

THOMAS MERTON'S INNER LANDSCAPE: A GLIMPSE OF THE SEVENTH DIRECTION

IN PREPARING this relatively brief paper, I have decided to let Thomas Merton do most of the talking. To begin, this is from 30 Aug 1939. [*The Sign of Jonas* p. 225]:

In the afternoon I went out to the old horsebarn with the Book of Proverbs. I was wandering around in the hay loft, where there is a big gap in the roof, and one of the rotting floorboards gave way under me and I nearly fell through.

Afterwards I sat and looked out at the hills and the gray clouds and couldn't read anything. When the flies got too bad, I wandered across the bare pasture and sat by the enclosure wall, perched on the edge of a ruined bathtub that has been placed there for the horses to drink out of. A pipe comes through the wall and plenty of water flows into the bathtub from a spring somewhere in the woods, and I couldn't read there either. I just listened to the clean water flowing and looked at the wreckage of the horsebarn on top of the bare knoll in front of me, and remained drugged with happiness and with prayer.

Once, years ago, I went to Disneyland in Anaheim, California. They showed a special film there. On a circular overhead screen was projected *seamlessly* a moving 360° panorama, taken from platforms in cars, on trains, on ships, on board planes and so on.

You could see in every direction, and it was so lifelike that on entering a railway tunnel, you instinctively ducked your head and looked back at the receding light. When the plane banked to swerve around a snow-capped mountaintop, you leaned automatically with it. To prevent people falling, there were railings, and repeated instructions as we went in to make sure we held on safely at all times.

Perhaps this is what it would be like, for those of us with more pedestrian

faculties, to get inside and experience first-hand the mind of Thomas Merton. So thrilling and vivid might it be, as to make us almost perpetually giddy. Merton was so observant, so alert, and not only to vision but to the other senses as well. This is from *Woods, Shore, Desert* [p.20], another West Coast experience.

Eight crows wheel in the sky. An interesting evolution of shadows on the bare hillside beneath them. Sometimes the crows fly low and their dance mingles with the dance of their own shadows on the almost perpendicular olive wall of the mountain pasture.

Below, the sighs of the ocean.

How did Merton keep his balance watching those crows, and the chaotic world in which he lived spiralling all around him? This was May 1968.

Merton gives us his answer many times, and so in a way does the first of the Psalms:

Happy are they who have not walked
in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
Their delight is in the law of the Lord,
And on his law they meditate day and night.

If we think of contemplation as equivalent to 'Meditation on the Law of the Lord', here is Merton's response [*New Seeds*; p1]:

Contemplation is the highest expression of men's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is... spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.

And where does the contemplative life lead Merton? To his point of balance, of equilibrium... To what he calls, *le point vierge*. [*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*; p.155]

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... This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.

Merton goes on and on about this throughout his life, about the need for silence and stillness and solitude, and also for scripture. [August 8 1949 – from *Sign of Jonas*; p.215]

By reading Scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet.

This is a blissfully happy man speaking to us now. And it was the same man who went East in search of further enlightenment during the last weeks of his life. Merton was convinced – from his readings of the Desert fathers, Sufi masters, Zen scholars, Hindus and Buddhists – not only of the value of deep prayer and contemplation, but by his intuition that there is a commonality of method, discovered by and taught within all spiritual traditions. In meeting the Dalai Lama, and the so-called Dzog-chen master¹, Chadril Rimpoche, in North India he found others whose traditions embodied the same thing. Here he is with the Rimpoche [*Asian Journal*; Nov 16, 1968]:

We must have talked for two hours or more, covering all sorts of ground, mostly around the idea of Dzogchen... the ultimate emptiness, the unity of sunyata (wisdom) and karuna (compassion), going “beyond the dharmakaya” (the body that subsumes everything; the ultimate nature of reality) and “beyond God” to the

ultimate perfect emptiness.

Now we can talk briefly about Merton's soul. His comment [*Asian Journal*; 4 Dec entry], “I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for”, implies that in a remarkable epiphany in Sri Lanka, at Polonnaruwa, Merton found completion in this ‘ultimate emptiness’. But what does this mean? In what way was this remarkable man incomplete, only a week or so from his death? There is, for me, a strong clue in the word ‘Love’. Merton wrote often and powerfully about love, for example in *Love and Living*.

Where there is no more selfishness, there is only love

says Merton (in *L&L*; p.199). And again: Love is a transforming power of almost mystical intensity. Love is not only a special way of being alive, it is the perfection of life (*L&L*, p.35)...

And again:

We discover our true selves in love (*L&L*, p.145).

Also, Merton adds, in discovering our true selves, we also discover each other. Loving God and creation, loving each other, loving ourselves—Did Merton show any signs of weakness with regard to any of these? How well was he able truly to love himself for much of his life?

Rather than examine this, I want first to say something about how we, here, can attain something of Merton's 360° landscape vision and experience. Merton himself insisted not only on the need for silence, stillness and solitude, but also on depth. Here he is writing in 1949 [Aug 22, *Jonas*; p.221].

On St Bernard's Day – I sat up on the hill... not wanting to walk far into the woods, because the more time you spend walking the less you have for really deep prayer.

Deep prayer, contemplation, meditation, emptiness, *le point vierge*, God, wisdom, compassion and love—for Merton (and for us) these are all linked.

So, what is the method? How do we do it, and how does it work? And then, what is the result? If I had longer, I would here link western psychology with Tibetan thought transformation, the processes of emotional healing and personal growth with meditation practice and Dzog-chen. If giving a workshop, I would also take you through a meditation, and make sure that even beginners caught a glimpse, had some experience, of that profound inner stillness where, as Merton says, truth lies.

Being present... That is the secret. Being present right here, right now.

Being mindful... The mind is full, but the ego is quiet: not absent but unassertive, because content. Egoless, or at least ego-free, the mind is at liberty to observe itself. It is free to observe itself observing the landscape... or rather, landscapes. Naturally and spontaneously, the mindful organ integrates them for us into a whole. This is the so-called *Wisdom Mind*... the mind and spirit of God.

Where do we look for these landscapes? Firstly, in the four directions (north, south, east and west). Then upward and downward... and then in the seventh direction, inward—into the body, and into the mind... into memory and into imagination, the fountain of creativity... Through memory and imagination we may look into the past and the future, while anchored still in the present. In other words, we recollect the past or think about the future without neglecting our true state, our inevitable context: this moment... the sacred infinity and eternity of the here and now.

It is then, in Merton's case as in ours, about wholeness, about *seamlessness*. This is how meditation, prayer and a devotion to Scripture work. Little by little, they break down the false barriers of our conditioning... These

practices break down the barriers first between the senses, thought, emotion and action, allowing unconstrained freedom and spontaneity of word and deed, of intuition and creativity. They break down too the barriers between past, present and future, so that time is experienced as seamless...

And, with regular meditation practice, eventually comes love—and knowledge of the unity that is God. Listen to Merton again (*L&L* p.16):

The true unity of the solitary life is the one in which there is no possible division. The true solitary does not seek himself, but loses himself... He 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 himself with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself. Therefore he no longer has thought for himself. What is this ground, this unity? It is Love.

The barriers of fear and envy between people, between nations and between cultures – including religious cultures and traditions – also fall at the feet of love. Love eventually breaks down too even the barriers between life and death, resulting in the banishment of fear and remorse. This is truly a blessing.

Let us finally see how Merton ties all of this up, how he demonstrates in a simple passage his deep intuition of the unity, and purpose, of creation, a creation which includes himself. Thomas Merton's inner landscape has no boundaries. It is as much outer as inner, as much world-scape as soul-scape. This is the key, really. The soul is seamless. Merton's soulscape is the panorama of the present moment rooted in God. This passage is from 1950 [Feb 10, *Jonas*; p.274/5]:

I went to the garden house attic, as usual, after dinner. Climbed up the ladder, observing all the hoes and shovels lying on the floor. I made my way through the litter of old stove-pipes and

broken strawberry boxes to the chair by the window. On the chair is a sack, stained with either paint, creosote, or the blood of something slaughtered. I opened the small window (a pane fell out one day when I let it slam; I can still see the fragments of glass on the red roof of the shed below).

Today it was wonderful. Clouds, sky overcast, but tall streamers of sunlight coming down in a fan over the bare hills.

Suddenly I became aware of great excitement. The pasture was full of birds – starlings. There was an eagle flying over the woods. The crows were all frightened, and were soaring, very high, keeping out of the way. Even more distant still were the buzzards, flying and circling, observing everything from a distance. And the starlings filled every large and small tree, and shone in the light and sang. The eagle attacked a tree full of starlings but before he was near them the whole cloud of them left the tree and avoided him and he came nowhere near them. Then he went away and they all alighted on the ground. They were moving about and singing for about five minutes. Then, like lightening, it happened. I saw a scare go into the cloud of birds, and they opened their wings and began to rise off the ground and, in that split second, from behind the house and from over my roof a hawk came down like a bullet, and shot straight into the middle of the starlings just as they were getting off the ground. They rose into the air and there was a slight scuffle on the ground as the hawk got his talons into the one bird he had nailed.

It was a terrible yet beautiful thing, that lightening flight, straight as an arrow, that killed the slowest starling.

Then every tree, every field was cleared. I do not know where all the starlings went. Florida, maybe. The crows were still in sight, but over their wood. Their guttural cursing had nothing more to do with this affair. The vultures, lovers of dead things, circled over the bottoms where perhaps there was something dead. The hawk, all alone, in the pasture, possessed his prey. He did not fly away with it like a thief. He stayed in the field like a king with the killed bird, and nothing else came near him. He took his time.

I tried to pray, afterward. But the hawk was eating

the bird. And I thought of that flight, coming down like a bullet from the sky behind me and over my roof, the sure aim with which he hit this one bird, as though he had picked it out a mile away. For a moment I envied the lords of the Middle Ages who had their falcons and I thought of the Arabs with their fast horses, hawking on the desert's edge, and I also understood the terrible fact that some men love war. But in the end, I think that hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives; because he knows his business. I wish I knew my business as well as he does his.

I wonder if my admiration for you gives me an affinity for you, Artist! I wonder if there will ever be something connatural between us, between your flight and my heart stirred in hiding, to serve Christ, as you, Soldier, serve your nature. And God's love a thousand times more terrible! Now I am going back to the attic and the shovels and the broken window and the trains in the valley and the prayer of Jesus.

Disney, with that remarkable panoramic film I mentioned, produced a short-term sensation, but Merton regularly, really and reliably delivers the goods.

Here is Psalm One again:

Happy are they who have not walked
in the counsel of the wicked...

Their delight is in the law of the Lord,
And on his law they meditate day and night.

Listen to how it continues:

They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season,
with leaves that do not wither;
everything they do shall prosper.

Do you not think this speaks of him, our spiritual guide? Where Thomas Merton has led, we must endeavour to follow.

There simply is nowhere else.

From a presentation at the Eighth Conference and General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society – The Hawk's Dream: Thomas Merton's Sacred Landscapes. University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. 5th June 2003.

Footnotes

1. The philosophical standpoint, meditation and ethic of the Nyingmapa, the Old School of Tibetan Buddhism founded by Padmasambhava in the 9th century. The teachings start from the assertion that our true nature is already enlightened.