

A PERSON THAT NOBODY KNOWS: A PARADOXICAL TRIBUTE TO THOMAS MERTON

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**"I have to be a person that nobody knows.
They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead.
Father Louis—he's half-dead too."**

The Sign of Jonas, p.246

HE MUST, even as he wrote those angular words, have been well aware of their irony; and now, ten years after his death, they are odder than ever. "He's dead": but "Thomas Merton" is one of the most wearisomely familiar names in the canon of modern spiritual writing, and a whole industry of Merton Studies has blossomed (if that is the word) and shows no sign of diminution. Indeed, I am busily contributing to it as I write these words.

He was, however, quite right. We "have" Thomas Merton, and the Thomas Merton we have, who is the subject of Merton Studies, is dead, dead and in no small danger of becoming dull. Merton's own anarchic sense of the absurd would have found wry satisfaction in the uncritical reverence accorded to his most ephemeral utterances; and I do not think he would have been best pleased at the sight of an illustrated new edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when he had gone to such pains in his later years to insist that it was, for him, an historical document—that he had, curiously and humanly enough, changed his mind. We are determined that we shall know him, in all the meticulous detail possible. And so (because providence too has a vengeful irony) we shall make it quite, quite certain that he will indeed be "a person that nobody knows". As unknown and yet well-known.

What we are in danger of forgetting is something utterly fundamental to Merton, something which makes more intelligible the fact that he could give almost equal veneration to Catholic and Buddhist traditions. It is the theme of the illusory self. Truth can only be spoken by a man nobody knows, because only in the unknown person is there no obstruction to reality: the ego of self-oriented desire and manifold qualities, seeking to dominate and organize the world, is absent. There is no-one there to know; but what is there to know is the form, the configuration of a wider reality as expressed in one place, one story. It will not be the story of an interesting and original personality, but the story of one series of responses to and reflections of the currents and structures of the world.

Merton did not believe that the concrete and the historical were unimportant; no Christian could seriously believe that, and to put it in those crude terms does not do justice either to the Oriental perspective. But he did believe that the truth was found not in the pursuit of an individual fulfilment or destiny, but in responsive attention to every possible human (concrete and historical) influence. There is no isolated, pure and independent "I", but there is a vast and universal web of "I"s, in which I have a true and right place. And understanding for me and for you comes by concentrating not on your

or my ego as such, but upon the web, the interrelation, through and in its several component points. This is — clumsily put — the characteristic Eastern doctrine of *dharma*. In the *Asian Journal* (pp.287-8), Merton quotes the Hindu writer, G.B. Mohan, on the function of poetry — "to make us aware of this *dharma*" — and the nature of the poetic enterprise as allowing an "insight into the complexities of our moral existence" by "recreating another's experience in our self". And Merton sees this as especially true of "anti-poetry", and concrete poetry, in which poetic meaning is found simply in the ironic reply of routine and banal meanings in another voice. Clearly this becomes possible only by a kind of withdrawal of the ego from poetry, so that the poetic voice is little more than a sounding board. And here again we return to the need for truth to be sought in selfless attentiveness — "this listening, this questioning, this humble and courageous exposure to what the world ignores about itself" (*Climate*, p.37) — in responsiveness to *dharma*.

This is a Christian view, not only because the gospels too preach the renunciation of self, but because Christian belief finds the ground of truth in the silence of Christ, in the story of a man so "poor" that, at the end of His days, He preaches no word, no idea, but suffers only, takes the world to Himself by resisting nothing of it, by exercising none of the self's habitual violence, and Whose life is thus transparent without qualification to the shape of reality. A man nobody knows. The distinctive Christian way is to find the grace of selfless, compassionate existence by attention to and identification with the unique and unrepeatable total instance of it within the net of *dharma*. And thus the priest or monk whose calling it is to guide, nurture, and, in some manner,

act out this way must see himself Christologically, as Merton so eminently did, writing of the "poverty" of the priest who "vanishes into the Mass" (*The Sign of Jonas*, p.187).

Into the Mass, and into the whole world which is gathered into it. Merton's genius was largely that he was a massively unoriginal man: he is extraordinary because he is so dramatically absorbed by every environment he finds himself in—America between the wars, classical pre-conciliar Catholicism and monasticism, the peace movement, Asia. In all these contexts he is utterly "priestly" because utterly attentive: he does not organize, dominate, or even interpret, much of the time, but responds. It is not a chameleon inconsistency (though it could be so interpreted by a hostile eye), because all these influences flow in to one constant place, a will and imagination turned Godward. Merton is sure enough of his real place, his real roots, to let some very strange and very strong winds blow over him, to let his understanding grow by this constant recreation in himself of other human possibilities. And so, in the long run, being interested in Thomas Merton is not being interested in an original, a "shaping" mind, but being interested in God and human possibilities. Merton will not let me look at him for long: he will, finally, persuade me to look in the direction he is looking. That is one reason why this is a short article. I don't want to know much more about Merton; he is dead, and I shall commend him regularly, lovingly and thankfully to God. I am concerned to find how I can turn further in the direction he is looking, in prayer, poetry, theology, and encounter with the experience of other faiths; in trust and love of God our saviour.