

Self-experience in Thomas Merton and C.G. Jung: Apophatic and Kataphatic Traditions in the 20th Century

DAVID HENDERSON

THOMAS MERTON (1915-1968) AND C.G. JUNG (1875-1961) WERE two of the most popular writers of the twentieth century. Their books sell around the world in many languages. Academics research their lives and ideas. People attend conferences, workshops, retreats and courses which draw inspiration from their work. There are websites dedicated to disseminating information about them and marketing the proliferating Merton and Jung spin-offs.

They both published bestselling autobiographies about which they were deeply ambivalent. Merton wrote his at about age 30 and Jung's was published just after his death. They both addressed, in a self-conscious manner, the dilemmas of modern man and mass man. They reflected on Christianity, eastern religions, Native American spirituality, war, evil, symbolism, myth, consciousness, meditation and solitude. They were both conflicted about their power as leaders, teachers and public figures.

I don't know whether Jung knew of Merton. It is perhaps not too fanciful to imagine that Jung had at least heard of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but there were no books by Merton in Jung's library and there is no citation of Merton in the index to Jung's collected works. Merton certainly read Jung. It is hard to know whether Jung had much influence on Merton. However, in my reading I haven't come across anything that would indicate to me that Jung really touched Merton's mind in the same way as Camus, Bonhoeffer or Fromm. There have been a number of books, papers and dissertations that use

Jungian concepts to look at Merton. No one has, as far as I know, used Merton's ideas to analyse Jung.

Interesting questions are generated by putting these two next to each other. For example: what is it about the narratives of their lives and the themes in their writings that have contributed to their popularity? Do they capture in uniquely accessible ways the dilemmas of late modernity? Does this appeal, which is meaningful for the middle of the 20th century, contain anything prophetic or durable? Do they represent the last gasp of modernism or a new beginning? Obviously we can't answer these questions today, but they form part of the background for this paper.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm has observed,

The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in.¹

I feel that one element of Merton's and Jung's appeal is that they grappled with this type of lack of orientation in time. Merton linked his experience with the desert fathers, and Jung felt that he found confirmation of his ideas in the work of the alchemists.

They attract many who are in search of self or uncertain about their own self-worth. Their life stories have been made into ideal patterns. Merton's journey from an expatriate childhood in southern France to his foreigner's death in Bangkok, and Jung's journey from lonely parson's son to world famous recluse are presented as narratives through which we can read the meaning of our own lives. We are drawn by their insistence that meaning is found through the self.

Even so, there are striking differences between them in their use of the notion of the self. One way to understand their difference is to see Merton as representing the apophatic tradition and Jung the kataphatic tradition. In this paper I will suggest a few of the ways in which they characterise these traditions.

The terms, *apophasis* and *kataphasis*, were used by Aristotle to describe categorical propositions as either affirmation or denial, saying or unsaying. *Apophasis* refers to the negation and *kataphasis* to the affirmation. The concept of *apophasis* was given its radical transcendence

by Plotinus and introduced into Christianity by Dionysius the Areopagite. The apophatic tradition in western Europe continued with Erigena, Eckhart, the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and John of the Cross. In the 20th century this tradition appears in continental philosophers such as Heidegger, Bataille and Derrida and in aspects of psychoanalysis. *Apophasis* can be seen as a type of theology, an epistemology, a mode discourse, a mystical practice, a quality of experience or as a hermeneutic. The western Christian tradition is overwhelmingly kataphatic and the apophatic has been alternatively denigrated or idealised.

The difference between apophatic and kataphatic language, experience and sensibility comes across graphically in the following testimonies by the two men. Among the volumes of Merton's writings on contemplation, this is one of the few relatively undisguised descriptions of his own way. It is from a letter written to the Sufi scholar, Abdul Aziz, in 1966.

Now you ask about my method of meditation. Strictly speaking, I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centred entirely on attention to the presence of God and His will and his love. That is to say that it is centered on faith by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as "being before God as if you saw Him." Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for in my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all. My prayer tends very much to what you call *fana* (annihilation, *kenosis*). There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present 'myself' this I recognize as an obstacle [about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle]. If He wills He can then make the Nothingness into a total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness seems itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation. It is not 'thinking about' anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible, which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible.²

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung wrote,

It was during Advent of the year 1913 – December 12, to be exact – that I resolved upon the decisive step. I was sitting at my desk once more, thinking over my fears. Then I let myself drop. Suddenly it was as

though the ground literally gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into dark depths. I could not fend off a feeling of panic. But then, abruptly, at not too great a depth, I landed in a soft, sticky mass. I felt great relief, although I was apparently in complete darkness. After a while my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, which was rather like a deep twilight. Before me was the entrance to a dark cave, in which stood a dwarf with a leathery skin, as if he were mummified. I squeezed past him through the narrow entrance and waded knee deep through icy water to the other end of the cave where, on a projecting rock, I saw a glowing red crystal. I grasped the stone, lifted it, and discovered a hollow underneath. At first I could make out nothing, but then I saw that there was running water. In it a corpse floated by, a youth with blond hair and a wound in the head. He was followed by a gigantic black scarab and then by a red, newborn sun, rising up out of the depths of the water.

Dazed by the light, I wanted to replace the stone upon the opening, but then a fluid welled out. It was blood. A thick jet of it leaped up, and I felt nauseated. It seemed to me that the blood continued to spurt for an unendurably long time. At last it ceased, and the vision came to an end.³

Part of the appeal of the two men for us is that they both sought authenticity in self-experience. Where Merton relied on emptiness and desirelessness, Jung relied on strong affect and imagery. The roots of Jung's conviction about the importance of inner experience lie in the intensity of his childhood dreams and visions, his experience of spiritualism mediated through his mother's family, and his reading of Kant and Schopenhauer while a student.

Jung considered himself an empiricist and felt that his psychological theories were scientific statements about psyche as it appeared to him in himself, his patients and the world. Jung's theory of the self is complex. The archetype of the self is the god image. The self is both centre and circumference. The psyche, which includes the persona, the ego, anima/animus, the complexes and the shadow, is given order by the self. The archetypal self is outside of space and time and transgresses the boundary of psyche and nonpsyche.

The self is experienced through the individuation process. Murray Stein observes that,

Each of the archetypal images that appear in the developmental sequence from birth to old age – the divine infant, the hero, the puer and puella, the king and queen, the crone and the wise old man – are aspects or expressions of this single archetype. Over the course of

development, the self impacts the psyche and creates changes in the individual at all levels: physical, psychological and spiritual.⁴

The self is impersonal. In the context of Jung's theory one speaks about the self rather than my self

The descent through the layers of psyche from the highest levels of idea and ideal and image through the concreteness of the ego's existence and the body's reality into the chemical and molecular composition of our physical being leads finally to pure energy and back into the realm of ideas, which is the world of nous, of mind, of spirit... Its essence lies beyond the boundaries of the psyche...it extends into regions beyond human experience and knowing.⁵

At first sight this could be taken for an apophatic claim—that the self is beyond human experience and knowing. However, the nous is, as far as I understand the concept, a realm that includes being and non-being and is thus, I would argue, kataphatic. There appears to be a correspondence between Plato's nous and Jung's collective unconscious. It seems to me, however, that Merton is in the tradition of Plotinus, who maintained that the One, which is (so to speak) neither being nor nonbeing, and cannot be represented, overflows and thus produces the nous.

One narrative we are given of Merton's life is that he changed from being a world-hating ascetic to being a life-affirming artist. This is sometimes taken to mean that Merton moved from an apophatic to a kataphatic relationship with reality. For example, David Cooper in his book, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*,⁶ maintains that over time Merton abandoned a rigid apophatic posture for a more open humanist position. I would argue that Merton, far from relinquishing his apophatic stance, followed it to its logical conclusion, and that his humanism is a natural expression of his apophatic dynamism.

Part of the dynamic of apophysis is the simultaneous presence of absolute transcendence and absolute immanence. So while Jung experiences the self as a distant impersonal shaper of life, Merton experiences that "this inner identity is not 'found' as an object, but is the very self that finds." For Jung the self is an other with whom I must learn to live; for Merton the self is at once the most intimate personal subjectivity and "ultimate and indestructible." Merton wrote of man's need to "transcend his empirical self and find his true self in

an emptiness that is completely awake because completely free of useless reflection”.

While Jung's self displays an elaborate architecture and hierarchy, Merton's self is existential. He contrasts the true self and the false self.

According to Thomas Del Prete, in *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person*,

Two of the strongest psychological attributes of the false self are its “fear of death and the need for self-affirmation”... The need for self-affirmation engages the self “in a futile struggle to endow itself with significance.” The false self thus acts as its own source of being and fulfillment.⁷

The “true self” is “the mature personal identity, the creative fruit of an authentic and lucid search, the ‘self’ that is found after other partial and exterior selves have been discarded as masks... This inner identity is not ‘found’ as an object, but is the very self that finds”... “learning to be oneself means... discovering in the ground of one's being a ‘self’ which is ultimate and indestructible.”⁸

To sum up: We have looked at a few of the ways in which both Merton and Jung place the experience of the self at the heart of the search for meaning.

The concepts of *apophasis* and *kataphasis* were suggested as tools to make sense of the differences between the writings of the two men. For Jung the highest value and achievement was consciousness. For Merton the true self is grounded in love and fulfilled in joy. It might appear counter-intuitive to associate the way of affirmation, *kataphasis*, with consciousness and the way of negation, *apophasis*, with love, but that seems to be one unexpected conclusion of this reading of their work.

I'll give the last word to our two authors. First Jung,

My life is a story of the self-realization of the unconscious. Everything in the unconscious seeks outward manifestation, and the personality too desires to evolve out of its unconscious conditions and to experience itself as a whole... In the end the only events in my life worth retelling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one. That is why I speak chiefly of inner experiences, amongst which I include my dreams and visions. These form the *prima materia* of my scientific work. They were the fiery magma out of which the stone that had to be worked was crystallized.⁹

And Merton,

When we know love in our own hearts... at such times of awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the ‘newness’, the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance... we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds, and join in the general dance.¹⁰

Notes and References

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