

Towards the Awakened Self: “Rites for the Extrusion of a Leper” and “Atlas and the Fatman”

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On the eve of his trip to Asia, criticizing the somewhat shallow *otium sanctum* [holy leisure] of monastic life, Merton expressed his “need of effort, deepening, change and transformation”. In the closing paragraph of his notebook *Woods, Shore, Desert* he confessed to an anguished desire to finally “push on to the great doubt”.¹ According to a celebrated Zen maxim, Great Doubt leads to great awakening; Little Doubt results in little awakening, and the absence of doubt makes awakening impossible. Doubt, then, initiates the arduous journey toward the awakened self—the self that penetrates beyond the shadow and the disguise—but to succeed in this journey, Doubt needs to be complemented by the Great Conviction and the Great Effort. I will attempt to show how all three principles structure Merton’s breakthrough to the ultimate self. I am going to base my analysis on Merton’s two poems: “Rites for the Extrusion of a Leper” from *Sensation Time at the Home* (1968) and “Atlas and the Fatman” from the *Uncollected Poems* section of *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*.

Theoretical Detour: Doubt and the Great Doubt

Radical skepticism is necessary for genuine awakening, teach Zen masters. Given

the importance of skeptical thought in the Western world since Socrates, given the fact that the twentieth century—presided over by the three “masters of suspicion”, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx—was named the century of doubt, it is strange that, if the Zen masters are right, we are not yet together awakened. Is this because our doubts tend to be Little Doubts that quickly ossify into dogmatic beliefs themselves? The Great Doubt, however, implies a critical attitude towards all classifications and formalisms as categories of the mind only, rather than of reality itself. The practitioner of Zen (and any religious mystic for that matter) is warned against becoming attached to religious rituals and practices, since they too are merely contingent (and therefore impermanent) expressions of a deeper reality of faith. The famous maxim that you should kill Buddha if you see him is a good illustration of the radicalism of the Great Doubt, which necessitates the destruction of the image (concept, outer form) as preparatory for reaching the inner truth, the nameless pure being.

In Western thought there seems to exist a concept analogical to the Great Doubt of Zen, and this is what Simone Weil (one of Merton’s late discoveries), called *de-creation*. Weil understood ‘de-creation’ as passing from the created to

the uncreated²—a process implying transition from the constructed, human-made and therefore false, to the unconstructed, or uncreated, therefore authentic. One of the giants of modernist poetry, Wallace Stevens, impressed by Weil’s lucid notion, defined the entire modern reality as “a reality of de-creation”.³ My contention is that Merton’s poetry, especially that of the fifties and sixties, can be termed *poetry of de-creation*.

From his earliest verses on, without naming it as such, Merton attempted an ideological critique, a ‘de-creation’ of language, on the one hand lamenting the fact that words had become tools for manipulating reality rather than means of naming and defining it, and on the other struggling to restore the lucid word. With time, his de-creative tactic was becoming more pronounced. It is possible to see this continuing and developing art in the early “Tower of Babel” (1940-1942), through “Original Child Bomb” (1962), “Picture of Lee Yin” and “Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces” (1963), numerous fragments in “Cables to the Ace” (1968) and “The Geography of Lograire” (1969), to such full-blown attempts at ideological de-creation of language as “Plessy vs. Ferguson”, and “Rites for the Extrusion of a Leper”, in all of which Merton struggled to read various official pronouncements against their explicit meaning and thus to uncover the repressed toxic details of events. He would typically decipher the deep, subliminal subtext of public discourses in order to demonstrate how smooth words about love, peace, and ‘justice for all’ secretly implement injustice, defend the status quo and particular group interests, and propagate contempt

under the guise of respect. In a nation “consoled by a coat of rhetoric”,⁴ Merton dared to challenge “the hot slogans of all who had a good time when the innocent were found with no clothes on in the Sunday paper”.⁵ Scrutinizing the rhetoric beyond the various “underlying fallacies” of official arguments, he understood how much we in fact are “all locked up in the same construction”,⁶ a construction the decision-makers adopt as a convenient interpretation of events, which the rest more or less willingly accept. But beyond the inflated language of public discourse, Merton would invariably find the inflated ego—“John the Master,” “I—the Capital Person”.⁷ In the last analysis, it was this inflated ego (the false or constructed self) that Merton treated with suspicion, doubted, denied as false, and ultimately de-created.

The Leprosy of Doubt and the Rites of Extrusion

Realizing that, in his lifetime, the wilful denial of truth had reached epidemic proportions, Merton understood that when everybody is infected with the same virus, nobody thinks of him or herself as ill. On the contrary, when illness constitutes the norm, it is the healthy citizens who become branded as freaks. To be “sane” and efficient, therefore, a society must remove its “unsound” elements—i.e., the conscientious, doubt-infected members—beyond its bounds, just as medieval society would expel its lepers for fear of being infected.

The analogy between doubts and leprosy is developed in “Rites for the Extrusion of a Leper”, a poem that starts with a careful etymological explication of the word “meazel”, the vernacular term de-

noting a person afflicted with leprosy. Tracing the word's origin to the Latin *misellus*, meaning "a poor little chap", and *miseria* or misery⁸, Merton concludes that leprosy is a symbolic revelation of our common misery, which consists in an ontological lack of certainty, and that doubting is in fact an inescapable human condition—the condition of "a poor little chap". Since doubts, however, like leprosy, are a threat to stability and order, two pillars on which a "sane" society is built, they must be exorcised by means of an appropriate rite which would allow law-abiding citizens to get rid of their destabilizing uncertainties by projecting them onto a scapegoat, a person whose visible otherness, like leprosy, makes him stand out from the crowd. "His sickness is a sign of doubts that infect his parish," says the poem, implicitly identifying the parish with any organized human community which, always intolerant of dissent, is eager to extrude the nonconformist "in honor of certainty".⁹ The extrusion is a carefully scripted "rite" which offers participants—each with their own "rattle" and "barrel"—many rewards, the chief of which is the sense of group solidarity and self-righteousness. In exchange for obedience to authorities, they are freed from the burden of decision-making: "My parish seems to understand, and doubtless behind it all there is a reason".¹⁰

The extrusion is presided over by a priest, who first celebrates a mass. The mass for the Dead, as the Lords Vicar specify, must not, however, be chanted, "For the Measel is not dead", insists the poem's persona. "His color is no longer certain but he still lives, though with one foot outdoors in eternity". And again:

"Indeed, he is alive and all the world's doubts are fighting in him".¹¹ The mass being over, the priest now accompanies the leper "to a common Lazar House or to a reclusory in the field".¹² There he teaches the extruded what he shall and shall not do. Finally, the ceremony "acquires an air of ordination" as the priest blesses the leper's robe, saying "Receive this hood as a sign of your Meazels and wear it at all times outside your hut in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen".¹³ He does the same with the implements which the extruded is to use in his new life.

By comparing the rite of extrusion to ordination, the poem highlights the analogy between the world's two "professional" doubters: the leper and the monk. Whether in the "common Lazar House" (which seems to correspond to the monastic community) or the "reclusory in the field" (the hermitage), both live "with one foot outdoors in eternity" and "at a safe distance"¹⁴ from the larger human community, and there, in the world's margin, exercise their "responsibility"¹⁵ towards it by facing the despair the world wants to know nothing about. "Your uncertainty has become certain, a source of sacred dread to others, but to you a kind of hell in which absurdity itself is an earnest of salvation",¹⁶ comments Merton, using expressions that in his writings normally refer to the monastic vocation.

Though neither the leper nor the monk belongs to this world, both have obligations to it and the task of both is to mourn ("Mourn for your doubts and also for our own, though they may differ", says the poem's persona¹⁷). Like an or-

dained monk, the leper has an obligation to take the anguish of humanity upon himself, to face life's contradictions and absurdities, cherishing no consoling illusions. And like a true monastic—although "he cannot change his spots, nor resolve the doubts that are printed on his skin"¹⁸—he has to, "with God's help... cope with his uncertainties alone".¹⁹ The societal marginalization of both the leper and the monk serve a similar purpose,

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namely to keep "sane" society from questioning "the general rule".²⁰ But what "general rule", one may ask, is the foundation of Western society? A society founded on Christian values would be expected to reflect those values, but Thomas Merton, a self-exiled marginal whose white habit makes him distinct like the leper's diseased skin, knows better. Beyond the sacred formula of the *ordo* of extrusion, he can hear society's desperate plea: since we already "doubt ourselves and our Blessed God," do not let us "go to the very end" and doubt our money, the only remaining sacredness in our lives.

²¹ In other words, the world seems to be

saying: if you insist on viewing events from a spiritual perspective and cherishing doubts—let alone the Great Doubt—about what we hold sacred, you must leave, so as not to expose the falsity and the emptiness of our secularized existence.

The poem's point of gravity, however, rests in the recognition of a certain bond, a mutuality between the community and the extruded. Even though "over the door of [the leper's] house shall be written 'Responsibility'"²², "all must bear in mind the judgment of God and contribute to his needs".²³ While the smooth functioning of any organized community depends on repressing doubts, the extruded—"a source of sacred dread to others"²⁴—must go through the hell of doubts *for* others.

The Enlightened Self: De-creating the Fatman Mystique

"To hold profound doubts regarding contradictions in life", says Zen scholar Dr. Nishimura, "is the springboard for launching the journey in search of truth".²⁵ I now want to argue that Merton's "Rites for the Extrusion of a Leper" can be read as a prelude to "Atlas and the Fatman". While the former poem revolves around the Great Doubt that sees through the ephemeral nature of life and society, and learns to accept the irresolvable paradoxes of existence (the leper "cannot . . . resolve the doubts that are printed on his skin"²⁶), the latter is spoken from the viewpoint of an awakened consciousness that has mustered the Great Conviction and made the Great Effort. Nishimura explains that in Zen the basic skepticism in one's existence must co-exist with confidence that one can save oneself by one's own effort. Only in con-

nection with the Great Effort, therefore, does the Great Doubt help to emancipate the self from all forms of bondage by forcing it to rely on nothing external to itself. The Great Doubt must lead to despair, which state resembles the state of a "living dead," says Nishimura in his article "Zen Understanding of Kierkegaard's Existential Thought"²⁷. (This remark further helps us understand the analogy between 'the extruded' of Merton's poem and the practitioner of Zen.) Without despair, a "leap" to enlightenment would be impossible. It is in this leap that contradictions are resolved and "the self that holds doubts about one's existence, and the self that seeks relief, become melded into a single spirit".²⁸

It is significant that "Atlas and the Fatman" should be written from the vantage point of "the farthest end of a known world".²⁹ At the end of "a rough but fortunate journey"³⁰ the poem's collective persona has reached an "unvisited shore" whose silence "embraced the beginning of history and its end".³¹ Apparently the poet, a metaphorical leper and member of a community of extruded, whom the extrusion rite forbade to "be in the company of humans",³² has agonized over the contradictions of the world on the farthest end of organized society, and managed to make the existential "leap" to pure being (in Christian perspective, "the beginning of history and its end" would point to Christ as the Alpha and Omega, the Lion of Judah "worthy to open the scroll and break its seals").³³ Now, on this "unvisited shore" the speaker glimpses a benign, world-sustaining power vested in Atlas, the lonely African mountain. In Merton's poem, Atlas becomes synonymous with life itself: it is

timeless and eternal, it exists beyond contradictions and differentiations; although hidden and unobtrusive, it holds "everything in massive silence". "In one deep thought without words," reports the poet, "he kept the continents from drifting apart. The seas obeyed . . . the beating of his heart".³⁴ It seems to me that such an immediate experience of fundamental reality must proceed from the enlightened self capable of seeing unity in multiplicity, and perceiving truth amidst the paradoxes and inconsistencies of human existence. While the world gives all its attention to one Fatman, a violent, noisy opportunist and self-proclaimed god "born with leather hands and a clockwork mind in order to make a lot of money",³⁵ the enlightened self sees Atlas, with his thoughts "full of inscrutable wisdom" and his heart "safe at the bottom of the green ocean",³⁶ and recognizes the Fatman as merely a transient shadow of reality.

The Fatman is a personification of an absolute leader, a composite of ancient and modern tyrants (an earlier fully developed version of whom can be found in Merton's 1957 morality play "The Tower of Babel"). Claiming to be "the auspicious beginning and the prosperous end",³⁷ he claims divine prerogatives, but his world is the domain of oppression and death, not the sanctuary of life. To conceal this fact, the Fatman re-names reality and rewrites history, replacing the gentle, feminine life-principle vested in Atlas with the iron law of patriarchy. (The Fatman, then, is the chief culprit responsible for concocting mystifications and ideological constructions of reality which the "extruded" have to de-create with Great Effort.) His legacy is the

freezing winter of Law. In this winter "Christmas goes by without a sound because there are no sinners any more, everyone is just . . . No one needs to be saved. No one needs to think. No one needs to confess".³⁸ No one needs to doubt, either. And since there is no place for doubt—let alone the Great Doubt—in the Fatman's world there is no awakening.

Yet not all yielded to the Fatman mystique. Those who, like the narrator, "stood far off", vigilant on their distant shore, "knew which was power and which was image, which was light and which was legend".³⁹ Related to all contemplative dissenters from organized utopias who, in another Merton poem are depicted as still caring to "take thought"⁴⁰ in a world too busy to reflect on the significance of events or too self-assured to doubt, they know the difference between reality and the shadow. And knowing the difference, they anticipate the moment when "the shadow (...) will be destroyed to give place to the light it might have contained".⁴¹

It is no coincidence that the metaphorical lepers alone resist "the beauty of [the Fatman's] system"⁴² and look forward to another beauty, forgotten but much more real: the beauty of mercy and prodigality. In the Fatman's winter of death they alone hear the stirrings of a new life and prophesy its coming: "Life shall wake underground and under sea. The fields will laugh, the woods will be drunk with flowers of rebellion". In the secret guerrilla warfare against death, which only they seem to be aware of, "every plant that stands in the light of the sun is a saint and an outlaw".⁴³ Ultimately, the "extruded" realize that all "individual things that spring into being without

reason"⁴⁴ and seem useless—just as the monk or the poet are useless in a world governed by profit and the iron rule of efficiency—are subversive of society's "general rule". Yet, unlike the poet or the monk, the "flowers of rebellion" cannot be completely removed to the world's margin. Those "individual things" whose "mercy is without explanation"⁴⁵ testify, in the midst of the proud world, to the "life that moves without being seen and [that] cannot be understood".⁴⁶

At the poem's end it is Atlas "the friendly mountain"⁴⁷ that remains, while the memory of the Fatman quickly fades away. This is Merton's de-created reality: the Fatman disappears because he has never been; he was merely a parasite, a demonic shadow of reality. And although new Fatmans are sure to be born, their power will be always curbed by the "gentle hands" of Atlas, that part the sky to let the birds "onto the land out of Paradise".⁴⁸ This is the message that Merton's late poetry leaves us with: that human life is forever caught in the interaction between these two contradictory

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forces, reality and its shadow, and that before history has run its course the best we can do is to "dance in the clarity of perfect contradiction".⁴⁹

In his celebrated "Prayer for Peace" (1962), Merton wrote that "our inner contradictions... are at once a torment and a blessing," for had it not been for the God-given "light of conscience, we would not have to endure them".⁵⁰ Merton believed that the monk or the "extruded," who has become "a source of sacred dread to others",⁵¹ was entrusted with a special vocation to make this light of conscience shine in the world by living the inner contradictions, or by going through the hell of doubts, for the world. He believed that he himself had an obligation to his brothers and sisters "in the world" an obligation to bring them words of wisdom and truth that could still be heard beyond the heavy coat of rhetoric, the jargon used by public servants, conscience-less atomic scientists, and the military busily "neutralizing" civilian targets. Only if he succeeded in this mission would his self-extrusion be justified. Obviously, such a mission requires a combination of radical skepticism with respect to the world of illusion, a great conviction that one should and could make a difference, and a great effort to acquit oneself of this task well. Would it be too much to claim that the "inner clearness, clarity" exploding for Merton from the smiles of the Polonnaruwa Buddhas "knowing everything, questioning nothing"⁵² was a final illumination of the same "clarity of perfect contradiction" he spoke of in "Atlas and the Fat-man"? It was in Asia - literally on the far shore of his known world - that Merton could finally experience what he had al-

ready experienced imaginatively as a poet and a representative person: that he reached beyond the shadow and the disguise (beyond the created) to the uncreated life-sustaining emptiness and compassion he had once vested in Atlas.

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