

Thomas Merton and the Edenic Vision

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I have the good fortune to live in close contact with nature,
how should I not love this world, and love it with passion?

Thomas Merton, from a letter to Mario Falsina, 25 March 1967

We need nothing but open Eyes, to be Ravished like the Cherubims.

Thomas Traherne, *First Century*, 37

IN AN ESSAY IN *Mystics and Zen Masters*, THOMAS MERTON OFFERS A SUMMARY of his view of the English tradition of mysticism: "English mysticism," he states,

is a mysticism of praise, and consequently it tends to take an affirmative view of God's creation and of human existence in the world. It is... a 'paradise spirituality' which recovers in Christ the innocence and joy of the first beginnings and sees the world – the lovely world of moors and wolds, midland forests, rivers and farms – in the light of Paradise, as it first came from the hand of God. (p.152)

While seemingly directed outward as an insightful summation of mystics such as Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Traherne, and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, this passage I believe also points us toward Merton's own view of nature. Throughout his writings Merton continually returns to the theme of recovering in nature "the innocence and joy of the first beginnings." We see this Edenic strain in Merton's reflections on nature as well as in rapturous moments of praise in which he describes the world around him with startling immediacy. Today I would like to examine some of Merton's writings in light of his comment on English mysticism and

to suggest the pervasiveness of his way of seeing nature "in the light of Paradise, as it first came from the hand of God."

In his first published journal writing, dating from May 2, 1939, Merton alludes approvingly to a passage from St Augustine:

"The 12th Chapter of Book VII [of *The Confessions*] is magnificent. Evil the deficiency of good. Everything that is, is good, by virtue of its mere existence. Corruptibility implies goodness."

In this early journal entry Merton immediately focuses on the inherent goodness of creation. The fact of existence – of being itself – validates the reality of its own innocent nature, and the potential for corruption only underscores the actuality of this goodness.

Over the next twenty-nine years of his life, Merton repeatedly reaffirms his joy in creation in the context of theological mystery. In *No Man Is an Island*, for example, Merton continues his exploration of the connection between nature and the original, Edenic world:

All nature is meant to make us think of paradise. 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, and that in spite of his sin and ours, it will once again become a paradise when we are all risen from death in the second Adam. Heaven is even now mirrored in created things (pp.115-116).

While creation is a 'mirror' that reflects the light of heaven, Merton's writings imply that we need not wait until "we are all risen from death" to be sensible of nature as paradise, for we can access intimations of heaven through direct experience. But nature not only reflects heaven, it also reveals heaven; the transparency of the world allows grace to shine through. Merton often discloses moments of ecstatic communion with the splendor of the created world. In a journal entry from 1965, for example, he recounts ambling by a stream until he comes to its source:

Wonderful clear water pouring strongly out of a cleft in the mossy rock. I drank from it in my cupped hands and suddenly realized it was years, perhaps twenty-five or thirty years, since I had tasted such water: absolutely pure and clear... 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 Terce with great joy, overflowing joy, as if the land and woods and spring were all praising God through me. Again their sense of angelic transparency of everything, and of pure, simple and total light (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.187).

We witness here Merton's tendency to take a personal experience and realize in it a sense of cosmic connectedness. The taste of water is also the taste of paradise—of clearness, of purity, of simplicity. In *Little Gidding* T. S. Eliot expresses an equivalent sense of presence: "Quick now, here, now, always—/A condition of complete simplicity..." Similarly, for Merton, paradise is here, now—if we only had eyes to see it.

Throughout his journals and other writings, Merton continues to express his preoccupation with Edenic nature. In a burst of intimate confidence in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton asserts:

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 (p.132).

And in the famous 'Fourth and Walnut' epiphany, Merton tries to define a center that connects us to God, calling it by that untranslatable term *le point vierge*:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal,...which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and glaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere (pp.157-58).

Merton implies that the problem of our relationship to nature is one of perception—we do not always have eyes to see the reality before us. Our worship of our selves constricts our vision and turns the natural world into what it is not, something evil or corrupt. If we could see nature with our "original" selves – from *le point vierge*, the pure essence of being that comes from God – we would see things as they truly are and would realize that we are living in paradise but do not know it.

Merton encourages us to respond to the paradise in which we are immersed by celebrating our communion with nature. In *No Man Is an Island*, Merton asserts:

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... One of the most important – and most neglected – elements 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. We do not see these things because we have withdrawn from them (pp.32-33).

This withdrawal can be expressed in two ways: we become attached to our false selves and thus skew our perceptions or we attach ourselves to the "creatures of God" for their own sake rather than for the sake of God. As he makes clear in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the problem is not that the world we experience is evil but rather that we have separated ourselves from creation through attachment to our own egos.

"There is no evil in anything created by God," Merton asserts, nor can anything of His become an obstacle to our union with Him. The obstacle is our 'self,' that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will. It is when we refer all things to this outward and false 'self' that we alienate ourselves from reality and from God (pp.21-22).

And the reality that we alienate ourselves from is eternal and paradisiacal. Our need is to be liberated from this "false self," and when we do, our vision is transformed. According to Merton, the way to experience nature as Eden is through what in his journals he calls "direct vision" (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.336), a purification of consciousness that allows us to penetrate appearances and access reality. Vision, however, implies both a viewer and a thing perceived, and Merton's description of the process of this connection actually involves being absorbed in the landscape until the boundary between self and nature is erased. Merton affirms that division and limitation seem to vanish, and when this occurs "you do not have an experience," he claims, "you become Experience" (*New Seeds*, p.283).

Besides establishing a theological context in which to understand the connection between original self and original world, Merton also expresses his consciousness of paradise in joyously lyrical passages. In other words, he does not simply tell us that nature is Edenic, he shows us as well. Merton frequently conveys this sense of paradise in language that emphasizes simplicity of form and serenity

of spirit. In a lovely section from the third volume of the journals, Merton reflects on a quiet September afternoon:

Engulfed 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 (p.16).

The pastoral imagery of shadows, birds, and trees intensifies the notion of perfection, and even the sound of a distant car reinforces rather than disturbs the serenity of the sacramental moment. Merton's language harmonizes all elements of the landscape and disengages them altogether from the flow of time. And while Merton conveys here only a single moment, it is also representative of all moments, for all time is sacramental and capable of opening us up to the Eden that is eternally present and merely awaiting an excuse to burst forth.

Other instances of this lyrical joy abound. In a journal entry from 1948, for example, Merton states:

Since [yesterday] was a fast day, we weren't long in the refectory in the evening, got out early and the sun was higher than it usually is in that interval, and I saw the country in a light that we usually do not see. The low-slanting rays picked out the foliage of the trees and highlighted a new wheatfield against the dark curtain of woods on the knobs that were in shadow. It was very beautiful. Deep peace. Sheep on the slopes behind the sheep barn. The new trellises in the novitiate garden leaning and sagging. A cardinal singing suddenly in the walnut tree, and piles of fragrant logs all around the woodshed, waiting to be cut in bad weather. I looked at all this in great tranquility, with my soul and spirit quiet (*Entering the Silence*, pp.215-16).

Here Merton casts his gaze outward, again using perceptual details to capture a particular moment at a particular time, but he also focuses on the subjective state the scene engenders, a mood of meditation, reflection, and serenity.

In another passage from the same volume of journals, Merton makes even more explicit the connection between vision, landscape, and Eden:

...this place was simply wonderful. It was quiet as the Garden of Eden. I sat on the high bank, under young pines, and looked out over this glen. Right under me was a dry creek, with clean pools lying like glass between the shale pavement of the stream, and the shale was as white and crumpled as sea-biscuit. Down in the glen were the songs of marvelous birds. I saw the gold-orange flame of an oriole in a tree...

There was a cardinal whistling somewhere, but the best song was that of two birds that sounded as wonderfully as nightingales, and their song echoed through the wood. I could not tell what they were. I had never heard such birds before. The echo made the place sound more remote and self-contained, more perfectly enclosed, and more like Eden. 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 (p.329).

Merton once again articulates a personal experience that has resonances for a larger philosophical understanding of the paradisiacal nature of nature. The intimacy of journal writing invites us to enter into the scene through his eyes and his perceptions, and once again the particulars of the landscape — an elemental landscape of streams, pools, rocks, and woods — open a gate into paradise. Tellingly, it is also a place of tranquillity and solitude, where Merton senses the severe contrast between life in nature and life in community.

In another passage from the journals of 1960, Merton reflects on the awakening of life at the beginning of each day:

The first chirps of the waking birds—'le point vierge [the virgin point]' of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it is time to 'be'? And He tells them 'Yes.' Then they one by one wake and begin to sing. First the catbirds and cardinals and some others I do not recognize. Later, song sparrows, wrens, etc. Last of all doves, crows,... With my hair almost on end and the eyes of the soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise, and I behold this secret which is there for everyone, free, and no one pays any attention (*Turning Toward the World*, p.7).

This passage deals explicitly with beginnings—the advent of dawn and the awakening world hold infinite promise of perfection. Each new day carries with it the possibility of re-creating Eden itself, when for the first time God gave permission for all to be.

In yet another glorious and lyrical outburst in a journal entry from 1964, Merton conveys his sense of the onrush of spring:

All the trees are fast beginning to be in leaf and the first green freshness of a new summer is all over the hills. Irreplaceable purity of these few days chosen by God as His sign!... Seeing 'heavenliness'...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 only for these days, passing through, a lovely, deep, simple song. Pure—no pathos, no statement, no desire, pure heavenly sound. Seized by this 'heavenliness' as if I were a child—a child mind I have never done anything to deserve to have and which is my own part in the heavenly spring. Not of this world, or of my making... Sense that the 'heavenliness' is the real nature of things not their nature, not *en soi*, but the fact they are a gift of love, and of freedom (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.99).

Once again Merton explicitly connects the landscape with a foretaste of heaven and perfection. He returns insistently to the purity of the setting, and the sound of the unknown bird resonates with the music of heaven. And to enter the scene and participate in it fully, he finds it necessary to recover the innocence of the "child mind."

Merton concludes the July 1948 journal entry cited earlier with the following observation:

For me landscape seems to be important for contemplation... anyway, I have no scruples about loving it (pp.215-16).

Ultimately, of course, what Merton wishes to communicate defies the constraints of language, but the imagery points us toward an experience accessible to all. In a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, Merton labels himself "in many ways an anti-ascetic humanist" and recognizes his need for the created world as a path to perfection. He comments:

one of the things in monasticism that has always meant most to me is that 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. One of the things I love about my life, and therefore one of the reasons why I would not change it for anything, is the fact that I live in the woods and according to a tempo of sun and moon and season in which it is naturally easy and possible to walk in God's light, so to speak, in and through his creation. That is why the narcissist bit in prayer and contemplation is no problem out here, because in fact I seldom have to fuss with any such thing as 'recollecting myself' and all that rot. All you do is breathe, and look around (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp.502-03).

In *East Coker*, T. S. Eliot reminds us that in our beginning is our end, so I would like to conclude by briefly returning to Merton's essay on English mysticism with which I began. Of all the authors Merton

discusses in his essay – Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich among others – it is Thomas Traherne who echoes most strongly Merton's preoccupations with Edenic nature, so it is no coincidence that in his journals and letters Merton refers numerous times to his delight in Traherne's writings. Most of all, I believe, Merton responded to the ecstatic strain in the *Centuries of Meditations*, that strange and wonderful collection. In this work Traherne causes us to consider an issue Merton revisits 300 years later: how to "enjoy the world aright." In a series of cautionary negatives and urgent positives, Traherne exhorts:

Your Enjoyment of the World is never right, till evry Morning you awake in Heaven: see your self in your fathers Palace: and look upon the Skies, the Earth, and the Air, as Celestial Joys: having such a Reverend Esteem of all, as if you were among the Angels (First Century, 28).

Like Merton, Traherne expresses a theology of affirmation. Heaven is a mode of apprehension, a state of wakefulness in which we become attuned to what is around us and live in harmony with a consciousness of its perfection. In yet another exuberant statement of the recovery of paradise, Traherne conveys an understanding of reality as beauty that once again foreshadows Merton's concerns:

You never Enjoy the World aright, till you so lov the Beauty of Enjoying it, that you are Covetous and Earnest to Persuade others to enjoy it. And so perfectly hate the Abominable Corruption of Men in Despising it, that you had rather suffer the flames of Hell than willingly be Guilty of their Error.

There is so much Blindness, and Ingratitud, and Damned folly in it. The World is a Mirror of infinit Beauty, yet no Man sees it. It is a Temple of Majesty, yet no Man regards it. It is a Region of Light and Peace, did not Men Disquiet it. It is the Paradice of God. It is more to Man since he is faln, then it was before. It is the Place of Angels, and the Gate of Heaven (First Century, 31).

For Traherne, as for Merton, the world is sanctified as it exists, and the only desanctification lies in our turning away from its riches. To recover original perception is to attain a state of grace.

In the *Second Century* Traherne again meditates on the divine link between self and created world:

That Violence wherewith somtimes a man doteth upon one Creature, is but a little spark of that lov, even towards all, which lurketh in His Nature. We are made to lov: both to satisfy the Necessity of our Activ

Nature, and to answer the Beauties in evry Creature. By Lov our Souls are married and solderd to the creatures: and it is our Duty like GOD to be united to them all. We must lov them infinitely but in God, and for God: and God in them: namely all His Excellencies Manifested in them. When we dote upon the Perfections and Beauties of som one Creature: we do not lov that too much, but other things too little. Never was any thing in this World loved too much, but many Things hav been loved in a fals Way: and all in too short a Measure (Second Century, 66).

In this transcendently beautiful passage, Traherne once again anticipates Merton's theological and existential preoccupations by suggesting that the resolution to the recovery of paradise is love itself. In a passage from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton meditates on the necessity "to 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" (p.25). And when we enter by love into this union, when our souls resonate with this singing, the world blossoms forth in its original radiance.

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