

# Thomas Merton's Prufrockian Moment Transcended: A Journey from Fear to the Exquisite Risk of Love

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On a dark night.  
Inflamed by love-longing-  
O exquisite risk!  
Undetected I slipped away  
My house, at last, grown still.<sup>1</sup>

In my essay "Thomas Merton and T. S. Eliot, Poets in Search of Soul" published in 1995 in the *Merton Journal*, I explored a number of parallelisms between the two poets. When they were young men, both Eliot and Merton were haunted by a sense of guilt, primarily sexual guilt, and plagued by self-disgust; consequently, they were acutely sensitive to the power of evil in the world, and were more often than not overwhelmed by the futility, emptiness, and sterility of the twentieth century, especially that of the years between the two great wars and both were also imbued with a spiritual malaise that can only be described as *contemptus mundi*.

In fact, Merton and Eliot were alien to the modern world and more attracted to the Desert Fathers who had fled the corrupt world in an attempt not to be corrupted further themselves. It is not surprising, therefore, to read Eliot's biographer, Lyndall Gordon, comparing Eliot's

sensibility to that of Merton. Gordon writes.

The monk, Thomas Merton, tried to explain their point of view (Desert Fathers). Solitaries, he said, regard the world as a wreck and are helpless to do good so long as they flounder among the wreckage. Their first obligation is to find a solid foothold and then to pull others to safety after them.<sup>2</sup>

Where to find a "solid foothold?" Eliot converted to the Church of England, his baptism occurring on June 29, 1927 in the small village church of Finstock. Merton converted to the Catholic Church on November 16, 1938 at Corpus Christi Church, New York City, and they remained faithfully devoted to their churches to their deaths. However, there was another solid foothold that both men ignored at their peril: they both had seemingly renounced human love, the foothold we all must somehow come to terms with in order to become whole human beings.

Prior to his conversion and life as a monk, and very much like the young T. S. Eliot, the man behind the persona of

J. Alfred Prufrock, Merton searched for human love, as the popular song says, in all the wrong places: parties, bars, jazz dives, college soirées, etc. His relationships with several women failed to blossom into love. Consider Merton's heart-breaking journal entry of March 30, 1958: "...my worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being able truly to love, because I despair of ever being worthy of love."<sup>3</sup>

Eight years after this entry, Merton found himself as a patient in a Louisville hospital, where he would stumble upon human love, a love that both astonished him and turned his world upside down.

Today I would like to observe Merton's journey to love through the lens of Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; it is a fruitful exercise because it sheds light not only on Merton's love-thwarted life but also on his journey to a greater wholeness, not only as a man but as a Cistercian monk who is also an artist. First, let's revisit Prufrock.

Preparing for yet another tea party, Prufrock wonders,

"Do I dare?" and "Do I dare?"

Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—

{They will say: How his hair is growing thin!}

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—

{They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"}

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?<sup>4</sup>

One's heart goes out to such a frightened person who yearns to connect with someone of the opposite sex: to connect and hopefully to fall in love. But Prufrock is terrified into silence and into inaction, like Eliot's paralyzed hollow men. Prufrock's eyes, however, are ever moving, eyes ravenous to connect with the eyes of another, eyes that have not failed to notice the light brown hair on the women's arms, but his hunger for love is veiled and disguised by the shadow of his terror, not only of rejection but also of exposing his vulnerability.

So his unrequited longing renders Prufrock an old man who in an enervated, dirge-like voice intones, "I grow old. . . I grow old. . . ." For a brief moment, he imagines himself as a nonchalant, free, brave and spontaneous young man rakishly walking the beach with the bottoms of his trousers rolled and his hair stylishly parted. He'd like to eat a peach unself-consciously, permitting the peach juice to trickle down his chin. But this occurs only in his imagination: he is much too afraid and painfully self-conscious ever to eat fruit in public.

Let us keep in mind that Eliot's first version of the "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" appeared in his 1910-II notebooks when he was twenty-two years old, having himself chosen to hide behind a persona of a forty-year old man.

Having perhaps personally known or privately observed such fear and self-consciousness, we may smile at Prufrock's adolescent-like timidity. But I believe it is far deeper than a passing shyness: Prufrock is essentially afraid of life, too long succumbing to the syndrome of the un-lived life; such fear-haunted, wounded, enervated characters fill Henry James'

novels, their most daring deed, like Prufrock's, is to balance a teacup upon their knees. Henry James himself understood full well the dangers of the un-lived life. Through one of his characters in his novel *The Ambassadors*, he pleads:

Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had? Do what you like so long as you don't make my mistake. Live!<sup>5</sup>

Now how does Thomas Merton fit in with J Alfred Prufrock? Unlike Prufrock, Merton lost his virginity at an early age. As a young man at Cambridge College, he fathered a child. He had lots of girlfriends. He was obviously not intimidated by sexuality or the opposite sex. But I believe that he was very much afraid of love. And for further elucidation, we must now return to Merton's journals.

Let's fast forward to Thomas Merton of 1966 when he was fifty-one years old. He has already fallen in love with his nurse whom he refers to as M. On April 15, 1966, he writes in his journal, "Love. I have got to dare to love, and bear the anxiety of self-question that love arouses in me, until 'perfect love casts out fear'."<sup>6</sup>

We hear the Prufrockian echo, "Do I dare," and "Do I dare," but contrary to the fear dominated Prufrock, Merton finally chooses to love, a decision resonating with an Augustinian timbre, "Love and do what you will." It must have been an agonizing decision for a monk, also a priest, to accept his nurse's love and to return it. But for Merton it was clear-cut, either he dared to love or he would have

to,

...instinctively go back to the old routine of drawing into my shell and putting up the defenses, not letting it go any further, anticipating the break to make it easier for myself.<sup>7</sup>

He also says,

I see how badly I need her love to complete me with warmth and understanding and how utterly alone I am without her now. Some talk for a hermit! But it is true and I may as well admit it.<sup>8</sup>

Note well Merton's fear of drawing back into his shell and recall Prufrock's bleak and unsettling comparison of himself to a crustacean:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.<sup>9</sup>

What could be more distant on this earth than the bottom of the sea? What could be more lonely, trapped within a shell, removed from touching or being touched. I think of the poet Anne Sexton's verse from *An Awful Rowing toward God* where she announces, "Touch is all." Merton craves to touch and to be touched. He writes, "I begin to seethe with physical desire, then become restless, disturbed, distressed, and fearful for the future."<sup>10</sup>

He sounds rather like a young man head-over-heels in love, one who has transcended his former fear and sense of unworthiness. He admits, "By all standards it's all wrong, absurd, insane. . .but some-

how it is not crazy."<sup>11</sup> Echoing Prufrock, he knows that to love a woman will disturb his universe, but it's a vital step along the way of his individuation, one necessitating an integration of the anima, the feminine archetype. In fact, Carl Jung suggests that if the encounter with the shadow is the "apprentice-piece" of individuation, then coming to terms with the anima is the "masterpiece" of individuation.<sup>12</sup>

In my book *Thomas Merton In Search of His Soul, A Jungian Perspective*, (published prior to the release of the unexpurgated journals), I had closely read and studied Merton's dreams, which are haunted by anima figures: Proverb, the Lady Latinist, the Chinese Princess and the Black mother to name a few. They all symbolically address what Merton has candidly described as his "refusal of women." These hauntingly eloquent dream figures, in my opinion, clearly presage the appearance of his nurse M. And of course there is the mystifyingly prophetic line from the haunting prose-poem *Hagia Sophia*,

Such is the awakening of one man, one morning, at the voice of a nurse in the hospital. Awakening out of languor and darkness, one of helpfulness, out of sleep, newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to meeting his nurse, the fifty-one year old Merton had never experienced true love for a woman. We find in his journal this remarkable June 23, 1965 entry (note well the reference to Eliot's *Four Quartets*):

The other day... after my Mass I suddenly thought of Ann Winsor, Andrew's little sister. She was about twelve or thirteen when I used to visit him on the Isle of Wight.... She was the quietest thing on it, dark and secret child. One does not fall in love with a child of thirteen, and I hardly remember even thinking of her. Yet the other day I realized that I had never forgotten her and with a sort of Burnt Norton feeling about the part of the garden I never went to, and that if I had taken another turn in the road I might have ended up married to Ann. Actually, I think she is a symbol of the true (quiet) woman I never really came to terms with in the world, and because of this there remains an *incompleteness that cannot be remedied*. The years in which I chased whores or made whores of my girlfriends (no, that is too strong and also silly, besides there were plenty that I was too shy to sleep with) did nothing to make sense of my life.... When I came to the monastery, Ginny Burton was the symbol of the girl I ought to have fallen in love with but didn't (and she remains the image of one I really did love with a love of companionship not of passion).<sup>14</sup>

Ann Winsor and Ginny Burton had over time become for Merton symbols of women. Anima dream figures and symbols can only direct attention toward one's incompleteness (notice also that Merton believed his incompleteness could

never be "remedied"). Soul work on the conscious level must also be accomplished for healing to occur. How ironic that Merton, a writer who through his many books offered spiritual healing to so many readers, was himself in dire need of healing. To borrow Henri Nouwen's phrase, he was truly a "wounded healer" in search of healing.

For Merton to refuse M's love would be tantamount to saying "No" to a greater psychic wholeness: he would remain as he describes himself: an incomplete man. In the end, he surrenders himself to what he describes as the "womanly wisdom in M. which instinctively seeks out the wound in me that most needs her

### ***Merton's nurse breaks through to Merton, breaks the shell behind which he has hidden, and releases the love so long pent up...***

sweetness, and lavishes all her love upon me there. Instead of feeling impure I feel purified."<sup>15</sup>

The cerebral man finally and humbly bows before feeling - before the archetypal feminine. Recall the woman of the gospel who breaks the alabaster jar and lovingly pours its perfume upon Christ's head. Merton's nurse breaks through to Merton, breaks the shell behind which he has hidden, and releases the love so long pent up, and she in turn pours upon him her own love. The point I am stressing here is that to love often entails a break-

ing, but more of that later.

During his relationship with M, we see Merton at his most vulnerable. Her love has stripped him of masks. That's not to say that Merton was deeply layered in masks, but he rarely appeared in his journals without wearing his writer's mask: he had always viewed his journals - somewhat self-consciously - as works of art, and he surely knew full well that future scholars would mine them. Inveterate diarists like Thomas Merton are fascinating people. William Gass comments:

Loneliness is the diary keeper's lover. It is not narcissism that takes them to their desk every day. And who "keeps" whom, after all? The diary is demanding; it imposes its routine; it must be "chored" the way one must milk a cow; and it alters your attitude toward life, which is lived, finally, only in order that it may make its way to the private page.<sup>16</sup>

We can imagine the blank page staring at Merton, commanding him to fill its white space with life, and Merton ever willing to surrender to its summons. But there came a time when the diary's pure white page proved insufficient. A page cannot reach out and touch, it cannot love, it can only mirror back the solitary self.

In these spring and summer journal entries of 1966, Merton unselfconsciously expresses himself; he even dares to describe himself in love: love reduces him to a comic teenager; thus, Merton is not only in touch with his anima but also with the *puer aeternus*, the eternal boy archetype. And the added boon is that he's writing his most naked and disarming

poetry, verse that is the antithesis of his obscure and opaque *The Geography of Lograire*. At the beginning of 1966, a few months before he meets his nurse, Merton had been reading Allen Ginsberg's poetry. He writes,

Ginsberg is important, one of those people who causes a whole country to judge itself or come under judgment. Everybody has to say one way or the other what he thinks of Ginsberg and what Ginsberg is trying to say. Maybe I should write a poem about this. His nakedness is perhaps the significant—extraordinary—thing.

(I like Ginsberg better than Theodore Roethke, simply because he is more explicit. He is warmer and more personal than William Carlos Williams.)<sup>17</sup>

Merton's placing Ginsberg above the major poets Theodore Roethke and William Carlos Williams is indeed high praise, and in this January, 1966 journal entry we have a clue as to the kind of verse Merton will write, in the spring, when he meets M. His *18 Poems to M.* are indeed naked in the Ginsberg manner, and clearly as warm and personal as William Carlos Williams. Let's consider one of his *18 Poems*:

I always obey my nurse  
I always care  
For wound and fracture  
Because I am always broken  
I obey my nurse

And God did not make death  
He did not make pain  
But the little blind fire

That leaps from one wound into another  
Knitting the broken bones  
And fixing sins so that they can be  
forgotten

I will obey my nurse who keeps this fire  
Deep in her wounded breast  
For God did not make death

He did not make pain  
Or the arrogant wound  
That smells under the official bandage

Because I am always broken I obey my  
nurse  
Who in her grey eyes and her mortal  
breast  
Holds an immortal love the wise have  
fractured

Because we have both been broken we can  
tell God did not make death

I will obey the little spark  
That flies from fracture to fracture  
And the explosion  
Where God did not make death  
But only vision.

I will obey my nurse's broken heart  
Where all fires come from  
And the abyss of flame  
Knitting pain to pain  
And the abyss of light  
Made of pardoned sin  
For God did not make death

I always obey the spark that smacks like  
lightning

In the giant night  
I obey without question  
The outlaw reasons  
The cries in the abyss  
From the world's body that the wise have

fractured

For God did not make death  
He did not make prisons  
Or stalking canonical ravens  
The dirt in the incision

I will obey my nurse  
I will always take care  
Of my fractured religion

*And God did not make death.*<sup>18</sup>

Merton's love poem serves as a counterpoint to Eliot's ironic *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* whose opening lines marked the beginning of modern poetry:

Let us go then, you and I  
When the evening is spread out against  
the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table.<sup>19</sup>

People sat up and took notice of Eliot's imagery even though they were baffled by his seeming obscurity. It was clearly not the evening that was a sick patient, it was Prufrock. Starving for love, Prufrock is too afraid to reach out for it and likewise to accept it. Merton's love poem "I always obey my nurse" can be read as an analgesic for all the Prufrocks of the world. Or in Jungian terms, he obeys his anima and in order to do so he must disobey his Benedictine rule and his abbot. Keep in mind that Merton for a lifetime obeyed masculine authority represented by his beloved father, Owen Merton, his guardian Tom Bennet, his friend-mentors Robert Lax, Daniel Walsh and Mark Van Doren, his abbots, and of course, the patriarchal Rule of St. Benedict. This pervading male dominance is the crux of

Merton's spiritual and psychological dilemma; for if there is to be a major transformation of consciousness in his life, there must be a new birth and without acceptance of the feminine principle, there is no rebirth; therefore, "I always obey my nurse" is Merton's miniature *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, as well as a declaration of independence. What he is clearly stating is that to anyone quick to judge him with disobedience, either of rule or vows, is wasting his breath. For in order to become an integrated, whole human being, Merton must obey that for which he has for a lifetime paid only intermittently paid attention: the feminine principle.

"I always obey my nurse" employs the word "broken" five times, the word "wound" four times, the word "fractured" four times, the word "pain" three times. The most repeated word in the poem is "obey" used eight times. Today such a word as "obey" or "obedience" is rightly unpopular. It smacks of Uriah Heepish servility, fawning humility and low self-esteem, a word suggesting a disregard, if not contempt, for autonomy.

Ever aware of his monastic formation, Merton suggests that obedience to his nurse is rather a wise choice and acceptance of feminine wisdom: the ego bows down to the anima in order to be raised in a greater life-giving, life-expanding consciousness, one that heals breaks and fractures and wounds, relieves pain and restores the patient to health and wholeness.

To obey implies listening: Merton first learns to listen to his nurse before obeying or rather choosing her. His decision is informed by what he hears but also by what he intuitively his unconscious is de-



manding of him. As a monk of Gethsemani, he had indeed listened to his anima, revealed most noticeably in his dreams of Proverb. You may recall that Merton began a series of letters to his dream figure Proverb of 1958. The fruit of this encounter with his anima is the famous Louisville vision of March 18, 1958.

Another encounter with the feminine archetype had occurred when Merton became entranced by a painting of a young woman offering a crown to a young man, painted by Merton's friend Victor Hammer. I have analyzed this encounter in my book *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul*, so let me just state here that Merton allowed the beauty of Hammer's work and its theme to resonate within him, and the fruit of the encounter is Merton's poem *Hagia Sophia*, a poem extolling the utter importance of the feminine principle in life. Just before he completed his poem, Merton wrote to Victor Hammer (and included his commentary on his poem), "The feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of creative realization of the Father's glory in the world and is in fact the manifestation of his glory...."<sup>20</sup>

Merton and his nurse, both wounded in their unique ways, offer healing to each other. In this relationship, Merton's former "refusal of women" transforms into an acceptance of women, or rather more accurately the exquisite risk of love. Now let us fast-forward to Merton's trip to the East. He is now standing before the Polonnaruwa Buddhas,

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet

sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamike, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything - *without refutation* - without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening. I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the *obvious* clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock and tree. And the sweep of bare rock sloping away on the other side of the hollow, where you can go back and see different aspects of the figures.<sup>21</sup>

With eyes cleansed by love, Merton's beholding is an exquisite act of attention to Beauty, as well as an acceptance of the wisdom that God is the source of all beauty. Gazing upon the Polonnaruwa Buddhas is simultaneously an aesthetic experience as well as a deeply religious one. Notice that this son of a father who painted like Cezanne, renders a rather astute, artistic evaluation of the Buddhas: he comments on their clarity, fluidity of shape, line and design and gazes upon the

Buddhas from different aspects and angles. He is very much himself here the connoisseur of the beautiful. But then there is the sudden loss of ego:

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. . . I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.<sup>22</sup>

To more deeply comprehend what happened to Merton in that egoless moment, let us first look at it as an aesthetic experience. What happens when great art takes your breath away, (and I might add, your ego)? Ken Wilbur writes:

Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter with it into the timeless present: we are with God today, perfect in our manner and mode, open to the riches and the glories of a realm that time forgot, but that great art reminds us of: not by its content, but by what it does in us: suspends the desire to be elsewhere. And maybe for a

second, maybe for a minute, maybe for all eternity—releases us from the coil of ourselves.

That is exactly the state that great art pulls us into, no matter what the actual content of the art itself—bugs, or Buddhas, landscapes or abstractions, it doesn't matter in the least. . . great art is judged by its capacity to take your breath away, take your self away, take time away, all at once.<sup>23</sup>

Keep in mind that the journal entry that records and describes Merton's aesthetic illumination before the Polonnaruwa Buddhas was written after the fact. Writing in his journal, he is looking back upon an overwhelming experience, likely struggling to find the most exact words to describe what is essentially indescribable. I think of Wallace Stevens in his poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." He writes:

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections,  
Or the beauty of innuendos,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.<sup>24</sup>

Merton's experience is beautiful but so is his prose description of it. Now let's look at it from a Jungian perspective. Although I cannot prove it definitively, I believe that Merton's nurse *enabled* Merton to experience this extraordinary event in his life: in a sense it was the fruit of their relationship as was the Louisville Vision and *Hagia Sophia* the fruit of his dream figure Proverb. Or one can simply say that Merton's whole life paved the way for this luminous aesthetic illumination, and if we accept this, then an elimination

of any life event, small or momentous, could jeopardize his last and perhaps greatest illumination, so even from this perspective his love affair with his nurse remains vitally important.

The Cistercian monk who went without shoes before the Buddhas was the broken man healed, restored and made whole by his nurse so that with eyes cleansed by love, he could gaze upon the Buddhas and lose himself in Beauty, illustrating Christ's dictum: in losing yourself you will find yourself.

There are several other ways by which we can understand what Merton experienced before the Polonnaruwa Buddhas.

### ***The Cistercian monk who went without shoes before the Buddhas was the broken man healed, restored and made whole by his nurse...***

Some might be satisfied with describing it as simply a Henry Jamesian moment of beauty, or Virginia Woolfian moment of being, or Simone Weilian moment of exquisite attention during which the ego disappears and the observer and the observed become one. Simone Weil's concept is appealing to me because she says that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer," and I have no doubt that Merton standing before the Buddhas had entered a contemplative moment that was indeed prayer. But to comprehend the depth and profundity of Merton's experience, I think we are wise to turn again to T. S.

Elliot's concept of the "Still Point." Without going into too much definition, I am of the opinion that Merton had pierced through temporality to experience a timeless moment. I do not wish to say any more about this, because of time factors (no pun intended!). Let me just echo T. S. Eliot and say that to reach the still point and to understand its significance is, "an occupation for a saint." I would rather not use the restrictive word "saint" but instead the expression "holy person"; thus, it is potentially an occupation for all of us.

I now want to rewind back to Merton's *Secular Journal*. So let's briefly return to October 15, 1939 when Thomas Merton is twenty-four years old. He's visiting the World's Fair Art Exhibit. Several paintings catch his eye, one of them is Peter Breughel's "The Wedding Dance." If you have seen this painting, you know it is one of wild celebration with people drinking, dancing, flirting, generally having a grand time. Merton's reaction to the subject of the painting, however, is curiously negative: he sees these characters celebrating a wedding as miserable people escaping their mundane lives by drunkenness and lascivious behavior. I fear his response is a case of psychological projection by an earthy young man manifesting an early "contemptus mundi." While looking at Breughel, he shifts his gaze to a small figure of a man at the top of the painting. Merton writes:

The first pyramid of dancers is carried on right into the back of the canvas by trees, people, etc., and suddenly you notice, at the apex of this pyramid, like the Keystone of the whole picture,

one, rigid, solitary, little man in grey with his back to the whole business, simply looking away at nothing, off at the back and top of the picture. He is paying no attention to anything, doing nothing, just standing, ignoring everything of the subject matter, and yet being an essential element in the construction of the whole picture.<sup>25</sup>

What a prophetic piece of writing. The little man in gray who turned away from the wedding dance is Merton, who will soon leave the world by entering a severe, medieval-like monastery. Like the wedding guest, he will seemingly turn his back on the world. And this rejection of the world will last for a time. It is my belief, however, that Merton's dream anima figures helped him to turn back toward the world, toward people with all their flaws and virtues - and when he looked, he did so with eyes of compassion. Thus the inner gaze transforms itself into an outward gaze, one that should take place in the lives of all contemplatives for there is always the danger of the inner journey dead-ending in a trap of narcissism.

Many years later his hospital nurse, who fell in love with him and he with her, invites him into the dance of life. And he says yes to the dance and for a brief time he is a happy member of the wedding party. But he gradually realizes, as he admits in his "Midsummer Journal" to M. that this life is not for him. His way is a solitary one, not to be graced with marriage and family. Such is his destiny, and he accepts it as he once obeyed his nurse.

It is generally agreed that Merton's

epiphany in Sri Lanka was his most numinous experience. I use the word numinous as Rudolph Otto defines it in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto was very much aware of the sublime power of Oriental art, its ability to express the numinous. Quoting Oswald Siren commenting on the Lung-Men Buddha, Otto says,

Anyone who approaches this figure will realize that it has a religious significance without knowing anything about its *motif*... It matters little whether we call it a prophet or a god, because it is a complete work of art permeated by a spiritual will, which communicates itself to the beholder... The religious element of such a figure is immanent; it is a "presence" or an atmosphere rather than a formulated idea... it cannot be described in words, because it lies beyond intellectual definition.<sup>26</sup>

Now, some Christians are puzzled, a few actually disturbed, that Merton's seemingly most numinous epiphany occurred in the East before the great, stone Buddhas and not in the west in a specifically Christian ambience, like a church or a Gothic cathedral or before a painting by one of our great Christian masters. Even the staid, conservative, unemotional T. S. Eliot himself fell to his knees when he first gazed upon Michelangelo's *Pieta*. But for Merton it would be the Buddhas that took his breath away. The Jesuit William Johnston sees no contradiction for a Christian to be overwhelmed by the numinous of the East. He writes:

Can a Christian avail of the treasures and wealth of Buddhism from inside? To this I would answer that quite certainly Christians can experience *some of the values of Buddhism* from within. If the Spirit is at work within Buddhism it would seem legitimate to enter discerningly and find his action. If in Buddhism there is an experience of the Absolute why cannot a Christian experience the Absolute through Buddhist categories? The question usually asked, however, is: 'What about the role of Christ?' Or, as someone facetiously put it, do you leave Christ at the door of the temple with your shoes?

And to this I would answer with Paul that no authentic Christian can be separated from the love of Christ. If he enters the Buddhist temple, he does so as a member of Christ—to grow in the Christ experience and to search for Christ who, he believes, is there in another way.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike J. Alfred Prufrock, Thomas Merton was not afraid to ask the overwhelming questions. For a lifetime he sought answers. When he embarked upon his trip to Asia, he admitted to still being a seeker looking for the door leading to wisdom. In one of his very last journal entries, he meditates on the three kinds of doors to wisdom. He describes the "third" door:

The door without wish. The undesired. The unplanned door.

The door never expected. Not select. Not exclusive. Not for a few. Not for many. Not *for*. Door without aim. Door without end. Does not respond to a key - so do not imagine you have a key. Do not have your hopes on possession of the key.<sup>28</sup>

Later, he completes his meditation, saying,

Christ said, "I am the door." The nailed door. The cross, they nail the door shut with death. The resurrection: "You see, I am not a door." . . . I am the opening, the "shewing," the revelation, the door of light, the Light itself. "I am the Light," and the light is in the world from the beginning.<sup>29</sup>

With the image of the door, I hear another echo from T. S. Eliot. The opening of the *Four Quartets*, in the inaugural lines of "Burnt Norton," Eliot writes:

What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.  
Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus, in your mind.<sup>30</sup>

Yes, and they echo in the mind of Thomas Merton. That Merton was granted a glimpse of the Light on December 2, 1968 is certain. It's not for us to grasp the complete meaning of what happened to this holy man, for to do so is like

grasping water. Though we must not cease to explore meaning, as Eliot would advise, because, for hands immersed in water remind us of immediacy and innocence. And who knows, by a combination of effort and grace we too may be jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things.

## Notes

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28. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p.285.
29. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p.285.
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Robert Waldron's new book is *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention (DLT/Novalis)*.