

# Thomas Merton and Philip Toynbee: Diarists of Darsan

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## Part One

I AM AN INVETERATE reader of journals, my favorites being those of Thomas Merton. When I need inspiration, I dip into Merton's journals, especially the astounding late ones: they grab my attention the way an icon does, offering glimpses of the transcendent. Merton's contemplative gaze, verbally captured upon the pages of his journals, possesses the power to rinse the spiritual eye so that I begin to see again the contours of my daily life more clearly, for like Aldous Huxley's unseen mynah birds in the novel *Island*, many of Merton's entries echo their cries, "Here and now boys. Here and now." And for Merton's Zen-like "transparencies" captured in both his prose and poetry I am most grateful: They point to an abiding in the "Now" moment whose enjoyment is available to anyone willing to foster the art of attention.

Another diarist has lately come into my life, of whom I've grown very fond: Philip Toynbee. I had known about his father, the eminent historian Arnold Toynbee and his legendary, classicist grandfather Gilbert Murray, but it was Professor Richard Whitfield, a friend of Philip's, who introduced me to Philip Toynbee's two books: *Part of a Journey, An Autobiographical Journal 1977-1979* and *End of a Journey, An Autobiographical Journal 1979-1981*.

What impressed me most about both journals is that they are imbued with the spirit of Thomas Merton.

Toynbee considered Merton to be one of the greatest spiritual masters of the twentieth century, unsurpassed even by his loved and admired Martin Buber. I was not surprised to read the glowing entries in his journals about Merton, for many important 20th century writers had become Merton *aficionados*. I think of the novelist Doris Grumbach, the essayist Annie Dillard, the poet Denise Levertov, the literary critic Frank Lentriccia, the Nobel Prize winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, the editor and essayist Nancy M. Malone, theologian Robert Barron, and the literary biographer/critic and poet Paul Mariani, just to name a few.

Philip Toynbee was however an unlikely man to turn to Thomas Merton for spiritual sustenance. A member of a distinguished family, a graduate of Oxford, a novelist, a poet and the book reviewer for England's oldest Sunday paper, *The Observer*, Toynbee was a well known agnostic, drinker and an anti-Christian, particularly anti-Catholic after his mother converted to Catholicism - an act he had at first viewed as both a familial and social betrayal. Yet, in 1963, in a published dialogue with his grandfather Gilbert Murray, Toynbee says, "I suppose the most fundamental question anyone

could ask anyone else is, do you believe in God?" This posed question initiated the first tentative steps of his spiritual quest. By the time he wrote his first journal, Toynbee had recovered his belief in God; a beleaguered faith, but faith nevertheless.

His journals chart a spiritual journey, fraught with doubt, fear, and crippling depression, to be gradually followed by periods of clarity, epiphany and joy. Above all this hovers the presence of the spiritual master whom Toynbee most admired, Thomas Merton. That he found a kindred spirit in Merton is not surprising, for they had much in common: both had mothers stinting in their display of love and affection. Both were born writers, with a poetic sensibility. Both were intellectuals educated at English grammar schools and universities. Both were acutely aware of the social injustices of contemporary life. Both flirted with the Communist Party. Both were agnostics in their youth. Both were inveterate readers. Both liked to drink. Both were healthy heterosexuals with an eye for women. Both read and admired the alluring if somewhat bizarre Simone Weil. Both chose Dame Julian of Norwich as their favourite mystic. Both were drawn into a dialogue with Buddhism.

When I read Toynbee's entry for January 7, 1978 (Part of a Journey, pp.82-83), I smiled. He sounded so much like the Merton who criticized himself so many times for this same "fault":

*Thomas Merton writes of 'the soul wounded by inordinate self-*

*expression.' Alerted by that splendid phrase I resolved about six weeks ago to renounce writing books, at least for several months: perhaps forever. Too much of my writing over the last forty years has been tainted with pride... Yet Merton wrote and published about forty books during his cut-short life. I know this caused him much heart-searching when he first entered the monastery; but he had the rare advantage of being under obedience and all his early books were written on the direct orders of his superior. But not, I suspect, his later books. Towards the end of his life he was exhibiting a freedom of speculation, and a breadth of concern, which cannot have been altogether congenial even to the most liberal of Cistercian abbots. Merton would never have disobeyed a direct order to stop writing, so such an order can never have been given. But the tone of those magnificent late works is of a truly free man, freely communicating his thoughts to people far outside his earliest readership of faithful Roman Catholics or potential converts.... His heart and mind overflowed with the new things seen and understood; and he was impelled by a generous longing to share these with 'Those gathering multitudes outside/Whose glances hunger worsens.'*

I quote at length to illustrate that not only did Philip Toynbee identify with Merton, but that he had also given much thought to Merton's life and to

his work. Toynbee didn't live long enough to have had the privilege of reading either Merton's unexpurgated journals or the collected letters, but his early opinion of Merton holds up extremely well as an insightful summary of what Merton had become by the end of his life. The sentence from the above selection that stands out for me is, "His heart and mind overflowed with the new things seen and understood." It is that quality of attentive seeing that I'd like further to explore in regard to both Toynbee and Merton. In 1977, Toynbee had been reading - in addition to Merton - the work of Simone Weil, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and the Psalms. He was also visiting the Anglican convent Tymawr, attending their services and becoming friends with the nuns, some of the happiest moments of his life. Sacred reading, sacred rituals and friendships led to a luminous moment of attention:

November 12, 1977

*For years all visual beauty has been tangled up with nostalgia. 'Tears at the heart of things': poignancy: carried back by a tree to some half-memory of a childhood tree, so freshly seen so long ago! A florid and deeply satisfying melancholy. Or the tree was a memento mori; my melancholy softly expanding into a future of no trees at all. But now, on this walk, I stopped several times and looked at a single tree as I haven't done for years. No, as I've never done in my life before. The tree was there and now in its own immediate and peculiar right:*

*that tree and no other. And I was acutely here-and-now as I stared at it, unhampered by past or future: freed from the corruption of the ever-intrusive ME. Intense happiness. (Part of a Journey, pp. 56-57)*

Toynbee finds himself by losing himself in his attention to the tree: he is freed from ego, from "ME." He is quick, however, to emphasize that his willed attention is not mystical; there is no sense of 'I and the tree' merging into One. What Toynbee has experienced is an epiphany, one that could lead, as he suggests (and hopes), to "mystical emotions." (PJ, p. 57) Five months later, in his March 5, 1978 entry, we see Toynbee still "cleansing the doors of perception." He writes:

*To BH after lunch, and as I walked through the wood I felt the spring for the first time this year. The trees looked as if they were just about to explode in the warm sun. And again I felt none of that old nostalgia for the springs of yesteryear: for a moment I nearly understood what it might mean to speak of spring as 'eternal'. Taking long strides between the little sunlit oaks and birches, I was glad to recognize that these strides weren't purposeful, in the sense of trying to hasten my arrival. They were attentive strides. (PJ, p. 129)*

Toynbee strides in the "Now" moment. His attention is not a willed attention but a "choiceless attention" - to borrow Krishnamurti's phrase. This kind of attention is the fruit of the spiritual way

of Simone Weil who says that "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer." (SW, p. 212) And if at this point we need to describe what Toynbee had spiritually become, the only word that suffices is *contemplative*.

One may ask, "Why the stress on his growth in *attention*?" The answer is a simple one: When we are able to shift our attention from our own self-interest, our constant egotistical concerns, then we are ready to give God our fullest attention. For to lose our self is to find our True Self, the "not I but Christ in me." Toynbee's attention (seeing) is akin to the Hindu concept *darsan*. Laura Sewall describes *darsan* thus:

*Darsan means "seeing" but is also sometimes translated as "auspicious sight," and it specifically refers to both seeing and being seen by the divine presence.... Darsan is revelatory, illuminating the unseen, the absolute, through the act of seeing the tangible physical world - the places of pilgrimage, the temple images, the peaks of the Himalayas, the river Ganga, the gaze of holy persons, one's guru, the saints, the renunciates. Darsan implies being gifted by the thing seen in a moment when the observer is receptive and respectful, and thus able truly to see. (SSEP pp. 32-33)*

## Part Two

Merton's late journals reveal that he too had moved into the kind of seeing described as *darsan*. This is evident

throughout his posthumously-published journal *A Vow of Conversation* (included in *Dancing in the Water of Life*). When I first read *Vow*, I was astonished by Merton's descriptions of nature's beauty, beauties his eye saw everywhere with a Zen-like intensity and captured in haiku-like sentences that sparkled with a serenely evocative expressiveness. His life as a hermit/monk seemed to be full of "angelic lucidity" (DWL, p. 187). Such a sea-change in the quality of seeing is not unusual among spiritual men and women. J. Neville Ward writes:

*Normally the mind functions by means of sense-impressions, images (that is to say thoughts of a pictorial nature), and ideas (thoughts of an abstract, conceptual nature). But the mind can function in another way. In the experience of the arts (listening to music, looking at a picture), or, when enjoying the view of a wide and various landscape, or in certain moments of tranquility and happiness in the infinitely diverse experience of human love, the mind seems not to be doing anything at all; it is certainly not pursuing a series of verbal thoughts, it simply attending in quietness and joy to what is in front of it. It is this faculty of the mind to attend, without one thought giving way to another, simply to be held, that is characteristic of contemplation. Practically everyone is familiar with it. It is Journal.*

We have here a further example of the kind of attention that is *darsan* - the

kind of attention Merton had attained in the early years of the 1960s. Another good example occurs in his April 23, 1964 journal entry:

*Real Spring weather - these are the precise days when everything changes. 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! Mixture of heavenliness and anguish. Seeing "heavenliness" suddenly for instance 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-not 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. Born partly of physical anguish (which is really not there, though. It goes quickly). 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. (DWL, p. 99)*

This is the clearest echo of those mynah birds. Obviously Merton is joyfully immersed in the Here and Now, finding it heavenly: Paradise regained. Here

beauty is "precise," not to be mixed with the pathetic fallacy of superimposed human emotion. Here beauty is pure and egoless. His *darsan* is akin to child-like wonder. Furthermore, it is not a Horatian *carpe diem*, a vigorous seizure-of-the-day aesthetic by a man with no hope for a future. Rather, Merton is "seized" by "heavenliness": God makes his presence known through his vestiges, through "His sign." In short, Merton is graced by God.

Merton's journals not only remind us that we are surrounded by God's signs - especially discovered in the beauty of the world - but that they also preach ever so subtly that we won't likely "see" them unless we develop the art of attention whose *sine qua non* is silence and solitude. Merton forever advocates inclusion of silence and solitude into our lives. By the time Merton had become a hermit, he'd evolved from a monk of the inward gaze, particularly noticeable in *The Sign of Jonas*, to a monk shifting his gaze outside himself, a change of perspective indicating that during his inner journey, he had indeed taken the U-turn necessary to avoid the dead-end of narcissism, the trap of which all contemplatives must ever be aware. Perhaps Merton's ultimate experience of *darsan* occurred before the Polonnaruwa Buddhas. He 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...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. . .The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya - everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.... (OSM p. 323)

No matter how many times I read this selection, I am moved by its beauty and mystery. Contemplating it, I always gain new insight. His seeing is not an act of will. That he has prepared himself for a lifetime to see the Buddhas goes without saying. His reverential demeanor reminds me of the character Mrs. Moore (in E. M. Forster's novel *Passage to India*) who respectfully removes her shoes when she enters an Indian mosque. Merton also removes his shoes and approaches the Buddhas silently, holily, and reverently. His physical body renders a last reminder of its presence: The grass and sand are wet, but then his body reduces itself to one *mudra*: Seeing. He gazes upon the Buddhas, an exquisitely attentive gaze piercing the surface of things, penetrating beyond shadow and disguise: *Darsan*.

Such seeing is the "exquisite risk" John of the Cross refers to in his *Dark Night of the Soul*.

On a dark night,  
Inflamed by love - longing -  
O exquisite risk! -  
Undetected I slipped away  
My house, at last, grown still.  
(DNS)

Risky because one is entering *terra incognita*, a spiritually untraversed soulscape, not knowing the effect it will exert on one's life. All one knows is that the "habitual, half-tied vision of things" must yield to a new manner of seeing: "I make all things new."

Or perhaps nothing is demanded: the nothing of "What Is" stills the house of being - and it suffices. Yet being in touch with the stillness at the centre of the wheel doesn't stop the wheel from turning. We don't know what Merton would have become had he lived longer, for the wheel of a faulty electric fan cut his life short. But one thing is quite clear: Merton experienced a "terrible beauty" while standing before the Polonnaruwa Buddhas, one that we will never completely understand. Some wonder whether it would have been better if he had not left his monastic cell to travel to the East. But the cell of our being goes everywhere with us, each of us the locus of Being. As Merton says,

*It is not simply a question of "existing" alone, but of doing, with joy and understanding "the work of the cell" which is done in silence and not according to one's own choice or the pressure of necessity but in obedience to God. But the voice of God is not "heard" at every moment, and part of the "work*

*of the cell" is attention so that one may not miss any sound of that Voice.* (DWL pp. 254-256)

If I had to summarize what I've come to believe, I would say this: I'm more and more convinced that the secret of the spiritual life lies in attention. It is secretive only because of our failure to see; thus, we all should take the exquisite risk and begin to cultivate the art of attention.

#### References

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OSM Merton, Thomas, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

SSEP Sewall, Laura, *Sight and Sensibility / The Ecopsychology of Perception* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher /Putnam, 1999).

DNS St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. Mirabai Starr, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002).

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UP Ward, J. Neville, *The Use of Praying*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

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**Robert Waldron** has written three books on Merton, two of which are still in print: *Poetry as Prayer*, Thomas Merton (*Pauline Books and Media*), and *Walking with Thomas Merton* (*Paulist Press*). His new book is *Walking with Henri Nouwen, A Reflective Journey* (*Paulist Press*) and in the fall of 2005 his *Walking with Kathleen Norris* (*Paulist Press*) will be published. He is a frequent contributor to the *Merton Seasonal*.

#### from Merton's letter to Jim Forest

"You are fed up with words, and I don't blame you. I am nauseated by them sometimes. I am also, to tell the truth, nauseated by ideals and with causes. This sounds like heresy, but I think you will understand what I mean. It is so easy to get engrossed with ideas and slogans and myths that in the end one is left holding the bag, empty, with no trace of meaning left in it. And then the temptation is to yell louder than ever in order to make the meaning be there again by magic. Going through this kind of reaction helps you to guard against this. Your system is complaining of too much verbalizing, and it is right.

"The big results are not in your hands or mine, but they suddenly happen, and we can share in them; but there is no point in building our lives on this personal satisfaction, which may be denied us and which after all is not that important..."