

"Only Connect. . ."

THOMAS MERTON, E. M. FORSTER AND THE EAST

THOMAS MERTON has come to Ceylon to visit the Polannaruwa Buddhas. Before him are a huge seated Buddha beside a cave, a reclining Buddha on the right and Ananda standing at attention. On December 5, 1968, three days before his accidental death by electrocution, Merton writes, I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. The silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing. . . . Looking at these figures, I was suddenly almost forcibly jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . I do not know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. . . . My Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. . . . I do not know what else remains, but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.¹

What "jerked" him out of the "habitual, half-tied vision of things"? He describes his experience as "one aesthetic illumination." We can conclude that it was beauty that forced him out of his usual way of seeing. Beauty captures the viewer and makes him see, to the point of surrendering to it without interfering "shadow" or "disguise." We see a Merton stripped of masks, a monk who in a moment of attention, of self-forgetting, allows his True Self to respond to Oriental beauty.

Merton was familiar with the East. He had studied the great Zen scholar Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and

had traveled to New York for a face-to-face meeting. Merton understood the profound importance of attention in Zen Buddhism; he writes,

Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to explain, but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception by verbal formulas—or by emotional excitement. Deception to what? Deception to its grasp of itself as it really is. Deception due to diversion and distraction from what is right there—consciousness itself."²

In E. M. Forster's breakthrough masterpiece *A Passage to India*, about the West meeting the East, Mrs. Moore, an Anglo-Christian, has entered a Mosque. On seeing her, young Doctor Assiz chastises her for not removing her shoes. When Mrs. Moore explains that she had indeed taken off her shoes, Assiz is surprised for the English rarely exhibit such respect for Indian culture. Mrs. Moore intuited that she had entered holy ground and acted accordingly. She says to Assiz, "God is here." At this moment, Mrs. Moore and Assiz become one in friendship. Walking in his bare feet, Merton too exhibits great reverence toward the Polonnarurwa Buddhas and Eastern culture. He is able to transcend his own background to reach out to the East. Within his soul he integrates both the East and West. He too could say, "God is here."³

Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915, in Prades, France to an American mother with Quaker leanings and a New Zealand father who belonged to the Church of England. When Tom was six, his mother died of cancer. Thereafter, Merton was raised, in turn,

by either his grandparents or his father. In 1928, Owen Merton and his 13 year-old son moved to Europe where Thomas was to live for the next seven years. Merton often watched his father paint the French landscape, thus developing his own artistic eye and appreciation for his father's talent.

He said his father painted like Cezanne, which tells us as much about Owen Merton as it does about his son Tom. Both eventually settled in England. Merton went to Oakham School, where his flair for languages won him a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge University. Merton went up to Cambridge for a year and did not distinguish himself academically, partly due to his father's death of brain cancer in 1931.

At sixteen, Merton was an orphan. His unsupervised life as an undergraduate at Cambridge allowed him to indulge in much partying and drinking. He had seemingly become part of what would notoriously be described as the "lost generation." The day after his nineteenth birthday, on January 31, 1934, Merton's guardian Tom Bennett surprised him with a birthday present, a trip to Italy. The English have long conducted a love affair with Italy. E. M. Forster writes,

I do believe that Italy purifies and ennobles all who visit her.⁴

Merton's Italian journey would indeed transform him forever. In Italy, Merton became a pilgrim: one who visits religious shrines. Touring Roman churches, Merton was fascinated by Byzantine mosaics, and discovered them to be not only beautiful but also spiritually powerful. He eagerly went from church to church to gaze upon the iconic splendor of mosaics and stained glass windows. The beauty of these saint-mosaics

enthralled him as works of art. But it was the huge icons of Christ that spiritually overwhelmed him, jerked him out of himself so that, for the first time in his life, he desired to know,

who this Person was that men called Christ.⁵ Through beauty, Christ beckoned the young Merton to him. The French mystic, Simone Weil, says,

In everything which gives us the pure, authentic feeling of beauty, there is, as it were, an incarnation of God in the world, and it is indicated in beauty.⁶

To learn to know Jesus Christ, Merton purchased a Vulgate Bible which he read and studied. However, his actual rebirth in the waters of Baptism and the desire to live the Catholic faith were still several years away. But God had touched him, and he would never forget it.

His time at Cambridge came to an abrupt and sad ending. Merton had fathered a child. His guardian Tom Bennett suggested that Merton leave England to begin over in America, for his undisciplined behavior would be unlikely to procure him a job in the British Civil Service, Merton's original plan.

He enrolled at Columbia University in February, 1935. Columbia was an exciting place for Merton both socially and intellectually. At the same time, however, he remained an agnostic and was hostile to formal religion. Ashamed of his past dissolute life and plagued by self-hatred, he was acutely sensitive to the power of evil in the world. Despite his outward success at Columbia, he often felt overwhelmed by feelings of emptiness. Catching sight of Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* in Scribner's window, he impulsively purchased it. Gilson introduced him to a concept of God that he at last found intellectually satisfying:

God is not an enraged autocrat intent upon condemning as many people as possible; rather, God is loving and compassionate. At this time, Merton also read Jacques Maritain, opening him to the idea of virtue. Merton also read widely in poetry: Dante, William Blake and Gerard Manley Hopkins. On reading an account of Hopkins' conversion to Catholicism through the influence of John Henry Newman, Merton decided on the spot that it was time to take instruction to become a Christian. On November 18, 1938, he was baptized at Corpus Christi church in New York City. In his newly-baptized fervor, Merton purchased the works of Saint John of the Cross. His reading also included Saint Teresa of Avila's *Autobiography*, Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and Saint Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. Under their inspiration, Merton longed for a deeper, contemplative life, one dedicated to God Alone. Strongly disapproving of Merton's life at Cambridge, the Franciscan order rejected his request for admission. The Trappists of Kentucky, to the contrary, accepted the young man. On December 10, 1941, he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani and three days later he became a postulant choir monk whose one desire was to disappear into God. Such an ascetical life would strip Merton of all that impeded union with God. That meant a stripping away of ego. Only when false masks have been discarded will a person come to know his true self who is Christ, "Not I but Christ in me." This now became Merton's *raison d'être*: to become more and more Christlike. In 1948 *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published. No one had predicted its now legendary success: the first year alone it sold over 600,000 hard copies.

Thus was launched Thomas Merton's career both as a spiritual writer and spiritual master. A year later Merton wrote *Seeds of Contemplation*, also a best-seller, introducing his readers to the practice of contemplation. Post World War II America was ready for such a book.

In the 1950s Merton's study of the East intensified. He corresponded with D. Suzuki, the leading Zen Buddhist intellectual of the time. Merton was able to visit him in the early 60s. Merton wrote *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, which includes his dialogue with Suzuki.

Did Merton achieve *satori* (enlightenment) before the Polonnaruwa Buddhas? It is a question impossible to answer. I am inclined to believe that Merton fulfilled a greater integration, a greater wholeness, holiness, if you will. Merton describes the integrated person,

Final integration is a state of transcultural maturity far beyond mere social adjustment, which always implies partiality and compromise. . .

... He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense "cosmic" and "universal man." He has attained a deeper, fuller identity than that of his limited ego-self which is only a fragment of his being. He is in a certain sense identified with everybody: or in the familiar language of the New Testament he is "all things to all men. He has attained to a deep inner freedom—the freedom of the Spirit we read of in the New Testament."⁷

E. M. Forster's epigraph to *Howards End* is his famous aphorism, "Only connect..."⁸ When Merton entered Gethsemani, he was imbued with Catholic triumphalism and *contemptus mundi*. He had succumbed to a duality of perception that considered the outside world as evil and the monastery as heaven on earth. The ardor of his conversion certainly

had much to do with such a perspective. But having embarked upon the inner journey, Merton came to know himself, to explore and to integrate those secret places of his personality, his past, with his desire for wholeness, and for God.

In time, he was able to turn his attention back upon the world, culminating in his famous Louisville Vision, voicing his unity with and love of his fellow brothers and sisters. When Vatican II encouraged more openness to other religions in a spirit of ecumenism, Merton continued his interest the East, eloquently articulated in *Mystics and Zen Masters* and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. An expert in Zen Buddhism, he was invited in 1968 to deliver a paper at the Calcutta conference, titled 'Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue.' He died shortly after his speech.

He went to the east with one intent: "Only connect. . ." And this he did, and today he continues to do so through his writings, both prose and poetry.

Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, (New York: New Directions Press, 1973) pp. 233-236.
2. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York: New Directions Press, 1968), p. 38.
3. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1924), p. 18.
4. E. M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1920), p. 7.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 109.
6. Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader, A Legendary Spiritual Odyssey of Our Time*, (New York: David McKay, 1977), p. 379.
7. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 206.
8. E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, epigraph, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1921).

FRANK MERTON TRIER

1919-2003

Frank Merton Trier, first cousin of Thomas Merton,
died in his sleep on July 20th, 2003,
at the family home of Fairlawn, West Horsley.
He was 84 years old.

He was the elder son of "Aunt Gwyn," Gwynedd Fanny Merton Trier (1885-1986), a sister of Merton's father Owen. Merton Trier and his brother Richard (1920-1968), were younger than their cousin, Thomas Merton.

Thomas Merton's earliest known writings, five stories written as a teenager c. 1928-1929, included a couple of stories written to entertain the younger cousins when Thomas was staying with Aunt Gwyn and her family during the Christmas holidays of 1928.

These stories were discovered in notebooks kept by Merton Trier.