthralling,” he writes. Occasionally he would even share the hermitage with wrens (D.W.L. 5/30/65). In fact, June seems to have been the month for wrens to visit—even to explore staying. One day as Merton was sitting in the back room of his hermitage he heard some movement in the front room. A Carolina wren that had been eyeing the place the previous day flew into the front room of his hermitage but soon “flew out again, as though it were not welcome!” (T.T.W. 6/5/63).

Merton seemed to have a special fondness for Carolina wrens. He would occasionally pause in a conference talk to pay attention to a bird, to respect its presence and even to allow it to sing. Such a moment was captured on a tape recording of one of his talks. Interestingly he had just been suggesting that we think about the presence of God surrounding us on all sides. There are things in life that “correspond somewhat to the presence of God,” he says. Then, as the transcriber

notes: “[At this moment Merton sees a Carolina wren outside the window and takes a moment to look at it . . . he seldom so suddenly leaves his lectures in this way. The wren sings a bit, too.]” (M.H.P.H. 454).

Smaller winged creatures could also catch his attention, sometimes in the middle of writing. On the same day that the Carolina wren had flown into his front room, and just prior to that visit, Merton was writing about the honorary degree bestowed upon him *in absentia* (naturally!) by the University of Kentucky. He is then honored again:

A very small gold-winged moth came and settled on the back of my hand, and sat there, so light I could not feel it. I wondered at the beauty and delicacy of this being – so perfectly made, with mottled golden wings. So perfect. I wonder if there is even a name for it. I never saw such a thing before. It would not go away, until, needing my hand, I blew it lightly into the woods. (T.T.W. 6/5/63)

A sense of wonder elicited by beauty and delicacy leads to wondering about its identity: a contemplative Adam seeks a name for a fellow creature.

The Presence of The Four-Leggeds

In January 1964 Merton crafts a “personal note” in response to Jim Frost, a high school student from Iowa who had written to ask for a few words from a famous author about himself. The monk encourages the student not to live “on Illusions,” but on reality, which is better, and is “right there in front of you.” Merton then tells about a recent encounter he had had with deer and makes a plea for the preservation of wild animals and respect for the land. After his reading of *Silent Spring* and prior to both the Roderick Nash work on wilderness and his reading of Aldo Leopold, Merton talks about his wild animal neighbors and encourages a member of the “rising generation” to dedicate himself to the love of the land and the preservation of its “richness and beauty.”

I like the woods and the hills. Last evening I was trying to count all the deer that were up at the other end of the field from where I was, but because they were up against some high sage grass and their color blended in to it I could not make them all out, but I counted at least five for sure. It is wonderful to have wild animals for neighbors, and it is a shame that people can't think of anything better than to go and shoot them.

The lesson is that we Americans ought to love our land, our forests, our plains, and we ought to do everything we can to preserve it in its richness and beauty, by respect for our

natural resources, for water, for land, for wild life. We need men and women of the rising generation to dedicate themselves to this. (R.J. 330)

Merton ends his letter with, "Well, God bless you Jim. And God bless all your classmates" (R.J.330).

Merton cared deeply for the animals around his hermitage, and had a special place in his heart for his "neighbors," the deer. They seemed lovely and vulnerable, especially around humans. The presence of hunters was a threat to his beloved deer as his letter indicates. Every Fall he and the deer had to put up with hunters. Although they were not supposed to hunt on monastery grounds, many hunters ignored such strictures. In fact, they were well aware that deer sought refuge there. Merton wanted to get the woods around the hermitage designated as an official game sanctuary, but was not sure that even that would work (R.J. 6/16/65). In November 1965, Merton wrote to Dom Jacques Winandy that he would be glad when deer hunting season was over because "my nearest neighbors are the deer." He had recently seen some deer who were wounded. It was "terribly saddening" to see "the cruelty of man and his insensitivity." If the hunters really needed deer for food, that would be one thing, but "[t]hey hunt in order to kill . . ." (Sc.C. 11/13/65).

Merton found the companionship of deer at the hermitage very enriching. The deer gradually grew accustomed to his presence. In the early period when he was permitted on occasion to sleep in the hermitage, he would spot them nearby. Carefully and quietly positioning himself on the front porch he would watch them graze. When eventually he began to move about, they "lifted up the white flag of their tails and started off in a wonderful, silent, bounding flight down the field only to stop a hundred yards away" (D.W.L. 3/15/65). He knew the places where they would bed down for the night and found it absolutely wonderful to have deer as his "nearest dormitory neighbors – thirty or forty yards from my own bed, or even less! How wonderful!" (D.W.L. 3/23/65).

One evening in the Fall of 1963, Merton was walking in front of the hermitage, saying Compline and watching the full moon rise. He spied a doe "out in the field again." She had become quite used to him by now and was not disturbed by his presence. She even came towards

him, crossing the field from where she had stood. Yet her “tameness” bothered him; deer season was approaching. He hoped that she only lowered her guard “with the white hermitage and the monk in white and black, without a rifle” (D.W.L. 9/10/65).

But there were rifles in the woods. On a morning two months later, Merton was saying Prime in front of the hermitage when he “saw a wounded deer limping along in the field” unable to use one leg. The saddened monk “began weeping bitterly.” To his amazement, after he had been “standing there weeping and looking at the deer standing still looking at me questioningly for a long time . . . [t]he deer bounded off without any sign of trouble” (D.W.L. 11/13/65).

Deer, like other animals, can provide insights into our own interior landscape. This is reflected in a tender passage by Merton;

The inner self . . . is like a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand and comes out only when all is perfectly peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone. He cannot be lured by anyone or anything, because he responds to no lure except that of the divine freedom. (I.E.5)

This is given a rich commentary and connected to the ‘True Self’ concept in Merton by George Kilcourse (M. A. 97-109).

The Land and the Role of Monks

Merton’s love for the songs of birds floating through the silent woods and his contemplative listening for the voice of the divine made him repulsed by the loud and violent machinery of humans—even when used by monks. Because of his growing communion with and appreciation for the hills, trees, animals, ponds and streams around the hermitage, Merton grew increasingly sensitive to human technology’s intrusive, crude, and noisy incursions. In October of 1961 he was incensed at the presence and noise of a “bulldozer *working day and night* in the cornfields, the bottom lands.” Its mission was to straighten a creek. Recognizing modernity’s penchant for making nature conform to abstract mathematical lines, he asks, “Can’t they be content to let the creek wind as it always did? Does it have to be straight?” Monasteries had also been bitten by the need to “improve” on nature. “Really, we monks are madmen, bitten by an awful folly, an obsession with useless and expensive improvements” (T.T.W. 171). There were

also noises from a dehydrator and a never-quiet pump. He wryly observes that the only direction that is quiet is south--towards his non-monastic neighbors on the other side of the property line. They speak, but are quiet folk. On the other hand, Trappists don't speak, they sign, "but drown everything in the noise of our machines." Maybe one of the reasons for signing "might be that it is not always easy to be heard," he sarcastically retorts (T.T.W. 171).

Whereas the sounds and noises of a forest or meadow form a meaningful whole since all originated together in an interdependent process, the noise of human machines bespeak a world and purposes alienated and alienating. From chain saws to Combines, inappropriate technology can be known not only by its violent power but its aesthetic crudity. The aggressive intent behind their operation is manifest in the sound of their fury.

An infernal concerto of chain saws broke out in the woods on the hillside behind the new water works, just before Sext. A deep one and a tenor, a roar and a yell of hot metal, diabolical intervals of "harmony" in utter fury, while three or four oaks went down in quick succession . . . The trees crashed and were cut up, or partly so, by dinner time. And now I suppose they will lie on the ground and rot for ten years, and no one will ever know what it was all about in the first place. Somebody's brainstorm – it was set to the right music. (T.T.W. 7/9/63)

The next day he would write of another noise:

. . . A new machine, sailing through the distant horse-pasture, by the little bell house, looking like an Ohio riverboat or a Saul Steinberg drawing, driven by a brother in a white sun-helmet. What is it? An atomic-powered river gunboat? An agricultural pagoda? It seems to be made of aluminum, and has a paddle wheel in front. A great deal must go on inside. It has ventilators protruding in every direction. Can be heard a mile away. Chews up the grass and leaves it shred[ded]. What for? (T.T.W. 7/10/63)

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton introduces a critical reflection on the deadening influence of mechanization on the monastic life with a quote from the Indian philosopher and art historian, Ananda Coomaraswamy: "Whatever is done naturally may be either sacred or profane, according to our own degree of awareness; but whatever is done unnaturally is essentially and irrevocably profane" (C.G.B. 25). For Merton, what we do in line with nature or that naturally flows from and expresses our body always has the potential to reveal a spiritual dimension. It is already structured to do so. What is done, however, "unnaturally," i.e. in a way and in a sphere cut off from the creative movement of nature, cannot be transformed

by awareness into something sacred. A tree or a meal can be sacred or profane without ceasing to be itself. A machine has no ability to manifest the sacred. The religious mind--if alert and aware--can recognize and be fed by the sacred in most anything. There are certain objects, systems, and actions, however, that cannot become sacred because they lock the mind into a non-religious mode of operation and have no potential reference to a deeper reality, pointing only to themselves.

Merton knew from first-hand experience how modern technologies can introduce values and practices into the monastic life that gradually weaken or undermine it. The monk was concerned about the proliferation of machines that purportedly saved time and labor but imposed their own artificial demands and rhythms on the monks and their effects on the traditional monastic spirituality of work and on the quality of the human and hence spiritual life of the monks themselves. Merton saw “a deadening of spirit and of sensibility, a blunting of perception, a loss of awareness, a lowering of tone, a general fatigue and lassitude, a proneness to unrest and guilt which we might be less likely to suffer if we simply went out and worked with our hands in the woods or in the fields” (C.G.B. 25).

Our natural sensitivities can be blunted by deadening routines and unimaginative work. Our spiritual life, which is built on and is meant to enrich and be enriched by our natural life, thereby suffers. Yet, the monks were told by authorities to offer it up as an act of sacrifice and “supernatural” merit. But simply declaring it so does not make it so, Merton opines. He suspects that the religious rhetoric was simply a way to rationalize and justify the economic and utilitarian gains of introducing this technology. Such logic leads “to the absurd proposition that, in practice, we must sacrifice the spiritual life itself.” But, he concludes, “to resign ourselves to the degradation and ruin of our spiritual life is not a sacrifice that we can offer up as pleasing to God” (C.G.B. 25). Rather, it is a “desecration of the temple of our being” (C.G.B. 26). The quality of the life of the body, its senses and sensitivities, is understood by Merton to be an essential grounding for the mental and spiritual life. He concludes that traditional monastic work in the woods and fields in contact with nature remains significantly better for the spiritual life than exposure to the

rationalized, mechanized routine of modern society (C.G.B. 25). This is not coincidental.

Increasingly aware of the disastrous course of modern humanity's relationship to the earth, Merton became convinced that the special relationship to the land that had been traditionally associated with the monastic life should be revived. He suggested that by building on this time-honored tradition, the Cistercian monk might find an answer to the whole "identity" question that plagued many religious during these modern times of change and rethinking, and might, in fact, become a model for a society that was in the midst of destroying its rural base. Merton expressed these sentiments and convictions in a letter discussing renewal and the future of monasticism:

. . . from every point of view I think that the Cistercian has to be a man who works the land and takes a wise and effective care of the natural resources (forest, etc.) which God has given into his charge. This is the kind of work that, for us, helps the "identity" problems to get solved and also takes care of most of the others too. Stability is much more reasonable and Christian when one has grown roots in the soil of his monastery . . . (Sc.C.. 2/27/65)

A cornfield that he describes as "a paradise of tall stalks and leaves and silence," offers Merton another insight into religious ways of seeing and relating to the earth. "What joy there is in seeing the tall crests nod ten and twelve feet above the ground, and the astounding size of the silk-bearded ears!" Not only joy in him, but "a sacredness about the beauty of tall maize." He feels not only what the Mayans felt but realizes that "in this feeling there is a pre-Eucharistic rightness and wisdom." "How can we not love such things?" he asks. He admits to a great admiration for the humanity of the Mayas and Incas who, he claims, "so far, have done most honor to our hemispheres" (C.G.B. 306).

In the original May 1965 draft of *Day of a Stranger*, Merton anticipates the late summer corn which "will be tall and sacred" with the wind whispering through the stalks and leaves "as if all the spirits of the Maya were there." And thinking of them he weeps for atrocities that were committed against native peoples "in past ages, in the carnage that brought Americans a 'history.'" Then this hermit confesses regret and bitterness: "I live alone with the blood of Indians on my head." (D.W.L. 241).

Our arrogant suppositions to the contrary, theirs was not the irreligious, deluded mind. The modern “completely irreligious mind is, it seems to me,” declares Merton, “the unreal mind, the tense, void, abstracted mind that does not even see the things that grow out of the earth or feel glad about them: it knows the world only through prices and figures and statistics” (C.G.B. 306). For Merton the “religious” mind feels a communion with living, growing things that, like the mighty rows of corn and tall oaks, are rooted in the common sacred earth. But “irreligious” minds (presumably found in many today who stridently proclaim their religiosity) “reduce the world to number and measure” (Ibid).

This modern self is a legacy of Cartesianism with its starting point and center in “a subject for whom his own self-awareness as a thinking, observing, measuring and estimating ‘self’ is absolutely primary” (Z.B.A. 22). The more this self as subject sets itself over against others as objects, the more it becomes isolated in its “own subjective prison,” a detached observer of the surrounding world, “isolated and out of touch” (Ibid). Losing touch with our deeper self and its communion with Life, we also lose those contemplative and poetic ways of “seeing” the natural world, ways filled with wisdom (*sapientia/sophia*). Merton understood, as we have seen, the ecological destruction wrought by a social order created by and creative of alienated selves with their objectifying and compartmentalizing thinking and valuing.

We also lose the kinds of experiences of nature that would generate moral sensitivities that would rebel against the sight of destruction. However, given the many sources and resources available by which one can learn to “see differently,” Merton is not without hope. Transformations in seeing and feeling and doing will lead to deeper transformations in being and in a sense of who we are both as human and as a part of creation.

In a review of two 1967 books on wilderness and paradise, Merton argued that given the fact that a monk’s calling and indeed his “whole life” is to nurture “a deeply religious appreciation” for “wilderness and paradise,” it is therefore a call to “a special kind of kinship with God’s creatures in the new creation.” This is not just a nominal kinship but involves a moral obligation towards all creatures and the earth. Since modern technological society seems set on destroying

the remaining tracts of wilderness, and since humans need such places if they are to remain human, then monks “of all people” should continue (or elect) to live there and help keep it a true “wilderness and paradise.” Monks could provide the additional service of preserving wilderness areas so people in the cities could find spiritual and physical renewal as well as “remember what it is like to be under trees and to climb mountains.” The call for monks to take up an urban life did not set well with Merton, especially given the current ecological trends. He sarcastically countered that call. “Surely there are enough people in the cities already without monks adding to their number when they would seem destined by God, in our time, to be not only dwellers in the wilderness but also its protectors” (M.J. 196). Illtud Evans, who was giving a retreat at Gethsemani in early 1965, told Merton that on the island of Rum in the Inner Hebrides off the western coast of Scotland, “. . . they allow no one to live except those protecting the wildlife and trying to restore the original ecology.” Merton’s response: “This is wonderful!” (D.W.L. 1/25/65).

As Merton became more knowledgeable about the growing ecological problems, he also realized the unique position and witness that monks might have in this area. The fidelity and sensitivity to place, necessary if good farming is to be learned and passed on, rests on stability. Merton realized that the Cistercian monk’s vow of stability can be immensely relevant to the long-term health of the earth and of rural life in particular. In a letter to Rosemary Ruether, Merton reiterated that:

. . . one of the things in monasticism that has always meant most to me is that the monastic life is in closer contact with God’s good creation and is in many ways simpler, saner, and more human than life in the supposedly comfortable, pleasurable world. . . . monks are, and I am, in my own mind, the remnant of desperate conservationists. . . . And this loving care for natural creatures becomes, in some sense, a warrant of his theological mission and ministry as a man of contemplation. (H.G.L. 3/9/67)

Here Merton links the vocation of the contemplative with the “loving care” for nature and its creatures. He identifies himself with the paradise tradition of the monastic and desert traditions, which he claims were eschatological “because the monk here and now is supposed to be living the life of the new creation in which the right relation to all the rest of God’s creatures is fully restored” (H.G.L.3/9/67).

Ruether had suggested that Merton would find real action in the cities. Merton accused her of not knowing much about rural life and its problems, nor of how the natural world was implicated in these problems. In fact, she seemed to assume that the problems of rural folk were not real “twentieth-century problems.” But farm problems are real, Merton asserts, and in an area devastated by the coal and lumber industries, “tree planting and reforestation are not simple sentimental gestures.” Merton asks the liberal Ruether that if reforestation was merely symbolic, why “would it have the importance it seems to have, for instance, in Mao’s China” (Ibid.).

Merton’s defense of his and monasticism’s connection with the land was also used to respond to Ruether’s objection that monks were anti-material and anti-sensual:

You talk about God’s good creation, the goodness of the body, and all that, but I wonder if you have any realization at all of the fact that by working on the land a person is deeply and sensually involved with matter . . . Hence I would say that in my life the cultivation and expansion of the senses, and sensual awareness of things and people, and sensual response, are probably a whole lot more important than they are in yours. (H.G.L. 3/19/67)

But, as we have seen, Merton did not rule out a prophetic role for contemplatives, either monks or nuns. Those who care for the land and spend contemplative time amidst woods and streams have a special responsibility to denounce the immoral actions of systems and individuals that are destroying the earth community and their own future as members of it. Perhaps Merton is seeing the Monastic community as a kind of *oyate* which respects and morally relates to both the other *oyate* and to the living earth that nourishes and supports them all.

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AFTERWORD

I. Narrative and Ecological Intimacies

Ecofeminist Karen Warren points out that an increasing number of environmental philosophers, many influenced by feminist writers and philosophers, “have begun to explore the use of first-person narrative as a way of raising philosophically germane issues in ethics often lost or underplayed in mainstream philosophical ethics” (Pojman, 594). Her point is valid, of course, not only for ethics but also for other areas in ecological thought.

Willis Jenkins agrees, pointing out that “ecological narratives” are a way to “subvert the abstraction of subject from habitat” common to modernity and to recast humanity “in ecological intimacies” (Jenkins, 54). In narrative, nature is not a passive recipient for the projection of human values by a detached subject, even on assigning it moral status, but plays an active and formative role in shaping personhood and stimulating moral sentiments. Nature “reappears with moral status, only this time ‘internally,’ within personal environmental experience” (Jenkins, 53).

Some of Merton’s best writing grows out of personal experience. This is certainly true of his writings on the natural world or creation. First-person accounts and reflections rooted in personal experience are well-suited, especially under the skilled pen of an essayist and poet like Thomas Merton, to convey the complex and rich ways in which humans interact with nature and thus offer new possibilities for the reader herself to appreciate, understand, and relate to nature. In the case of Thomas Merton’s writings, they invite us to listen deeply to the “voices” of natural beings and attend wholeheartedly to their presence. In this way, they affect our inner attitudes, evoke sympathetic feelings, and inform our moral and spiritual lives. In Merton’s first-person narratives, nature appears “within” his personal experience often conveying both moral and spiritual values.

II. Narrative and Place

For the radical ecologist, “the most obvious way in which environmentalism has challenged modernism’s anthropic homogenization of space has been through a re-emphasis of the import of particular natural places in our lives...” (Smith, 212).

Narrative, through first or third person accounts of a character's close association and interaction with "Place," also reveals how Place helps shape the ecological character of personhood. Merton's growing sensitivity to and appreciation for the times and moods of various places presents a radical contrast to a world which increasingly "feeds upon and empties out the differences between places [until] every place is remade into modernity's own abstract image, reduced to mere coordinates within homogeneous space" (Smith, 208-209). In fact, the more time Merton spent within the natural community, the more subtle, sophisticated, and personal became his relationships. The monk not only could identify the local trees, flowers, plants, birds, and animals and chart their seasonal interactions; he opened himself to their presence even as he allowed them their "space." His writings and his own interior life were richly influenced by the nuances nature revealed in terms of inhabitants, climate and weather.

III. The "Poetic" and "Contemplative" As Deep Ways of Knowing

Theologian Christopher Pramuk urges readers to view Merton's work "through the more fluid categories of a literary, sapiential, or poetic frame of reference" (Pramuk, 34). His imagination plays a creative role in his writings on religious experience, including his deep experience of nature and place, a role more similar to "literary and poetic cognition" than systematic theology (Pramuk, 34). Ecophilosopher Hwa Yol Jung considers poetic thinking or cognition an essential element in radical ecology. For Jung, poetic thinking "is the elemental and holistic vision of earth and the world. It is the natural landscape of our thought which the geography of concepts presupposes" (Jung, 16). Thus the "poetic" (*Dichtung*) refers to a pre-conceptual but in-formed apprehension or perception of nature, "the elemental and primal ground for human thought" (Jung, 159). Jung points to writers such as Aldo Leopold and Loren Eiseley (and we would add, Thomas Merton) as examples of those who "speak the language of the poetic" (Jung, 160). Their use of language is such that it reflects and remains grounded in a more "holistic" way of seeing and knowing nature.

If the hallmark of the modern world is technological thinking (a point Merton will also emphasize), then "to transcend technological thinking is to think poetically" (Jung, 162). Pramuk

points out that Merton, as a contemplative and spiritual writer, was more interested in “religious *experience*” than “doctrinal formulas,” preferring the language of “personal *transformation*” and “awakening” to that of salvation and redemption. Most frequently the divine was spoken of and experienced as “*presence*” whether in nature, the inner self, or other humans, rather than as a transcendent deity who is made available only through official channels and then often as lawgiver and judge (Pramuk, 3).

IV. Reverence: Caring for Self, Other and the Earth Community

Ecophilosopher Hwa Yol Jung reminds us that for the early Heidegger, care (*Sorge*) is “the basic existential characteristic of being human” (Jung, 166-7). Merton intimates as much when he calls such a way of knowing “primordial familiarity” that is “religious” and connects the inner Light of the mind with what is known (the “vestige” or presence of God) in nature. “Properly understood,” says Jung, “caring is letting things be as they are and appreciating their intrinsic value.” For Jung such an act—or non-action—is also “reverential in that it respects the natural way of worldly things” (Jung, 167).

Jung’s concept of *Ecopiety* presents an alternative to the dominant social and intellectual framework of modernity. According to Jung, *ecopiety* is composed of “the *yang* of homopiety and the *yin* of geopiety as complementary” (Jung, 103). Homopiety, represented by the Confucian tradition, signifies a human being’s “care and reverence for other men and women” and “concerns itself with the weighty matters of the social world” (Jung, 129). Geopiety, on the other hand, is represented by the Daoist and Zen Buddhist traditions and signifies humankind’s “reverential attunement to nonhuman nature” (Jung, 186). Merton would agree with Jung on the important role that the “forgotten wisdom of East Asia” can play in defining “*a new ethics of the future* based on ‘ecological man’” (Jung, 109). Merton would also include the forgotten wisdom (Sophia) of Eastern Christianity. Geopiety “underscores the idea” that we are inhabitants of place and concerns itself with the web of a person’s “connatural relationships” with the natural world, so much so that “the mindscape,” says Hwa Yol, “is rooted in the landscape.” This co-penetration can be seen clearly in the tradition of *feng shui* (Jung, 104).

V. Prophetic Ecology: Critical Vision, Liberating Action & A New Era

Especially in the 1960s Merton increased his attention to social criticism and social justice (the *yang* of homopiety) as a complement to his continuing development of eco-wisdom and environmental justice (the *yin* of geopiety). Thus he anticipates and seeks to hold the two main poles of the radical ecology movement in a fruitful and complementary tension. His Sophianic theology provided an ecopiety depth within which the two could find common harmonizing energy and presence which maintained their distinctive tones.

Historical issues of war and peace, social justice, technological thinking, alienation and dehumanization, etc. appeared alongside of but also affected his writings on creation and the contemplative life. In this context and at the end of the year of the Cold War Letters (1961-1962), Merton encountered *Silent Spring*, the seminal environmental work by Rachel Carson. He immediately began to make connections between the issues with which he had recently been dealing and modernity's escalating war on the natural world. Merton told Carson that her work offered him a further insight into the "*consistent pattern* running through everything we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life" (W. F. 70). Part of this pattern included what has been called "factory farming" which Merton found unacceptable especially to monastic life.

This critical perspective, radical ecologists complain, is lacking to many mainstream environmentalists who, while well-intentioned, accept the basic worldview and socioeconomic structures of modernity while attempting to implement those technological and political changes necessary to avoid particular negative consequences of current practices.

Likewise, radical ecologists believe that most mainstream environmental philosophies are products of modernity and simply reflect and reproduce its "social and natural relations" (Smith, 25). Such philosophies might even be counter-productive, giving the illusion that simply by incorporating a few environmental values and personal "green" practices into the present anthropocentric worldview and social structure that a flourishing planet supporting a just and sustainable society can occur (Smith, 53).

Merton ties together the social and personal requisites to undergird peaceful human relationships with one another and with nature. Our attitudes and moral sensitivities to one another also govern our relationships to the Earth and to members of the Earth community (oyates). In fact, being at peace with and loving ourselves is also important to being at peace with “the other.”

Should I really experience nature as *alien* and *heartless*? Should I be prepared to imagine that this alienation from nature is real, and that an attitude of sympathy, of oneness with it is only imaginary? On the contrary- we have a choice of projections. Our attitude toward nature is simply an extension of our attitude toward ourselves, and toward one another. We are free to be at peace with ourselves and others, and also with nature. (C.G.B. 139)

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