

INTRODUCTION



“THE FOREST IS MY BRIDE”

The mystery of Thomas Merton's marriage to the forest is a rich and overlooked sub-theme in one of the most celebrated spiritual stories of modern times. A contemplative master of monumental fame and significance, Thomas Merton's life reads like a great drama in which all the crises and challenges of modernity are portrayed in the searching of one soul for liberation and wisdom. His 1948 autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*—resonating like the confessions of a modern American Augustine—introduced Merton to generations of readers around the world as the archetypal lost soul in search of union with God. His numerous personal journals and volumes of correspondence up to 1968 complete the masterful self-revelation of one man laboring for transformation and fullness of life in the confusions of the post-modern world.

The pathways he explored in his quest “to recover paradise” have become routes of discovery and healing for millions of seekers, and his prophetic voice on the perennial issues of violence, racism, commodity culture, ignorance, and psychic disorientation has pronounced saving wisdom that has changed the discourse and orientation of modern spirituality. All the turns in contemporary religious life toward mystical experience, engagement with the world in its woundedness and wonder, and the exchange of wisdom among the world’s contemplative traditions were pioneered by Thomas Merton. He leaves a legacy of inspiring and challenging reports of daring explorations into farther reaches of the personal world, the social world, and the divine world. Curiously, what remains hidden or obscure in his very public discourse on matters of the sacred is the significance that the natural world played as the ecstatic ground of his own experience of God. But a close reading of his voluminous writings reveals his intimate rapport with and progressive espousal of creation as the body of divinity—at once veiling and unveiling the God he so longed to behold and be held by.

. . . I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is

imperative that I hear the silence of the night,
alone, and, with my face on the floor, say psalms,
alone, in the silence of the night.

. . . the silence of the forest is my bride and the
sweet dark warmth of the whole world is my love
and out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the
secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root
of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers
in their beds all over the world (*DWL*, p. 240).

Thomas Merton spent his whole monastic life listening for that secret pulsating in the heartbeat of creation, and wedded the forest so he could listen with absolute rapture and commitment as one would to a spouse, "for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, until death. . . ." What he heard in the murmurings of wilderness were "the sweet songs of living things" whose choirs he joined as a solitary monk offering a psalm of glory and thanksgiving on behalf of humankind. In time his own center became "the teeming heart of natural families" as his unique subjectivity opened to the cosmos in wonder and awe, sounding a silent interval of praise in the rapturous hymn of creation.

Thomas Merton's restless and passionate search for God took him through the traditions of monastic and hermitic life, intense engagements with the bloody struggles of the human enterprise, and the

rich libraries of spiritual and cultural wisdom. Yet he found at last “the wide open secret” he yearned to know in the “present festival” of the natural world, in a wisdom that awakened in him an intimate “primordial familiarity” with creatures. He wrote no book explicitly to trace his route through creation to communion with divinity. Nor has any book been written about his journey. But one can identify certain influences that brought Merton to insist that the human vocation was ultimately to be “a gardener of paradise.”

LANDSCAPE PAINTERS’ SON

On the last evening of January 1915, with the stars in the sign of Aquarius, Thomas Merton was born during a snowstorm at the foot of a mountain in the Eastern Pyrenees. Mt. Canigou cast its shadow at the bottom of his garden, in a town called Prades in the Catalan lands of southern France near the border of Spain. His father was a New Zealander named Owen Merton and his mother, an American named Ruth Jenkins. Both were of Welsh ancestry and both were landscape painters. After the early death of his mother, Tom became his father’s companion on many landscape-painting adventures, and as they toured the monastic ruins in the valleys of southern France he conceived his lifelong desire of attending to the great silence he experienced there. In fact, his father was his

first and perhaps most influential teacher of contemplation, introducing Merton to the celebration of the sacred mysteries embodied in nature:

His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure . . . and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean . . . since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself (*SSM*, p. 11).

They traveled to the Mediterranean and down to the border of Catalonia, and then across an ocean to the tropics of Bermuda, and all the while young Tom was being tutored in the art of beholding. His father's mentorship influenced his abidingly vivid sense of geography and the confluence of art and nature in his sensibility. He inherited his father's intense and disciplined way of looking at the world, which Merton would later translate into a painterliness of language in describing it. Such training in "natural contemplation" became the foundation of his psychic life, and the ground of his experience of the divine, such that at an early age his religious instinct went skyward.

Day after day the sun shone on the blue waters of the sea, and on the islands of the bay. I remember one day looking up at the sky, taking it into my head to worship one of the clouds (*SSM*, pp. 30-31).

FRANCISCAN SOUL

Thomas Merton had a Franciscan soul, and this realization grew in him over time. In the Christian experience, Francis of Assisi personifies a way of celebrating familial intimacy with all the creatures of the universe: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Mother Earth. Merton had his encounter with the Franciscan tradition in its intellectual form while an undergraduate student at Columbia University in the 1930s, and it inspired him to embrace Catholicism, and even more dramatically to become a Franciscan. Under the mentorship of Dan Walsh he was introduced to the great Franciscan intellectuals Bonaventure and Duns Scotus, with whom Merton explicitly identified. Both thinkers gave him necessary frameworks for understanding the hidden wholeness of creation, and Bonaventure in particular presented to him an itinerary for venturing in *The Soul's Journey into God*, through the mysteries of creation, the self, and the dark and trackless path of being. According to Bonaventure, the sacred journey into God begins by

following the divine footprints back to their source as we "place our first step in the ascent on the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror through which we may pass over into God, the supreme Craftsman" (*SJG*, I, 9).

Merton moved in a similar sensibility, celebrating creatures as vestiges or sacraments that reflected the overflowing creativity of their divine Source. This is especially evident in *Seeds of Contemplation* where Merton describes creation as "the art of the Father." Likewise, his indebtedness to the Franciscan tradition is apparent in his poetry.

For, like a grain of fire
smoldering in the heart
of every living essence
God plants His undivided power—
Buries His thought too vast
for worlds
In seeds and roots and blade
and flower.

—"The Sowing of Meanings,"
Figures for an Apocalypse

In true Franciscan spirit, Merton could sense the "angelic transparency of everything, of pure, simple and total light." Son of the landscape artist that he was, Merton's aesthetic nature had a *kataphatic*

orientation, delighting in the forms and images of the divine emanations. "We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness," he writes in "Hagia Sophia," "He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things, the which His light is one fullness and one wisdom. Thus He shines not on them but from within them." Merton was intuitively drawn to this language of "inscape" discovered in the writing of Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was himself temperamentally Franciscan and likewise greatly influenced by Duns Scotus. Merton echoes Hopkins' style in saying of creatures, "their inscape is their sanctity," and he sensed in all visible things "an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness."

But nature also comforted and companioned Merton in his troubling orphanhood, as he discovered in the community of creatures a kinship circle he could be at home with. Only in the solitude of nature did Merton truly experience the peace and joy of his Franciscan soul. Only the simplicity of creation—that world of "sanity and perfection"—offered relief from his gnawing sense of alienation and burdensome habit of introspection. It provided for him a realm of freedom where he could be buoyant, light-hearted, and happy. The *kataphatic* way of glorious forms invited Merton to celebrate the liturgy of creation as joyful communicant, feasting

on a kind of beauty and silence he tasted no other way, conducting him into divinity indwelling in all things. Nature evoked the poet and psalmist in him, and perhaps for these reasons Merton did not in fact ever join the Franciscans, but found his way to the woodland choir of a Cistercian monastery where the order of the day was simply to praise.

CISTERCIAN HEART

Thomas Merton entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941. An American foundation of the Cistercian order dedicated to the contemplative life, the monastery lands were set in the Appalachian region of Kentucky more remarkable for knobby woodlands than bluegrass. Merton came to this forest monastery to engage in a lifelong experiment in spiritual transformation by taking vows to harness and orient his energies of intention. Obedience, the primary Benedictine vow, directed the monk to listen with the ear of his heart to the still, small voice of God speaking in all things. Stability of place grounded the monk in a community of guidance that provided the holding environment for the great work. The more dynamic vow, *conversio morum*, set him to the daily labor of radical conversion to recover the authenticity of his true nature. To deepen these, the Cistercian monk entered into deep silence, which

was for Merton a paradoxical opportunity for profound dialogue with the world and creation. Merton's promise of silence became a vow of conversation expressed in extraordinary literary creativity. During the twenty-seven years of his life at Gethsemani he became the most prolific monastic writer of all time. Understandably he sought refuge from the exhaustion of his own verbal intensity in the "wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech" of nature that spoke its healing to him. It was creation's *lingua incognita* that relieved his ambivalence and compulsion toward human language and communication, at once intensifying and slaking his Cistercian thirst for the waters of silence described in his early history of the order:

When the monks had found their homes, they not only settled there, for better or for worse, but they sank their roots into the ground and fell in love with their woods. . . . Forest and field, sun and wind and sky, earth and water, all speak the same silent language, reminding the monk that he is here to develop like the things that grow all around him . . . (WS, pp. 273-274).

Monasticism, east and west, was born in the woods and deserts of the earth. In so many of Merton's works he explores the impulse to the mar-

gins of inner and outer space that is a signature of the monastic temperament. In *The Wisdom of the Desert* he traces the roots of Christian monasticism to the deserts of the Middle East; in his essay "From Pilgrimage to Crusade" he tells of daring exploits of Celtic monks in search of their *dysarts* on the wild, remote islands of the North Atlantic. Merton shared this orientation toward the solitary places of divine encounter, and although Gethsemani was the lure that drew him toward it, eventually the conventional monastic enclosure frustrated more than satisfied his hunger for solitude and silence. But in 1951 in response to Merton's request for greater solitude, Abbot Dom James nominated him "forester" which entailed restoring the woodlands that had been stripped a decade earlier. The job radicalized his experience of solitude, no longer perceived as privacy for intellectual pursuits, but an opportunity for embodied engagement with a whole community of wisdom in silent participation in the vitality of living things. This charge, along with his reading of Thoreau, reawakened his desire to become a competent naturalist, which enhanced his other monastic commitments as husband of nature—planting, sowing, reaping, clearing, saving—and mentor of novices. In time he learned that the true mentor and spiritual director of souls was nature itself. The fields, rain, sun, sky, mud, clay, wind, and fire are

all masters of sacred wisdom, and worthy subjects of contemplation.

Merton's espousal of the forest intensified in 1960 when he began to take up residence in a hermitage set on a knob called Mount Olivet. There his Cistercian heart found a wider community inviting him to the daily office of praise. Now his choir mates were frogs, birds, and cicadas—the "huge chorus of living beings (that) 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" (*SJ*, p. 360). His worship became "a blue sky and ten thousand crickets in the deep wet hay of the field"; his vow became "the silence under their song" (*CA*, p. 6). Soon the whole landscape became the primordial scripture on which he meditated as he saturated "the country beyond words" with his psalms.

CELTIC SPIRIT

During the 1960s Merton began to sense what "writes the books, and drives me into the woods," and celebrated gratefully the Celtic spirit that coursed through his Welsh blood. In his discovery of Celtic monasticism he recognized himself in the hermits, lyric poets, and pilgrims of a tradition that opened a new world to him. He shared a similar spiritual

temperament with these masters of "natural contemplation" (*theoria physike*) who sought God less in the ideal essences of things than in the physical hierophanic cosmos.

Though ever a romantic, his engagement with nature as farmer and forester was also tactile, athletic, even sensuous; like his father, he loved to walk barefoot in the woods, feeling the fragrant pine needles of Gethsemani beneath him. With the green martyrs of the Celtic tradition, he always enjoyed a palpable sense of the presence of the Presence for whom he and they had sacrificed the world of human society. It encircled him in the great encompassing of creation, and imparted to him a peace unlike any other. But his embrace of "green martyrdom" was never bucolic: his wedding to the solitude of the forest allowed this orphan man to feel in earnest the raw and excruciating wound of loneliness that widened and deepened with the years. He chose to live alone in the forest as refuge for his own existential pain, but also to make reparation for the violation of earth and earth peoples. Here he became a poet, a protester, a prophet, a political prisoner, and an escaped prisoner. Ever in search of his "true self" beneath his distress and artifice, he came in time to realize it was none other than his "green self"—his original nature healed of inner agitation, congestion,

drivenness, turmoil, and suffering by entrainment to the merciful rhythms of the elements, the seasons, the creatures, in the particular bioregion of Kentucky that he called home.

Merton also identified with the Celtic monks' restless quest to recover paradise as a lived experience of the native harmony and unity of all beings. Indeed his lyrical language betrays his Celtic spirit playing at the "thin places" between the physical and imagined realms, as he allowed himself to be taken to in-between dimensions of sheer transparency where being sensibly flows through the courseways of creation, where time alters, where space opens to the numinous. And like his Celtic monastic ancestors he made "a profound existential tribute to realities perceived in the very structure of the world and of man, and of their being." In lineage with them, he engaged in that "spiritual dialogue between man and creation in which spiritual and bodily realities interweave and interlace themselves like manuscript illuminations in the Book of Kells" ("From Pilgrimage to Crusade," *MZM*, p. 97).

ZEN MIND

If Irish monks affirmed his Celtic spirit in their mastery of *kataphatic* contemplation of the wonders of divinity in nature, Buddhist monks evoked his Zen mind and drew him onto the *apophatic* path

of formless "emptiness" he had begun to walk with Therese of Lisieux, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and other Christian masters. From his days at Columbia, Merton had always entertained an attraction to the spiritualities of the East, and in the 1950s he began a serious study of Chinese humanism and Zen Buddhism. Within a decade he had written several books on the wisdom of Asia: *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and *Mystics and Zen Masters*. As with so many other of his fascinations, he followed this one to its climax: his own death in Bangkok, Thailand, during a pan-monastic conference of Christians and Buddhists. As the Celtic monks made their lives a pilgrimage to their place of resurrection, Merton embarked on his voyage to the East in 1968 with an uncanny awareness of the destiny and ultimacy of this long desired journey. *The Asian Journal* reveals not only his readiness for the profound encounters and experiences that awaited him there, but the clear and simple state of mind to which his Zen studies had brought him.

Merton found in the teachings of Buddhism a direct method for dismantling the false, afflictive self that was the source of all personal, social, and even ecological suffering. As he experimented with forms of meditation and perception proposed by the Zen