

# Conjectures on 'The night spirit and the dawn air'

Peter Ellis

The middle section of Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is the text for the 2010 TMS conference, and the following picks up on some of its character and themes. These have been selected in a personal and unsystematic way in the spirit of the book itself, which was intended as a 'singular, existential and poetic approach' to questions in the air in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

The whole of this passage lies under the spell of the Ox Mountain parable.<sup>2</sup> Originally the mountain was forested but over time the trees have gone, so that even the memory that there was once a forest has gone too. If men could have stopped felling the trees, and if they had not run cattle on the mountain who had eaten every new shoot, then some regeneration would have taken place. This regeneration would only have occurred while man was looking away, through rest—the night spirit, and renewal—the dawn air. Where there is unremitting change there is never the chance of a return to fecundity. What happened on Ox Mountain is paralleled in man and in our nature. Without silence, passivity and rest man is condemned to barrenness, to losing contact with nature, to giving birth to nothing, to life without growth.

The two main themes of 'The night spirit and the dawn air' are, first, reflections on modernity, politics, current events and on psycho-social analyses, and,

second, thoughts about the monk's task and purpose today in the light of his medieval predecessors. Interspersed within these themes are intense evocations of nature, memories, remarks on other religions, etc. The text is presented in short passages maintaining the breaks of the daily journal entries—the originating material for *Conjectures*—and the bricolage effect is heightened by the use of sharply contrasting material. The famous 4th and Walnut moment follows a diversion about golf, and serious text on the monastic vocation is interrupted by vignettes of the reality of monastic life—the trite reading matter presented during the monk's silent meals and the banality of the reported sermons and talks set before the monks. It seems right that the reality of monastery life is foregrounded like this. Merton saw that at Gethsemani he was to 'study truth here and learn here to suffer for the truth'.<sup>3</sup> Constantly shifting the focus of the text allowed Merton to show the faceted nature of the truths he found.

How does the Ox Mountain parable fit with this? What was Merton's intention? Obviously the principal meaning is that the monastic life is one that is close to rest and renewal. Even though there is no overt intention to regenerate the world, nevertheless the monastery is a place of silence, passivity and rest where there is no ongoing project but attentiveness to

the cycle of the present in the cyclical monastic liturgy. In contrast, the ongoing project in the world of the 50s and 60s outside the monastery was the amassing of nuclear weapons and the beginning of American involvement in the war in Vietnam. The desertification of Ox Mountain could be read as that of a post-nuclear landscape, and one section<sup>4</sup> discusses the possibility that 'the whole works may go up in smoke, a perfect waste'.<sup>5</sup> Here the monastic vision warns against the pursuit of definite meanings and against despair and the abandonment of all hope and reason. 'I don't consider that my life has to make perfect sense to me at every moment. I certainly do not think it is at all possible for our society to make sense in the way that it thinks it can'.

Another ongoing project was also what would have seemed, viewed from the monastery, like the end of civilisation and culture—the arrival of the 60s counter culture. Here Merton struggles and more or less fails to understand what was happening. Rock and roll is described as worse than the non-music of a fumbling pianist in an old people's home,<sup>6</sup> and there are passages of apocalyptic horror at the new social moeuers. The main one<sup>7</sup> starts as one of the great conservative statements, worthy to be put alongside those of T.S. Eliot, about tradition as a memory we are born with. In another passage<sup>8</sup> he wonders whether the new radicalism is the hope for the future, but returns to the suggestion that it might be the precursor of a 'permanently organized warfare state, blind and dedicated to the forceful resolution of imaginary problems'. All this changed for Merton as the 60s progressed; after *Conjectures* he came to value lifestyle politics more.

One area of hope was Vatican II and this, I think, can be taken as an example of the unforeseen regeneration and renewal that takes place even in the darkest moments. Another area is that the poetic passages—the birds at dawn, the colours of the sky and trees, the intensity of feeling summoned by heavy rain falling—are all connected with nature as a living organism. On Ox Mountain the forest and trees are natural growth representing the gift of Eden, while the felling of trees and the grazing of domesticated beasts represent man's dominance. Merton is not only suggesting a reversal of modernity so that we are in thrall to nature rather than exploiting it as a resource, but he is also recognising nature as a creative and energising power and not just a passive victim.

All these themes and ideas are bouncing around in 'The night spirit and the dawn air'. They are generally treated with the greatest delicacy—the exception being perhaps the passages engaging with social change in the late 50s. An earlier Merton might have belaboured the contrasts but here everything is subtly done. *Conjectures* and the night spirit passage within it can thus be seen as part of Merton's spiritual journey marked by a softening of approach through time. Gradually the great theological beasts present at Merton's conversion—the creatures dominating the *Seven Storey Mountain*—stop their roaring and start to lie down with the lambs. What comes out to play through Merton's life are all the earlier hidden projections, so that finally he is able to run to the East as both the madman and his keeper (to advance to the Zen proverb prefacing the last section of *Conjectures*).

But I also wonder if there is something

more. Could the barrenness of human nature, the absence of growth and the failure of birth that were the interpretation of the Ox Mountain parable have been personal as well as general, and refer to Merton's own creativity? One of the most interesting sections in the text is a passage about his premonition of death<sup>9</sup> and about his relationship with his writing.<sup>10</sup> It begins: 'I think sometimes that I may soon die ...' and goes on to discuss his preparedness for death. He writes '... in the light of this I realize the futility of my cares and preoccupations, particularly my chief care, which is central to me, my work as a writer'. He then explores the contradictions involved in his monastic search for union with God and his need to write as 'salutary work' for his own survival and well-being.

The ability of a few writers—of whom Merton was one—to tap in to a great range of thought and experience and to pour out endlessly creative work can lead us to puzzlement at the very process itself. E.M. Forster's view of writing was that we wouldn't know what we were thinking unless we wrote it down, but that view takes no account of the magical nature of writing. A lot of things are going on. Writing drags the material out of the intimacy of the mind onto the formality of the page, and then reading drags it back into the intimacy of another mind—the reader's. This transference via the printed page can lead to trouble. Some text is forced by a new thought which bursts out of an intense experience—'In Louisville, at the corner of ...'<sup>11</sup>—and then, repeated over and over, loses its immediacy and becomes, for the reader, emblematic of itself rather than of the experience. And what makes the text sing?

Is it the depth of experience or the stylistic skill of the writer? Is the reception of text always a matter of shifting cultural perspectives?

One possible way of looking at texts is the recognition—that exists even in secularity—that the art of writing is a gift and comes from inspiration. If we take Merton's dedication of himself to God seriously—as of course we must—then great spiritual writing can be seen as the word of God. Then the depth of the writer's experience just touches on the immensity of God's experience and the felicity of the writer's style on God's creative joy.

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Many of us write out our relationship with God in journal form, and most of us who do so will be aware of the contrast between our words and those of great spiritual writers like Merton. It's not just a matter of the beautifully phrased insights which we encounter in the text but of the easy relationship of them with the raw and immediate experience. But even so we are all aware that actually Forster was wrong, at least when the subject is spirituality. We could each of us say of

our best moments, and can certainly say for Merton, that we don't know what God is thinking until we write it down.

Many meditation techniques treat thought as a barrier between the person meditating and the object of meditation, and Merton will certainly have been aware of the monkeys running up and down the curtain, the bits of rubbish coming down the stream of consciousness and so on. What the 'Night spirit and the dawn air' shows after a passage of 45 years is that text that derives from experience cuts even deeper into us as readers than text that derives from thought. Without doubt the experiences dealt with in the poetic sections are the fruit not of an immense labour of thought but of an immense practice of presence (from meditation, yoga, etc). This is contrary to the Wordsworthian view that immediate experience fades from childhood on. For Merton too the Benedictine commitment to place was vital. Why, we ask, did he not take the advice of the Colombian postulant and 'start a totally new kind of monastic order' in South America?<sup>12</sup> The answer must be that Merton's astonishing creativity was fuelled by Gethsemani. Look at the passage about the 'way' up through the woods<sup>13</sup> or at 'paradise is all around us and we do not understand'.<sup>14</sup> I think that Merton's fear was that away from that place of commitment something might dry up—though of course we know that in the event that was not the case.

A final conjecture is on the passage deriving from the moment when Merton paused on his night watch round in the novice's room.<sup>15</sup> There Merton feels on the edge of mystery and revelation and that the rooms themselves have something

very urgent to say. In the scriptorium he seems to hear what it is, namely that the novices 'were most truly there, though in fact they were all upstairs in the dormitory asleep'. The room has become transformed by 'their love and their goodness' filling it with 'a presence curiously real, comforting, perfect'. What does this mean? Is there something here about death in this intimate exchange between animate and inanimate? Earlier Merton has a section on our vital impulsion to 'return to the Father',<sup>16</sup> which he ends: 'The 'return' is the end beyond all ends, and the beginning of beginnings ..... Our destiny is to go on beyond everything'. Perhaps this consolation can be applied to the Ox Mountain parable?

**Notes**

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1995, p.7.
2. *ibid*, p.137.
3. *ibid*, p.178.
4. *ibid*, p.191.
5. *ibid*, p.192.
6. *ibid*, p.152.
7. *ibid*, p.161.
8. *ibid*, p.172.
9. *ibid*, p.189, there are others on pp.143, 176, 178, 180.
10. *ibid*, p.189.
11. *ibid*, p.156.
12. *ibid*, p.160.
13. *ibid*, p.179.
14. *ibid*, p.132.
15. *ibid*, p.212.
16. *ibid*, p.171.

Peter Ellis is an archaeologist, an editor and a member of the Thomas Merton Society.