

CORRECTION

Gosia Poks writes: In his article "Thomas Merton on Adolf Eichmann" in the last issue of the *Merton Journal* (Advent 2007) John Porter identified four Merton pieces that revolve around the figure of Eichmann, while Merton wrote only three: "Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann" (1964), a fragment from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), and "Epitaph for a Public Servant" (1967). The fourth one, "Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces" (1963), concerns not Eichmann but Rudolf Hoess, the first Auschwitz concentration camp commander, who started organizing mass murder in a technical way. Merton must have known how easily people confused the two war criminals and so he made it clear that "Chant" was about Hoess in his letter to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the editor of *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, who was publishing his poem ["This piece is by the way not about Eichmann, but about the commandant of Auschwitz, [Rudolf] Hess." Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth. The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed. Christine Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 268. Lynn R. Szabo, the editor of the newly released collection of Merton's selected poems makes the same mistake. See *In the Dark Before Dawn. New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (ed. Lynn Szabo; New York: New Directions, 2005), p. 242.] The letter to Cid Corman that Porter quotes as, supposedly, identifying the poem as "a sort of Eichmann's own double talk about himself" refers to "A Devout Meditation." [see: Merton, *Courage for Truth*, p. 248. The letter was written on September 5, 1966, not 1965 as Porter claims.] But in a way the confusion of Eichmann with Hoess is quite a legitimate mistake, as both represent two almost identical realizations of the same type of "technological man".

Thomas Merton For All Seasons

Gosia Poks

My adventure with Thomas Merton began, predictably, with *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I chanced upon this book when my faith was strong and unambiguous, when Merton's ascetic radicalism resonated with mine, and his heart-rending longing for Ultimate Reality, presented in intensely poetic images, fueled my own spiritual quest. That was the happy time of religious certainty, the youth of faith, when I believed I possessed absolute truth, and so had Merton. At that time I would often find myself among non-believers who challenged me and asked tough questions. I felt the need to know better what I believed in to be able to "defend" God. So I embarked on a plan of methodically random, but otherwise fascinating and rewarding readings in theology and spirituality. Although Merton was not on the reading list, he would have fitted perfectly, especially his *The Ascent to Truth*, which—when I finally discovered it—was a treat.

When Merton appeared on my horizon again, my faith was less concerned with dogmatic correctness and more with authenticity and lived experience. For years I had been visiting the ecumenical community of Taizé, France, and was profoundly impressed by the brothers' hospitality, genuine monastic spirituality, and that rare atmosphere of listening. It was in this context that I chanced upon Merton's poem "Elias—Variations on a Theme," which deals with the absolute otherness

of God "who does not need to be defended,"¹ not even by his own prophets. The poem, written in a makeshift hermitage on the edge of the Gethsemani woods and included in *The Strange Islands*, a 1957 collection of verse, was Merton's farewell to the unshakeable religious certainties, as well as religious righteousness of his first monastic years. In this hermitage Merton, like the Old Testament Elias, finding himself where "The pathway dies/ And the wilds begin",² realizes that familiar questions and worn-out answers will no longer do. In the demanding silence of his deepening solitude the stern ascetic (Elias as well as Merton) who used to preach doom and destruction to the proud world, now stands condemned as a false prophet. What he preached turns out to have been his own message, not God's, since God, who is merciful, does not *rejoice* in destruction. In the poem we find a realization fundamental to Merton's later work, namely, that the more severe and inflexible a believer, the further from God and closer to idolatry (or a proto-fascistic ideology) he or she tends to be. In powerful images the poem articulates the basic truth that the imperative to listen to the living, unpredictable God means abandoning our own ideas of who God is and what our Christian mission consists in. Merton, like Elias, realizes that it is only now, where "the pathway dies," that his faith journey truly begins. Only now can he start to be free "like the birds or lilies" to "seek first the

Kingdom, without care."³

The poem was an important stage on *my* faith journey. I could obviously identify with Merton-Elias: the self-righteous prophet's sense of failure, his confusion of the apparent with the real, his recognition of being condemned together with others are all essential ingredients of an authentic, soul-searching religious quest to pierce illusions and confront Reality Itself. But on top of it all, it was a great poem: powerful, convincing, and engaging. Merton knew that poetry, through its reliance on aesthetics rather than ethics, has a greater persuasive power than theology or philosophy. As Thornton Wilder once said, "in matters beyond logic, beauty is the only persuasion."⁴ Faith is analogical rather than logical; to talk about God, who is always greater than anything we can imagine or understand, we need metaphors and figures of speech. Rational discourse is insufficient. This is how I was drawn into the least popular, but most rewarding, field of Merton's work: his poetry.

By that time Merton had already been an important point of reference for a number of concerns; his social, political, and ecological consciousness shaping my thinking about my being in the world just as strongly as his religious writings kept remodelling my spiritual environment. The impressive thing about it all was that the most diverse planes of interest actually fused and informed each other in Merton's thought, and that he was able to use his concerns with the natural world, spirituality, and politics as co-ordinates of his identity, in consonance with the existentialist Merleau-Ponty's famous saying: "I am myself and my circumstances," which Merton embraced in the 1960s. Considering how evocatively and with what passion Merton

could write about whatever moved him, reading him is experiencing the truth of the words attributed to the German poet Hölderlin that "poetically dwells Man on the earth."

Yet, existence on the margin of the known and well-organized—"where the wilds begin"—is far from romantic and freedom from fixed certainties means insecurity and risk. Such a life results in a permanent state of ambiguity and contradiction and demands making hard choices that accord with conscience, rather than simply obeying rules. The issue which tormented

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Merton in the last decade of his life was the apparently irresolvable conflict between the Law on the one hand, and the freedom to "seek first the Kingdom, without care" on the other. In the struggle to remain faithful both to his monastic vows of obedience and to the inner voice of his conscience Merton anticipated many of the struggles that his readers now face on an almost daily basis. As he was drawn deeper into a radically personalist and existentialist faith based on obedience to God who is Alto-

gether Other, who comes to us as a stranger, and who speaks through the particular historical and personal circumstances of our lives, he came to believe that loyalty to God—which is synonymous with loyalty to truth—must lead one to a criticism of all forms of organized life, that of the institutional Church included, since institutions always tend to sacrifice the individual to the abstract and the general, and thus do violence to those who exist actually and genuinely, not merely statistically. In 1962 Merton was ready to embrace situation ethics ("which is so spat upon"⁵) as *acceptation* of responsibility rather than an evasion of it. Likewise, he insisted that the Christian call to constant conversion must apply to the entire Church, not only to individuals. On March 9, 1962 Merton was reading Hans Küng's book on *The Council, Reform and Reunion* and felt "so glad these things are at last said."⁶ He lavished praise on Küng for his lucid presentation of "the alliance of the Sadducees and the Pharisees ag[ain]st Christ" within the Church. The next day, still meditating on Küng's book, he wondered, like many of us still do, how to love "the Church as she *is* and not as she might be."⁷ Merton admits it is relatively easy to love the "poor" sinners,

But the great, complacent, obtuse, powerful and self-satisfied sinners who are aware only of their righteousness, who close the doors, do not enter in and help others out, the Grand Inquisitors who build their own structure on top of God's structure and attach more importance to what they themselves have built than to what He builds...Yet they are in their own

way patient and gentle. They too suffer. They too have a kind of humility. But they are *closed*. There are human realities to which they absolutely refuse to be sensitive.⁸

This journal entry demonstrates Merton's growing awareness of life's complexities and of the impossibility of pointing the accusing finger at others only. With time he was even more dissatisfied with the inadequacy of self-righteous reasoning, whether other people's or his own, and would recognize his complicity in everything he criticized and despised. At best he was a "guilty bystander," at worst he would dwell on his "wolf nature," his spitefulness, inner resentment, and the willingness to see evil instead of good.⁹ His growing combativeness disturbed him. Merton's existential understanding of faith got him involved in the political, social, and religious problems of his time: he wrote letters to innumerable correspondents and countless articles and essays on such crucial issues as war and peace, the racial situation in America, monasticism and spirituality, the interreligious dialogue, Latin America. And then complained of exhaustion. Moreover, Merton's monastic superiors had no understanding for his mission of public witness to truth as they believed it to be contrary to the monastic vocation. Frustrated and misunderstood, he felt that "to become a saint [...] may mean the anguish of looking like and in a real sense 'being' a sinner, an outcast. It may mean apparent conflict with certain standards which may be wrongly understood by me or by others or by all of us."¹⁰ I cannot help thinking that if more Christians arrived at a similar conclusion, their lives would perhaps be harsher, but the world would be a much nicer place to

live in.

To Merton the anguish of living this contradiction was at times too much. He saw that many postulants, novices, and monks were leaving and felt that his own spiritual life was a desert, with only an oasis here and there, perhaps even this a mirage. "I live in great darkness and weakness,"¹¹ he wrote in September 1960. Communal liturgical observances, instead of bringing peace and joy, would only frustrate him more and heighten the sense of absurdity. In some respect Christmas and Easter were the worst seasons. (This might be consoling to those who also hate the seasonal pagantry and feel guilty about it). Merton was "deeply impressed by the superficiality and shallowness"¹² of the long ceremonies. In December 1962, in the grip of a usual Christmas depression, he despaired of having any future in the monastery "except death." A long lament follows. Merton feels the Gethsemani ship is sinking and that he is facing "the slow and inexorable sacrifice of [his] will and [his] life"; his acceptance is "forced, without taste, without joy, without light"; he is "caught in a state of allegiance to ideas and policies" which seem to him "utterly absurd."¹³ Only after Vigils some consolation comes: "for a half moment that made sense, I stood outside in the darkness with the snow falling on my cheeks and listened to the deep silence of the woods at midnight." Naturally, it is here that Merton feels closer to the mystery of Incarnation than he did in the church while engaging in fruitless chants and gestures "to the point of nausea". To him this is a telling reminder that God's message was proclaimed to the shepherds in silence and with great simplicity.¹⁴ But silence and simplicity are no longer to be found in the institutional church and

systemic religious observances. In April the following year Merton complained of the Easter service's "pomposity, phoniness, display," and the abbot's "interminable pontifical mummery," all "for the glory of God". Compared with this, "the spring outside was sacred". Unable to find God in the artificiality of the church pomp, Merton found Him at the lake outside in "the purity of the green buds, the wind skimming the surface of the water, the utter silence, and a muskrat slowly swimming to the other side!"¹⁵

Taking all this into consideration, there is little wonder that Merton was developing a serious case of neurosis ("My own neurosis runs like a sore"¹⁶), suffered from acute dermatitis on his hands, and struggled with backbone problems. May 26, 1963, the fourteenth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, and February 22, 1964, the twenty-second anniversary of his reception of the habit, were bleak occasions. In lines suggestive of a case of professional burnout, he writes about "defeat and failure," accuses himself of living a lie, being uncharitable and unjust, lacking the courage "to bear up under the attrition of monastic and priestly life."¹⁷ The twenty-two years in the monastery seem to him years "of relative confusion" and "inexplicable inner suffering," for which, however, he blames largely himself. An important corrective follows: "Yet in the heart of it is a kind of standing aghast at the situation, the ambiguity, in which I find myself. In the depths of my heart I do embrace the Cross of Christ".¹⁸

The specific "ethics of ambiguity" was a practical consequence of this embrace of the Cross, since the Cross is the instrument of destruction (crucifixion) of any conceivable *image* of God. Consequently, no dogmatic formulation, no human concept of

divinity, truth, justice, etc., can ever encapsulate the inexhaustible Being of the living God. Recent history provides ample evidence that the greatest crimes are often committed "in the name of truth" and that the possession of "absolute truths" often serves to justify the refusal of love towards the other. Since a follower of Christ is

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called to love even the enemy, it is hardly surprising that Merton believed compassion to be more important than justice and saw pity as "more central than truth."¹⁹ In 1961, justifying his camera-shyness to himself, in a telling journal passage Merton compared a photograph—which often captures transient pose and falsity—to the idea of the Last Judgement "so many mad Christians have". True Judgement was to him "a patient, organic, longsuffering understanding of the man's whole life, of *everything* in it, all in context."²⁰ One finds it hard not to wish that the "mad Christians," who are perhaps only more confused and more wounded Christians, would get the message.

It is beyond discussion that Merton's anguish—that "perpetual climate of the

lucid man"²¹—bore rich fruit. But the price he paid (and the currency was, literally, his life) seems exorbitant. Of course, there were frequent moments of quiet happiness, harmony, even ecstatic joy, but they were fragile and ever threatened by new absurdities. When I read Merton's journals from the early 1960s, which record his struggle with life's absurdities and with his own ambiguities, what I find there is a sort of consolation. So, after all, such anguish is perfectly *normal*!

"Living with risk, living with ambivalence and contingency is forced upon us with the relative decline of institutions and organizations in this age of reflective judgement."²² This is how Scott Lash characterizes the modern risk society, in which all the givens have evaporated and the organized life's "island of necessity" is constantly being undermined by "the sea of freedom" while individuals "innovate rules in a bricolage of their own identities."²³ To Lash this necessitates a constant process of deconstruction and retrieval: "Modernity's fate is eternally to retrieve and eternally to deconstruct the ground."²⁴ Reading recent cultural theory side by side with *Turning toward the World* and *Dancing in the Water of Life* is an eye-opening experience, as it makes us realize what is really at stake in this modern deconstruction-retrieval process: the confusion, the anguish, the pain. It is devastating to read those journals and see Merton drowning in, what he himself calls, "our shifting, fluid ground, in which there is no foothold."²⁵ I suppose the full impact of those journals registers late, when our resonance with Merton's anguish is most complete.

Fortunately, Merton does not leave us there. Realizing that monastic peace is, in a very real sense, synonymous with monastic

dread,²⁶ he continues with a "life of clashes and discoveries, not of repetitions,"²⁷ abandoning himself and his inner contradictions to God. On January 31, 1964, Merton begins his jubilee year in a more hopeful mood. Although he is "not exactly clear what [he is] doing," the hopeful thing is that "everything is always beginning again."²⁸ As he is settling down to the life of a regular hermit and beginning to live "with the tempo of the sun and of the day,"²⁹ a harmony with the surrounding world is being gradually restored and his spiritual life starts to revive. This is the time of the long awaited *Kairos*. At the end of the calendar year Merton reclaims his signature language of love and wonder, writing:

In the cold of Advent I recapture the lostness and wonder of the first days when I came here twenty-three years ago, abandoned to God, with everything left behind. I have not felt this for a long time. The monastery is too warm, too busy, too sociable for that! But breaking off and living (to a great extent) in the woods brings me back face to face with the loneliness and the poverty of the cold hills and the Kentucky winter—incomparable, and the reality of my own life!³⁰

He feels he is just beginning to awaken, realizes that the hermitage is his "place," his "nest," and even enthuses: "No matter what mistakes and illusions have marked my life, most of it I think has been happiness and, as far as I can tell, truth." And a few lines later he adds that the best, as well as some of the most terrible, times of his life "have been in and around Gethsemani."³¹ Most

of the neurotic symptoms are gone by then, as are the annual Christmas depressions. Merton seems to have made it to the other end of a long tunnel into the light of day. He was right about *Kairos*: if he was not ready for it before he had reached fifty, he would never be. On January 31, 1965, the day his jubilee year is over, Merton is happy not to seek anything beyond this "living together with wisdom" and opens his journal entry for that day with these words from the Book of Wisdom: "for nothing is bitter in her company, when life is shared with her there is no pain, nothing but pleasure and joy."³² This is possibly one of the greatest gifts Merton can offer those who feel they have reached a dead end in their personal, spiritual, or professional life. The journey never ends, there are only new beginnings, new awakenings; deserts constantly spring back to life.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, "Elias—Variations on a Theme," in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p.243. Subsequently referenced as CP.
2. CP, p.240.
3. CP, p.245.
4. I am unable to trace the source of this quote.
5. Thomas Merton, *Turning Towards the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton. Volume Four 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer, San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1996, p. 207. Subsequently referenced as TTW.
6. TTW, p.209.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. TTW, p.126.
10. TTW, p.198.

11. TTW, p.50.
12. TTW, p.279.
13. TTW, pp.278-79.
14. TTW, p.279.
15. TTW, p.313.
16. TTW, p.321.
17. TTW, pp.323-24.
18. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton. Volume Five 1963-1965*, ed. Robert Daggy, San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1997, p.79. Subsequently referenced as DWL.
19. TTW, p.202.
20. TTW, p.180.
21. Albert Camus, qtd. in "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd," Thomas Merton, *Literary Essays*, p.275.
22. Scott Lash, *Another Modernity*:

- A Different Rationality*, Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p.3. Subsequently referenced as Lash.
23. Lash, p.3.
24. Lash, p.6.
25. DWL, p.32.
26. DWL, pp.56-57.
27. DWL, p.69.
28. DWL, p.68.
29. DWL, p.146.
30. DWL, p.172.
31. DWL, p.199.
32. DWL, p.200.

Gosia Poks' new book, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, will be reviewed in the next issue of the Merton Journal.

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