

Merton's Fascination with Deer: A Graceful Symphony

Monica Weis

"[T]t is a bitter journey without God's grace to walk peacefully about in the world, loving created things...because they are imperfect yet make captives... When you love them for themselves then you get only bitterness."
(18 May 1939)¹

"Let me seek, then, the gift of silence and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all."
(*Thoughts in Solitude*, 1958)²

Can this possibly be the writing of the same man, Thomas Merton? If so, what has happened to change his opinion from such a dualistic view of matter as bad, spirit as good to such an incarnational view – an attitude that sees all nature as holy, infused with the spiritual energy Christians call God?

Some answers to these questions can be found in Merton's *Journals*, those seven volumes of reflective writing that contain more than 1470 references to nature. If we examine Merton's encounter with one species – the deer in the monastery woods surrounding Merton's hermitage, we can witness Merton's adjustment to deeper solitude and the power of place in his spiritual development, as well as explore, in miniature, important themes of the larger symphony of his life.

I deliberately use this symphony metaphor, because I want to frame my argument within the structure of the first movement of a classical symphony, that

is, three musical sections often accompanied by a coda or final statement. Permit me to offer a mini-lesson on classical music.

From Haydn and Mozart to the present, the first movement of most sonatas, concertos, and symphonies is constructed in what has come to be known as sonata form. In that first movement, the composer's ideas are presented in three sections: the **exposition**, the **development**, and the **recapitulation**. In the **exposition**, musical ideas are introduced, often with a number of themes, both dramatic and lyric. In the **development**, or central section, the composer expands on these musical ideas, using ingenuity and the thematic material at his disposal to build dramatic tension, increase the musical temperature, and suggest competing forces. The **recapitulation** section then restates all the previous themes with modifications or variations; and, often the movement concludes with a short fourth

section, the **coda** or final statement of the theme.³

By applying this symphony metaphor to Merton's experience with the deer in his woods – and, by extension, to his whole life – one can understand more clearly the power of these creatures on Merton's thinking and spiritual resolve. His initial *fascination* with the deer, moving from mere scientific observation to *spiritual insight and intimacy*, comprises the **exposition**. A long journal passage celebrating *communion*, even ecstasy, in nature, is the **development** section. Then a passage revealing Merton's *compassion and responsibility* for the deer represents the **recapitulation** or restatement of themes, followed by two easily discernible variations or modifications. This is quickly followed by a short *recommitment* to the woods that functions as the **coda** or final statement of Merton's vocation to life in the hermitage.

Occurring as they do during the last five years of his life, Merton's encounters with deer, mentioned in twenty-three journal passages, elicit from him a gamut of reactions – from dismissing their existence in 1963 (when one of the brothers “insists” he has seen “a deer again” in the woods) to using deer as a symbol of his love for “M,” to a tongue-in-cheek comment that his somewhat crazy farmer-neighbor, Andy Boone, believes the deer are raping his cows.⁴ However, this examination of sequential deer passages is restricted to Merton's journal entries from January 1965 through June 1966 in order to see more precisely how his interaction with deer is a reflection of the larger symphony of his life.

Exposition: Fascination/Intimacy

The exposition of a first movement of a symphony, in proper classical style, includes both *dramatic* and *lyrical* themes. The movement can have connecting passages, repetition and overlapping melodies before coming to closure. If we look at the exposition of Merton's fascination with the deer, as detailed in his journal entries 1965-66, we note two major themes: the dramatic outward glance at nature, and the more lyrical inward glance, leading to spiritual insight, intimacy, and heightened sense of personal identity.

Theme #1: After an emotionally charged feast of Epiphany, January 1965, Merton “suddenly” realizes toward twilight that there are deer in the tall grass, looking at him (8 January 1965).⁵ Merton is immediately captivated by the drama of the moment – these five graceful creatures studying him. Apparently the attraction is mutual, for the “lovely moment” of looking, says Merton, “stretched into 10 minutes perhaps!” This encounter is not the startling opening melody of a Beethoven Fifth Symphony, but a more subtle drama, the Elijah “breeze” moment when the awesome presence of the Holy is felt not in the mighty action of wind or storm, but in the gentle, almost imperceptible realization that the Holy is already present.

Theme #2: Nine months later, when Merton is living in the hermitage full time and settling into a routine, a second theme emerges (6 September 1965).⁶ Again, Merton's fascination with the deer begins with an intellectual approach. He studies the two stags through his field

glasses. But his scientific observation quickly moves to lyrical inward reverie. Captivated by their “beautiful running, grazing,” Merton is also *seeing into* the deer: he is experiencing an epiphany of universal “deeriness,” captured by cave painters so long ago. Moving beyond his initial outward gaze, Merton's inward reflection – “contemplative intuition” he calls it – recognizes his connection with those ancient ones, keenly sensitive to the “Mantu or spirit” of the deer. Merton experiences what the Scottish theologian Dun Scotus called the *haecceitas*—*thisness* of a creature, and what Gerard Manley Hopkins (one of Merton's favorite poets) called “inscape.” This September encounter with the deer is a powerful and deep moment for Merton; he is not only appreciating the graceful woodland creatures in the external world, but reflecting on their universal spiritual significance. He is moving from a solely outward glance at the exterior landscape to an inward glance at the spiritual meaning of creation and the geography of his own heart. He recognizes his link with his human ancestors, as well as the Divine Spark he and the deer share with Being itself. That poignant encounter of mutual looking, Merton concludes, reveals “something essential” in himself. No wonder he “long[s] to touch them.”

This extraordinary moment of fellowship is not as unique as it may seem. Native peoples often speak of human and animal worlds as “parallel cultures” on two sides of a chasm, occasionally crossed by the shaman to make inquiries.⁷ Contemporary nature writer Gretel Ehrlich explains this impact of nature on us. When I discover a certain interdependence with animals, she writes, I encounter

“intimacy with what is animal in me.” The animal and I are “comrades who save each other's lives.” We form an odd partnership, “stripped-down compassion, one that is made of frankness and respect and rigorously excludes sentimentality.”⁸

Such unspoken intimacy underpins Merton's journal comments four days later (10 September 1965). Merton begins this entry by citing the deer's apparent acceptance of him as part of the environment, noting the movement of the doe toward him as he is pacing in front of the hermitage saying Compline.⁹ This new tameness is cause for both elation and alarm as Merton remembers the oncoming hunting season. Again, Ehrlich's words offer insight into the meaning of this intimacy and its impact on our deepest identity.

An animal's wordlessness takes on the cleansing qualities of space: . . . what is obvious to an animal is. . . what's bedrock and current in us: aggression, fear, insecurity, happiness, or equanimity. Because they have the ability to read our involuntary tics and scents, we're transparent to them and thus exposed – we're finally ourselves.¹⁰

Merton would agree with Ehrlich, for he continues in that entry to comment on the peace and solitude of his hermit existence, in contrast to what he calls the “artificiality of the community life” in the monastery. The passage concludes with a list of the harmonious components of his evenings: “quiet supper reading, walking, looking at the hills, the silence, the moon, the does, darkness, prayer, bed.”

This second, lyrical theme of intimacy

and deepened identity continues to play out in the following day's journal entry. "In a sense," Merton comments, "a very true and solitary sense, coming to the hermitage has been a 'return to the world' not a return to the cities, but a return to direct and humble contact with God's world, His creation, and the world of poor men who work . . . My space is the world created and redeemed by God and God is in this true world" (11 September 1965).¹¹ This sense of right relationship echoes the ecological balance Merton celebrated four months earlier in *Day of a Stranger*, that charming prose poem describing a typical day at the hermitage. It is not surprising that Merton spends the feast of St. Francis Assisi on holiday in the hollow, field, and woods "where the deer sleep" and that he comments in the midst of this intimacy with nature, that he is "only just beginning to know what life really is" (5 October 1965).¹²

Let's leave the woods temporarily to examine the larger symphony of Merton's life, where fascination and intimacy with nature are also recurring themes. Merton was introduced to the nature poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins at Oakham when he was recovering from blood poisoning; at Columbia, he was fascinated by the avant-garde poet-engraver William Blake whose aphorism, "Everything that is, is holy," guided Merton toward his master's thesis on Blake's concept of beauty; and he spent several summers in western New York State at Bob Lax's family cottage, writing and enjoying the sunsets over the green hills.

But Merton's fascination with nature has even deeper roots. His father, Owen, a landscape painter, awakened in little Tom an attention to detail and color; his

mother, Ruth, a writer, recorded many of his early experiences. In *Tom's Book To Granny*, a chronicle Ruth was keeping for the New Zealand relatives, she records how at three months of age Tom "watched and talked to a flower," that at eight months, he "stood up in his pram, especially to see the river when we went on the bridge," and that before they left Prades, France, ten-month old Tom "had already begun to wave his arms toward the landscape, crying 'Oh color!'" The vocabulary two-year old Tom had acquired included the typical terms for clothes, food, and furniture, but also a curious and wide array of bird species he apparently recognized and could name: kingfisher, chickadee, woodpecker, wren, and oriole.¹³

Merton's early habit of being attentive to his surroundings was useful to him throughout his life: as a cartoonist at Columbia, a writer of letters, essays, poems, and books, and as a contemplative monk, especially in his later years when he became deeply interested in Zen with its emphasis on awareness. One might say that Merton's nature awareness was training for prayer awareness¹⁴ for soon after his entrance into Gethsemani, Merton writes that all feelings and obligations inside and outside had been brought into harmony (18 December 1941).¹⁵ By January of 1947, Merton acknowledges the providence of God for bringing him to this place where he can pray "walking up and down under the trees."¹⁶ On 2 July 1948, Merton notes that "landscape seems to be important for contemplation. . . . Anyway I have no scruples about loving it."¹⁷

And we cannot overlook the pivotal date of 27 June 1949 when, after being at

Gethsemani for eight years, Merton is allowed to go beyond the confines of the cloister to roam the hills of the abbey property.¹⁸ The increasing frequency of nature references in his journals with their connection to prayer indicates how intensely being in the woods nourishes Merton's vocation, and how unswervingly and urgently the God of Creation draws him toward the hermitage.

***Merton dialogues with
his surroundings,
celebrates his harmony
with the sun, articulates
how he and the warblers
share the same nature -
namely, love, and how
being in unity with the
woods, reaffirms his
vocation to solitude***

For example, in the major portion of Volume II of the *Journals* – much of which was published as *The Sign of Jonas* – there are 180 separate entries celebrating nature. However, in Volume V which details Merton's gradual move to the hermitage full time, there are 225 separate nature entries – not counting four full pages that constitute the core of *Day of a Stranger*. Merton dialogues with his surroundings, celebrates his harmony with the sun, articulates how he and the warblers share the same nature – namely, love, and how being in unity with the woods, reaffirms his vocation to solitude. "There is no question for me," writes

Merton, "that my one job as monk is to live the hermit life in simple direct contact with nature, primitively, quietly, doing some writing, maintaining such contacts as are willed by God, and bearing witness to the value and goodness of simple things and ways, and loving God in it all" (15 April 1965).¹⁹

Such a transition from appreciating the outer landscape to reflecting on one's inner landscape in prayer is grounded in Merton's immersion in Benedictine spirituality that balances work and prayer, and reverences the rhythm of the soil. It is also supported by daily recitation of psalms, praising a God who feeds us with the finest wheat (Ps 81), leads us to green pastures (Ps 23), gives the sparrow a home and the swallow a nest in which to place her young (Ps 84).

Development: Communion and compassion

Exposition of one or more themes in a symphonic work holds its own charms, but the serious concert-goer is interested in the development of these themes. Where do they go from here? What are their musical possibilities?

Likewise, a student of Merton's life is interested in the development of his experience with nature. What does it do for prayer? How can it be integrated into a life of silence and contemplation? Similar to its musical counterpart, the next several deer passages reveal Merton's experience of communion, even ecstasy, in the presence of nature. Tempo increases; dramatic tension amplifies, competing forces build contrast, and Merton is at his literary best.

During October and November of 1965, Merton had been reading Heideg-



A deer in the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani (Photograph: Harry Hinkle)

ger and Isaac of Stella, as well as reflecting on his own writing in which he sees a “superficial existentialism” and “arrogant tone.”²⁰ On 5 November he comments that he is writing too much, not knowing where or how to say “No.” His next paragraph, however, like the comet he has been seeking in the night sky for several evenings, streaks off in a blaze of exultation.²¹ His initial scientific exuberance quickly moves to poetic images, and finally prayer.

Introduced by the word “Riches,” Merton begins with quasi-field notes of the experience – the “mist,” brightness of the comet, the reflection of its tail. He then quickly moves to metaphor, praising the beauty and emotional impact of “this great spear in the sky” and illustrating, with poetic dexterity, the context of this cosmic phenomenon. Acorns drop around him, the monastery bell signals the most

sacred moment of Roman Catholic Mass, meteorites flash across the sky, military planes invade the space, and the stag cries out beyond his hedge. “Riches” – and Merton is moved to recite Psalm 18 “with joy.” This is a powerful passage in which we see how the outer world becomes a landscape of the sacred, flowering into a prayer of praise. Psalm 18 celebrates how the “heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork,” how the voice of all creation is heard, and how right relationship with each other and with God is essential.

What a curious flight of linguistic exuberance – both in Merton’s writing and in the psalm he is moved to recite. In one short paragraph, Merton moves from scientific observation to picturesque composition of scene. Juxtaposed to this skyward movement originating in deep space

is the intrusion of growling man-made machinery – the SAC plane, symbol for Merton of all that is wrong with the American military-industrial complex, and against which Merton often rails. Here the “stag,” is not central to the passage, but integrated into the scene. Is the cry of the stag a mere coincidence of timing? A mere poetic addition? Or is Merton using this detail as a subtle commentary on the disharmony brought about by military build-up, the nuclear arms race, and war itself – issues in his prolific writing. In any case, the intensity of the moment, captured by the repeated one word sentence, “Riches”, catapults Merton into a psalm of exultation in which six of the fourteen verses are reminders of the importance of being “blameless and innocent of great transgression”.

Caught up in the awe of this cosmic phenomenon, Merton is something of a psalmist himself, using several effective rhetorical strategies: 1) poetic contrast between nature in its most mysterious manifestation and its interruption by human implements of destruction; 2) the numerical sequence of three meteorites, two planes, and one deer; 3) and the strategic *epanalepsis* – “Riches” – to book-end the passage. From captivation to scientific study to personal insight and intimacy, Merton has moved to this new level of communion which will prepare him for a yet deeper encounter with Mystery itself – one that evokes compassion.

Mid-morning a week later (13 November 1965), Merton spots a wounded deer limping in the field.²² Now so totally caught up with the sacredness of all creatures, Merton experiences an impulse of compassion; he finds himself “weeping bitterly” at the sight, then astounded as

the deer, after giving him a long look, “bounds off without any sign of trouble.” Once again parallel cultures have reached across the chasm for some kind of deep inexplicable communication. Merton never says whether his initial impression was mistaken, nor suggests that a miracle has occurred. He merely sketches the scene in bare detail, yet surrounded with mystery – because it is indeed the provenance of Mystery.

What is one to do after experiencing Mystery in solitude? “Good news” must be proclaimed; insights gained in contemplation must be shared; turning from the world for silence and solitude requires a return to the world with compassion

What is one to do after experiencing Mystery in solitude? “Good news” must be proclaimed; insights gained in contemplation must be shared; turning from the world for silence and solitude requires a return to the world with compassion. Once we have felt “the life of the other,” writes ecofeminist Judith Plant, we arrive at a “new starting point for human decision making.”²³ Subsequent passages about the deer reveal that Merton himself is at a new, that is, a deeper starting point – one in a series of starting points he had begun in 1959 with his “turning toward the world”.

Less than a month later (11 December, 1965), Merton begins his journal entry by commenting on the close of Vatican II and celebrating the Council's strong statement against total war, and noting that his "own attitude to 'the world' will have to be modified."²⁴ Citing news in a letter from Dorothy Day, and less reliable news from his farmer-neighbor Andy Boone, Merton lists five points of environmental destruction, most of which can be traced to human interference. Point two records two deer found dead nearby – possibly poisoned by chemicals. Here is no poetic flight of fancy, but hard-nosed data that are beginning to trouble Merton – and he feels compelled to list them in his journal.

One might consider this reference to dead deer perfunctory or anti-climactic after what we have read so far; however, deeper reflection indicates the degree to which Merton's vision has broadened. Deer are no longer the "other" to be viewed through field glasses, but fellow inhabitants of the woods worthy of compassion and protection. Having been enticed to "study" the deer, Merton has allowed them to influence his inner life, often experiencing communion with them in their mutual solitude. Now, compassion for their well-being prompts Merton toward at least some minimal level of responsibility for them.

Leaving the woods for a moment, we can discover a similar development of themes – communion and compassion – in the larger scope of Merton's life. Not long after his solemn vows and the completion of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton experienced a moment of spiritual ecstasy that he relates with uncharacteristic emotion:

Love carries me around. Love sails me around the house. Love, love, love lifts me around the cloister. I walk two steps on the ground and four steps in the air. It is love. It is consolation. . . I don't want to *do* anything but love. . . That was the way it was up in the apple trees yesterday morning with all that blue sky. The bulls in their pens were rumbling like old men. . . that was the way it was after Communion. . . and that was the way it was going into the refectory. . . and that is the way it is writing this, too. I feel all clean inside because I am full of You, O God, and You are love, love Love! (26 September 1948).²⁵

Two years later on New Year's Day, Merton describes his walk in the rainy woods, and "climbing the steepest of the knobs...When I reached the top", he writes:

I found there was something terrible about the landscape. But it was marvelous. . . I said 'Now you are indeed alone. Be prepared to fight the devil.' But it was not the time of combat. I started down the hill again feeling that perhaps after all I had climbed it uselessly. Half way down, . . . I found a bower God had prepared for me like Jonas' ivy. It had been designed especially for this moment. There was a tree stump, in an even place. It was dry and a small cedar arched over it, like a green tent, forming an alcove. There I sat in silence and loved the wind in the

forest and listened for a good while to God. . . The peace of the woods steals over me when I am at prayer" (4 January 1950).²⁶

It is clear that, for Merton, what is external has significantly affected and effected the internal, bringing about an experience of communion. Indeed, *habitat* – the landscape – has become interlaced with *habitus* – Merton's way of living.

One sees Merton's awareness of the dynamic tension of life clearly in the posthumously published *Day of a Stranger*, written in May 1965.²⁷ Merton celebrates the seduction of his wooded hermitage and pictures himself as a dawdling lover, disposed "to marry the silence of the forest," to take as his "wife" the "sweet dark warmth of the whole world." Yet out of compassion for this world, he also critiques our technological excesses. For instance, the 2.15 a.m. light on his ikon, illuminating a room in which the "psalms grow up silently like plants" contrasts with the SAC plane overhead, that "metal bird with a scientific egg in its breast!" Merton's sense of nature is clearly not the delight of a tourist, alien to or trapped by geography, but the intimate sense of place beyond geography where "one central tonic note. . . is unheard and unuttered."

Where does one go from here? In the symphony, the recapitulation section allows a restatement of all the previous musical ideas with some modification or change of key. And so we move back to the deer passages, their recapitulation and final statement.

Recapitulation and Coda: Responsibility
In January and February of 1966, Merton

notes the morning tracks of a small deer and two deer that bounded away in "long slow curving leaps."²⁸ In March, after the worst of winter has passed, Merton and the deer are again studying each other.²⁹ These passages begin the recapitulation section of our "deer symphony," a reprise of all the motifs of the previous autumn: field glasses, five deer, a snapshot description of their movement, and again the fascination. But this time, the initial fascination which has taken root in Merton's spiritual life, enables him in May/June to write about the deer with two different modifications: the first, a poetic image celebrating communion; the second, a vignette of an actual experience with deer that functions as a parable of responsibility.

Modification #I—the poetic image: Inserted into his journal entry for 7 May 1966 is a love poem for "M," the nurse Merton had fallen in love with after back surgery in March.³⁰ This poem recalls their interaction on Derby Day, finding quiet time together against the backdrop of the "rich in small jets" landing for the ceremonies at Churchill Downs. The poem's persona speaks of their own ritual – the "tender liturgy" of permitting God to recreate an Eden for the two lovers; when the scene is ready, "love walks gently as a deer/to where we sit on the green grass." Here is no actual deer in the woods for Merton to gaze on but the universal deer – the Mantu of generations past, together with allusions to Genesis and the Song of Songs, in all its intense, yet gentle, mystery – an apt image of his relationship with "M."

If we are open to mystery, argues Harvard scientist Edward O. Wilson, crea-

tures are no longer mere objects, but subjects who reveal their sacred space to us.³¹ To say this in poetic terms, openness to mystery means paying attention to metaphor as a way to express the ineffable. Merton is surely engaged in expressing the ineffable – not, this time, an experience of *agape*, that mysterious love of God for humans, but *eros*, that equally mysterious and valued love between human beings. It is not surprising that deer, so wild, untameable, and exotic to our human way of thinking should be so clearly linked with the wild, untameable, and exotic love Merton feels for “M.”

Modification #2—a real experience: In June of 1966 Merton acts on behalf of his beloved woodland creatures. He shoots be-bes at some dogs that have been hectoring the doe in his woods.³² Merton sees his doe, notes the distress on her face, and immediately fires upon the offending dogs – not to kill them, but to “sting them good” and deter their aggressive behavior. This act of protection of wild life has value on the literal level – saving the deer – but it also carries symbolic meaning because of its strategic location in Volume 6 of Merton’s *Journals*, namely embedded in the “Mid-summer Diary for M.”

Merton has been philosophizing that he can have “M’s” love in a “deep and lasting, very fruitful form as long as it is part of [his] solitude.” Despite the challenge from “M,” solitude, says Merton, is an issue that “cannot be forced.” Suddenly the text switches to this vignette of the distressed doe and the annoying dogs. Is this merely a tangential story – a variation on a theme – inserted in this “Diary for M” to relieve the heavy tension of

what to do about their relationship? Is it a parable meant to suggest that their love – gentle as a deer – must be protected from badgering outsiders or probing questions? Is it intended to mean that their love must remain wild and free and that they – Merton and “M” – must be satisfied not with erotic consummation of their love, but with the mysterious union of each

*openness to mystery
means paying attention
to metaphor as a way to
express the ineffable.
Merton is surely engaged
in expressing the
ineffable - not, this
time, an experience of
agape, that mysterious
love of God for humans,
but eros, that equally
mysterious and valued
love between human
beings*

other’s authentic identity? Or is this perhaps a prophetic and didactic vignette indicating that Merton is at yet another starting point for human decision-making? Perhaps this latter interpretation is more accurate, for by the end of the “Mid-summer Diary,” Merton resolves his struggle by acknowledging that “[l]ove and solitude must test each other in the man who means to live alone. . .”

Merton’s “Midsummer Diary for M”

moves quickly to a coda or closing statement in which he refers to himself as a wild being of the woods: “You are in love with a fox, or a deer or a squirrel. Freedom, darling. That is what the woods mean to me. I am free, free, a wild being, and that is all that I ever can really be. . . . Darling, I am telling you: this life in the woods is IT. It is the only way. . . . All I say is that it is the life that has chosen itself for me.”³³ Merton’s decision to “marry the silence of the forest,” as he wrote a year earlier in *Day of a Stranger*, is apparently irrevocable. Like Thoreau, Merton is committed to the “tonic of wildness.”³⁴

Recapitulation of these themes occurs, as well, in the larger symphony of Merton’s life. He is constantly rethinking and rewriting essays, often publishing them under a new name. Perhaps the most notable revision of his thinking occurs in the 1962 text, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, a significantly modified version of the originally popular *Seeds of Contemplation*, 1949.³⁵ As Donald Grayston has cogently demonstrated, Merton’s experience during this twelve-year period – a time of being more deeply influenced by the alluring and gratifying aspects of nature – enabled him to “remint” the concept of contemplation.³⁶ Whereas *Seeds* reveals a traditional and orthodox approach to individual Catholic piety, *New Seeds* is balanced by a deeper understanding of the Christian mystics, as well as a healthy dose of Zen and holistic thinking; reason is balanced by intuition, analysis by synthesis. The “seeds” that God sows in our souls help us discover in contemplation our essential unity with one another. Indeed, the individual and God are “[n]ot two loves, one waiting for the

other, striving for the other, seeking for the other, but Love Loving in Freedom.”³⁷ Resorting to nature metaphors to explain our connectedness and God’s desire to play in the garden of His creation, Merton writes in *New Seeds*: “When we are alone on a starlit night, when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; . . . hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash. . . – at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, . . . provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.”³⁸ Because the incarnate Christ is the means of our unity, then everything – humans and all creation – is caught up in the ecstasy of the “general dance.”³⁹

There are additional modifications to Merton’s fascination with nature, particularly in the last three years of his life when environmental integrity becomes a recurring concern. Just as Merton’s “turning toward the world” elicited strong and prophetic comments on war, non-violence, the dangers of technology, racism, and nuclear proliferation, so too, his compassion for the world was beginning to include ecological questions we are just now acknowledging in the public arena.

In 1963 Merton wrote to Rachel Carson, complimenting her on her controversial book, *Silent Spring*, and praising her for situating the problem of pesticides within the wider issue of “our awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values . . . and dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself.”⁴⁰ In 1966, Merton published a review of two biblical texts by Protestant theologians in which he suggests that monks seem “to be destined by God, in our time, to be not only

dwellers in the wilderness but also its protectors" and that perhaps hermits have a "natural opportunity" to act as forest rangers or fire guards in "our vast forests of North America."⁴¹

Merton's public stance on ecology gained an even broader audience, just six months before he died, and forms what we might consider the Coda or his final statement on nature. In Merton's review of Roderick Nash's first edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967),⁴² he summarizes the history of American attitudes toward the wilderness over three and a half centuries, then challenges the reader to recognize our own twisted dualistic thinking that regards nature as commodity to be used at whim. Connecting preservation of the land with preservation of American freedom, Merton asks if we are capable of developing what Aldo Leopold called an "ecological conscience," that is acting on the principle that "[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."⁴³

Final Thoughts

If one examines these thirteen deer passages comprising one cycle of seasons, Merton has come a long way from mere fascination with these graceful woodland creatures. The deer evoke in Merton spiritual insight and move him to action. Indeed, the deer become a kind of ikon of the immanence of God and the movement of grace. Like the deer in the woods, grace can come suddenly as a flash of spiritual insight or gradually as a deeply felt realization. Though the deer are always in the woods – and grace is always available to

the soul – silence and solitude are prerequisites for the gift of deeper intimacy. One might also suggest that Merton's encounters with the deer, occurring as they do in the hermitage years, prepare him for the "great coda" of his life – the penultimate experience of oneness and compassion bursting from the rocks at Polonnaruwa and, a few days later, his ultimate union with the Divine.

Looking at the larger symphony of Merton's life, it is equally clear that na-

**Merton has learned in
the depths of his
contemplative
experience what
Rosemary Radford
Ruether argues almost
twenty-five years later,
namely that "the whole
ecological community ...
supports and makes
possible our very
existence."**

ture is no longer merely something fascinating "out there" that Merton can choose to ignore or regard on only a speculative level. Rather, Merton has learned in the depths of his contemplative experience what Rosemary Radford Ruether argues almost twenty-five years later, namely that "the whole ecological community. . . supports and makes possible our very existence."⁴⁴ If Merton is to be "seized" by Jesus, if the incarnation is

to be an ongoing grace and not just a past event, then the Divine must be accessible in the "raw, brute physicality" of this world. And if Christ is present in everything, we are all linked as earthy, interdependent members of his Body, responsible to and for one another.

Here, the symphony metaphor breaks down. There is no progression to a final cadence such as a public outcry from Merton to inspire us to greater efforts on behalf of nature. In fact, his untimely death has left us with another "unfinished symphony". Just as the student Süssmayr was left to finish Mozart's *Requiem*, we, the students of Merton, are left to finish the work of the master. We can do this by learning to look, really look at the geography around us, reflecting on its meaning and how it contributes to our identity. We can do this by examining the landscape of our own hearts, identifying and encouraging impulses of compassion for those humans and non-humans who need our care and protection. And we can finish the work of the master by discovering through moments of contemplation what actions will contribute our own note of harmony to the environmental symphony of the world.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. I 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O (HarperSanFrancisco, 1955), p. 7.
2. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), pp. 104-105.
3. William Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 696-697.

4. These three examples can be found in Merton's journals: *Turning Toward the World, Vol. IV 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (HarperSanFrancisco, 1966), p. 311; *Learning to Love, Vol. VI 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp.52-53; *The Other Side of the Mountain, Vol. VII 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart O.C.S.O. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p.165. Subsequently referenced as TTW, LL, and OSM.
5. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life Vol. V, 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 189. Subsequently referenced as DWL.
6. Ibid. p. 291.
7. Barry Lopez, *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors*, ed Edward Lueders (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), p. 17.
8. Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), pp. 64-66.
9. DWL, p. 292.
10. Gretel Ehrlich, *op cit.*, p.64.
11. DWL, p. 293.
12. DWL, p. 301.
13. Ruth Jenkins Merton, *Tom's Book to Granny* (Louisville: The Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine University, 1916, manuscript) pp. 1,3,7.
14. Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.83.
15. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence, Vol.II 1941-1942*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 4. Subsequently referenced ES.
16. ES, p. 36.
17. ES, p. 216.
18. ES, See Jonathan Montaldo's

- footnote, p. 328.
19. DWL, p. 229.
20. DWL, p. 312.
21. DWL, pp. 312-313.
22. DWL, pp. 315-316.
23. Judith Plant (ed.) "Toward a New World: An Introduction," *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989), p. 1.
24. DWL, p. 323.
25. ES, p. 234.
26. ES, pp. 393-394.
27. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, ed. Robert G. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc, 1981). See especially pages 35, 43, 31, 61.
28. LL, pp. 9, 18.
29. LL, p. 25.
30. LL, pp. 52-53.
31. Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).
32. LL, p. 331.
33. LL, p. 342.
34. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 265.
35. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949); *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk CT: New Directions, 1962). Subsequently referenced as NS.
36. Donald Grayston (ed.) *Thomas Merton's Rewritings: The Five Versions of Seeds/New Seeds of Contemplation as a Key to the Development of His Thought* (Lewiston NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989). See also William H. Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), pp. 156-159.
37. NS, p. 282.
38. NS, p. 296-297.
39. NS, p. 297.
40. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), pp. 70-72.
41. Louis Merton, "Wilderness and Paradise; Two Recent Books," *Cistercian Studies* 2:1 (1967), pp. 83-89. The two books reviewed are: George Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harpers, 1962) and Ulrich W. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (Naperville, IL 1963).
42. Thomas Merton, "The Wild Places," *The Catholic Worker* (June 1968); "The Wild Places," *The Center Magazine* (July 1968), pp. 40-44.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
44. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature," in Judith Plant (ed.) *op cit.*, p. 174.

Monica Weis SSJ, Professor of English at Nazareth College, Rochester NY (USA) is past Vice President of the ITMS, and a frequent contributor to Merton journals. Her most recent book is *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005).