

Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor: A Kinship with Nature

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Thomas Merton's love of nature was evident in his writings and Monica Weis, SSJ, estimates that 'there are close to 1,800 nature references in the corpus of Merton's journals.'¹ So too, Flannery O'Connor utilizes a backdrop of nature in many of her short stories and novels. It is the purpose of this essay to present the kinship of Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor in their views about the environment and the impending dangers inherent in the misguided use of technology. I

will argue that both writers, through their differing genres, had ecological and environmental concerns. In Merton's case the argument is facilitated by the many nature references in his journal entries but since O'Connor did not write directly about the environment, I will present excerpts from one of her short stories entitled 'A View from the Woods' as an exemplar, albeit through inference, of her environmental consciousness.

But first, I will establish the con-

nection between Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor as articulated by literary agent Robert Giroux, and scholars Sally Fitzgerald and George Kilcourse. Although Merton and O'Connor never corresponded there was a mutual admiration and respect for one another. Robert Giroux describes Merton's interest in O'Connor's farm and the many peacocks that literally overran the property. Merton also was unaware of the historical importance of Milledgeville, the location of the O'Connor farm, and was surprised to learn that it once had been the capital of Georgia. When Giroux visited O'Connor she was interested in Merton's monastic schedule at the Abbey of Gethsemani. O'Connor's face lit up when Giroux explained that he had bought and played for Merton, Edith Sitwell's recording of *Façade*, which prompted the monk to laugh so hard 'that tears ran down his cheeks.'² Sally Fitzgerald, a longtime friend of Flannery O'Connor and editor of her letters, delivered the Thomas Merton Memorial Lecture at Columbia University on 13 November 1981. In this lecture she spoke about the mutual admiration that Merton and O'Connor had for one another. Because both lived cloistered lives, Merton in the monastery and O'Connor one restricted by invalidism, they never met. Fitzgerald speculates that had these highly intelligent writers met they would have enjoyed each other's humour, self-mockery and appreci-

ated each other's 'invincible faith.'³ Flannery O'Connor, who portrayed many characters in her stories as prophets, defined the prophet, according to Fitzgerald, 'as one whose function is not to foresee the future but to see into the depths of finite reality, of men and manners, to the spirit that enlivens them, and to bear witness to that insight, whether in utterance or in the life he leads.' Fitzgerald comments that both Merton and O'Connor are 'prophetic figures by this definition.'⁴

In his article about the kinship of Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor, George Kilcourse focuses on issues related to their experience of faith and arising from their writing. He states:

Merton ... attempts to awaken readers with his late collection of antipoetry, *Cables to the Ace*, in which he ironically tells his readers that they 'find me always upside down/In these reflected glooms' (*Collected Poems* p.446) - a phrase that could as easily have been spoken by O'Connor in describing her own fiction.⁵

Kilcourse further describes Merton's and O'Connor's intense interest in the writings of Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. A foundation for art in Maritain's book, *Art and Scholasticism*, influenced both writers in their intuitive and creative

natures. Likewise, Gilson's 'understanding of ontology' resonated with each writer.⁶

Having attended to the overall kinship of Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor, I will briefly explore the development of Thomas Merton's ecological conscience. A pivotal moment for Merton, according to Monica Weis, was a 12 January 1963 letter he penned to Rachel Carson upon the publication of her book, *Silent Spring*.⁷ In the first paragraph of the letter, Merton describes Carson's book as a most valuable contribution, not only because she rang an alarm about the pesticide problem, but because it was an 'essential piece of evidence for the diagnosis of the ills of our civilization.' Not only was Merton referring to the specifics of the pesticide problem, but he was speaking more broadly when he addresses 'the ills of our civilization' and the proposed remedies '[which] are instinctively those which aggravate the sickness: *the remedies are expressions of the sickness itself*.'⁸ The context of Merton's broader interpretation of the Carson thesis was that he had been silenced on 26 April 1962 by the Cistercian Order in regard to his writings about war and specifically about nuclear war. Prohibited from publishing about war, Merton resorted to letter writing and he circulated 111 so called 'Cold War Letters' to friends and scholars. In his letter to Carson⁹ Merton declares: '[A] book like yours is a most salutary and impor-

tant warning ... I hope also that lawmakers will be able to see the connection between what you say and the vastly more important problem of nuclear war: the relationship is so terribly close.'¹⁰ I note that Merton, with an eye to cosmic unity, perceived an ecological conscience as a subset to a peace-making conscience. In a short journal collection titled *Day of a Stranger*, Robert E. Daggy in the introduction, summarizes the themes of the book by referring to Merton's concern about the dangers of technology as represented by the Strategic Air Command airplanes flying overhead with the bomb.¹¹ In the text of the journal Merton refers to the bomb as an 'apocalyptic cherub [in the] closed bay of the metal bird.' Even the 'growl' of the tractor on the Abbey farm reminded him of the commercial endeavors of making money and materialism.¹² In a review of the book entitled *Wilderness and the American Mind*,¹³ Thomas Merton reminds us of the prophetic work of Henry Thoreau who warned that emerging American capitalism was endangering the wilderness and if conservation measures were not properly enacted, then '[man will] destroy himself in destroying nature.'¹⁴

Thomas Merton developed his powers of observation of nature at an early age and these faculties were facilitated by both geographic location and genes. His father, Owen, was a landscape painter and his mother, Ruth, had studied art in

Paris. Monica Weis describes the wondrous convergence of genes and geography in the early development of Merton's keen observational powers that would enable him in later years to record so beautifully and accurately the many journal entries of his natural environment in the hills of the Kentucky landscape, the location of his beloved monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani. She states:

It would not be rash to suggest that Thomas Merton was genetically predisposed to new ways of seeing because of his artistic parents, that he was born with a keen eye that 'selects and discriminates'; nevertheless, the serendipitous convergence of stunning light, natural beauty, colorful art, emerging fluency in two languages, and a mother who was consciously and conscientiously shaping and nurturing her son's interaction with his environment was a singular blessing for Merton in those first years.¹⁵

Kathleen Deignan, CND, quotes a passage from one of Merton's journals which accentuates the acuity of his keen eye:

The beauty of the walnut tree at the end of the noviate wall. More beautiful still because of the dead end of the branches that reach out, stark and

black, from the rich foliage and gesture against the sky and the hills. The great leaves and the innumerable shades and patterns where they overlap. Inexhaustible beauty of design, made more curious and fecund by the pruning two years ago that was not quite successful.¹⁶

This passage is but one example of Merton's ability 'to see' and as mentioned above he was born with a keen eye trained to discern and appreciate the stunning light and natural beauty of the landscape. Indeed, one of the chapters in Weis's book is entitled 'Learning to see, becoming awake' and in the opening paragraph, she declares: 'It is all about seeing—not merely looking, but *seeing*. Seeing with new eyes.'¹⁷

Flannery O'Connor emphasized the importance of the senses in determining the success of a fiction writer. She maintains: '[T]he nature of fiction is in a large measure determined by the nature of our perceptive apparatus. The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions.'¹⁸ As part of the sensory apparatus, O'Connor emphasizes the importance of 'seeing' for the fiction writer. She draws upon Joseph Conrad, one of her favorite fiction writers, to make her point: 'My (Conrad) task which I am trying

to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything.'¹⁹

Thomas Merton's evolving ecological conscience as chronicled by Monica Weis, therefore, begins with his early years and appreciation of colour-laden landscapes in France, through the pivotal moment of reading Rachel Carson's book coupled with his memorable letter to the author. Merton's maturation as an environmentalist, of course, had other influences, not the least being the writings of conservationist Aldo Leopold and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard Chardin, both of whom I will mention below in conjunction with my remarks about Flannery O'Connor's ecological intuitions.

If Thomas Merton was clear about his ecological views through the essays, journal entries and letters, Flannery O'Connor's views were obscure as the words ecology, environment or environmental justice do not appear in her writings. However, one of her best essays was a description of the peacocks on the farm and certainly the 'King of the Birds'²⁰ may not have had any utilitarian value, but they represented beauty for the sake of beauty as part of nature's landscape. Indeed creatures of nature or 'critters' are an important element when considering environmental justice or concerns and are appropriately included in Kathleen Deignan's book regarding Thomas Merton's nature

writings.²¹ Most of O'Connor's stories are in a rural setting complete with colourful landscapes that surely must have appealed to Thomas Merton as he read them and it is certain that he read most if not all of them.²²

Within the O'Connor environmental literature review, I will reference three persons that also appear in the Thomas Merton canon: Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson and Pierre Teilhard Chardin. Aldo Leopold influenced Thomas Merton in his formation of an 'ecological conscience.' Merton states: 'Leopold brought into clear focus one of the most important moral discoveries of our time. This can be called an ecological conscience, which is centered in an awareness of man's true place as a dependent member of the biotic community.' Merton quotes Leopold's basic principle of the ecological conscience: '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.'²³ Timothy R. Vande Brake makes the case that it is probable Flannery O'Connor never read Leopold's work but 'there is good reason to pair these two writers [because] ... a strong and consistent ecological current runs through her work.'²⁴

I have previously discussed Rachel Carson and her influence on the development of Thomas Merton's ecological conscience. Although there is no evidence that Flannery O'Connor read Carson's book, *Silent*

Spring, Mark S. Graybill draws some interesting parallels between the lives of both women. Most importantly, however, O'Connor, like Carson, had a perspective 'grounded in [a] repulsion against human arrogance, especially as manifested in the exaltation of science and technology as the omnipotent force in society.'²⁵

Pierre Teilhard Chardin's works were read by both Merton and O'Connor. Chardin, a French Jesuit priest-philosopher, trained as a palaeontologist and geologist, and wrote, *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu* as well as other books. Monica Weis highlights a Merton journal entry that states: 'Real importance of Teilhard—his affirmation of the 'holiness of matter'. In the same paragraph Weis indicates that Merton affirms Chardin's 'belief in the 'fundamental oneness' of all creation and his hope in a new religious consciousness.'²⁶ A further confirmation of this 'oneness' is Merton's journal entry quoted by Weis which reads: 'I myself am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place.'²⁷ Flannery O'Connor echoes Chardin's 'fundamental oneness' and cosmic connection of creation when she writes: '[T]he bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima affects life on the Oconee River [Georgia], and there's not anything [anyone] can do about it.'²⁸ Graybill notes that O'Connor underlined the following passage from *The Divine Milieu* that appeared in the book by

Claude Tresmontant entitled *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: His Thought*:

By virtue of the creation and still more of the Incarnation, *nothing is profane* here below on earth to him who knows how to see. On the contrary, everything is sacred for him who in every creature distinguishes the particle of the elected being that is subjected to the attraction of Christ in the process of consummation.²⁹

Graybill comments that the Chardin passage underlined by O'Connor is a cogent description of the natural world forming the basis of Christian ecotheology which defines the divine presence in all creation. O'Connor's fiction is not so much reflective of Chardin's thought but rather 'complementary to it.' In Chardin 'she found a prophet whose incarnational view of nature she could accept.' Much of O'Connor's fiction can be interpreted as a 'warning of mankind's arrogance towards God's nature', and from the publication of *The Divine Milieu* some of her fiction writing reflects Chardin's underlying theme that 'love and respect for the environment must replace the impulse to own, control, conquer, and exploit it.'³⁰ It is important to note that Flannery O'Connor's last book, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, reflects an evolving, more pronounced and complex ecological consciousness. The title is a phrase

taken from Chardin's scientific explanation of the long upward route towards convergence at the Omega Point.

Remain true to yourselves, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all of those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent [to a] 'supreme consciousness.'³¹

On hearing of O'Connor's death, Thomas Merton published an article honouring her in the November 1964 issue of the journal *Jubilee* (reprinted in *Raids on the Unspeakable*); in 'Flannery O'Connor—A Prose Elegy' Merton states:

The key word to Flannery's stories probably is 'respect'. ... [W]e are still convinced that we respect 'everything good'—when we know too well that we have lost the most elementary respect even for ourselves. Flannery saw this and saw, better than others, what it implied. She wrote in and out of the anatomy of a word that became genteel, then self-conscious, then obsessive, finally dying of contempt, but kept calling itself 'respect.'³²

Merton explains that there is contempt for the Negro, the stranger,

the child, the country, the city, the farmer, the woman, the animal, the white man, the preacher, the world and yes, for reality itself. He asserts: 'Contempt, contempt, so that in the end the gestures of respect they kept making to themselves and to each other and to God become desperately obscene.'³³ Timothy Vande Brake picks up on the theme of contempt in O'Connor's short story 'A View of the Woods' and affirms '[a] little healthy contempt' is exactly what O'Connor offers in [this story]'. Citing the exaggerated satire, he declares: 'It is as if, through characters such as Mark Fortune, [O'Connor] is eager to show her readers just how ridiculous the single-minded pursuit of 'progress' is, since like Leopold she is highly aware of its communal costs.' Leopold's basic principle of the ecological conscience as cited above resonates with O'Connor in this story.³⁴

'The View of the Woods' represents O'Connor's 'most fulsome, sustained meditation on man's destruction of the environment' according to Graybill.³⁵ The story opens with the invasive 'machine' gouging the earth, lifting the dirt and '[throwing] it in a pile.'³⁶ Briefly, the story revolves around two main characters, nine-year-old Mary Fortune Pitts and her 79-year-old grandfather, Mark Fortune, who is selling off sections of his considerable landholdings in the rural countryside of his residence. Colours and descriptions of nature abound in the story which surely must have piqued Thomas

Merton's interest. At one point in the story O'Connor describes the 'view of the woods' as perceived by Mark Fortune:

The sunlight was woven through [the trees] at that particular time of the afternoon so that every thin pine trunk stood out in its nakedness ... the gaunt trunks appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them.³⁷

This description of the raw, beautiful landscape is vintage Merton and could easily have been included among his 1800 journal entries on the wonders of nature. Although there are several sub-plots to the story the main theme focuses on young Mary Fortune Pitts's disagreement with her grandfather about his proposed sale of a parcel of land known as 'the lawn.' The sale would result in the construction of a gas station which would obstruct young Mary's 'view of the woods.' Mary is outraged about the proposed business transaction:

[Mary] turned and looked him (Mark Fortune) straight in the face and said with a slow concentrated ferocity, 'It's the lawn. My daddy grazes his calves there. We won't be able to see (emphasis mine) the woods any more.'³⁸

After Mark Fortune consummates the sale of the land to the serpentine entrepreneur known as Tilman, a physical altercation ensues, whereby Mary is accidentally killed by her grandfather. In a letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor made it clear that Mark Fortune was among the damned and Mary Fortune Pitts was saved for her attempt to preserve 'the lawn' from the predatory business interests of her grandfather and Tilman.³⁹ Indeed, Mary was martyred for her valiant stand in defending 'the lawn.' There is a convergence of her love and respect for nature and her outreach to Charadin's Omega Point – that is, she remained true to herself and was therefore united with all who believe in the love of God's creation. It is noted that while this story was being written, the Sinclair Dam was being built within a few miles of O'Connor's Andalusia residence and it is probable she heard 'the clanking of heavy machinery amidst the familiar noises of the peacocks, cows and cicadas.' O'Connor was, most likely, 'lamenting losing her own view of 'the woods across the road.'⁴⁰

In conclusion, the colourful landscape backdrop for the story must have interested Merton. The search for environmental justice by Mary Fortune Pitts surely resonated with Merton's evolving ecological conscience. As he read the story in the mid-1960s, the 'growl' of the monastery tractor must have converged with O'Connor's depiction of the

machines invading Mary Fortune's Edenic countryside and more specifically her small patch of land known as 'the lawn.' Finally, I surmise that Thomas Merton had a 'little healthy contempt' for Mark Fortune who was ravaging the countryside but, in the end, he died alone alongside 'one huge yellow monster ... gorging itself on clay.'⁴¹

Notes

1. Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p.71.
2. Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), pp.xiv-xv.
3. Sally Fitzgerald, 'Rooms with a View,' *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 10, 1981, p.5.
4. *ibid.*, p. 22.
5. George Kilcourse, 'O'Connor and Merton : Icons of the True Self in a "Christ Haunted" World,' *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol.23, 1994-5, pp. 119-20.
6. *ibid.*, p.122.
7. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p.10.
8. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), pp.70-1.
9. The 12 January 1963 letter to Rachel Carson was not one of the 'Cold War Letters.'
10. *Witness to Freedom*, pp.71-2.
11. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs

- M. Smith Inc., 1981), p.16.
12. *ibid.*, pp.31 and 16.
13. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1967).
14. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter Capps (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), p.101.
15. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, pp.32-3.
16. Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2003), p.149.
17. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p.22.
18. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: The Noonday Press, 1970), p.67.
19. *ibid.*, p.80.
20. *ibid.*, pp.3-21.
21. *When the Trees Say Nothing*, pp.103-34.
22. Although there are a number of references regarding Merton's reading of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, the following citation is most relevant for this essay. In a letter to W.H. Ferry, Merton states: '[I have] just finished reading Flannery O'Connor's new book, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. O'Connor's short story, "A View of the Woods" was included in the posthumously published volume.' See Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love, The Letters of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p.221 [4/30/1965].

23. *Preview of the Asian Journey*, pp.105–7.
24. Timothy R. Vande Brake, 'Thinking Like a Tree: The Land Ethic in O'Connor's "A View of the Woods"', *Flannery O'Connor Review*, vol.9, 2011, p.19.
25. Mark S. Graybill, 'O'Connor's Deep Ecological Vision', *Flannery O'Connor Review*, vol.9, 2011, p. 4.
26. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p. 135.
27. *ibid.*, p. 83.
28. *Mystery and Manners*, p.77.
29. 'O'Connor's Deep Ecological Vision', p.5. O'Connor reviewed *The Phenomenon of Man*, *The Divine Milieu* and *Pierre Teilhard Chardin: His Thought* in *The Georgia Bulletin*, the diocesan newspaper. See *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Carter W. Martin (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1983), pp.86–7, 107–8.
30. *ibid.*, pp.5–7.
31. Margaret Early Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p.111.
32. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp.37–8.
33. *ibid.*, p.38.
34. Vande Brake, p.29.
35. 'O'Connor's Deep Ecological Vision', p.11.
36. *Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories*, p. 335.
37. *ibid.*, p.348.
38. *ibid.*, p.351. Not being able to see

the woods anymore accentuates, of course, the faculty of visual acuity that Flannery O'Connor emphasized as an important gift the fiction writer must possess to be successful. My brief narration of the plot is a description at the literal level of the story. The anagogical dimension of the story is beyond the scope of this article but it will be the focus of a future essay. For O'Connor's delineation of the anagogical vision of a story see *Mystery and Manners*, pp.72–3. In her letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor suggests the anagogical level when she stated: 'The name of the story is a view of the woods (not capitalized) and the woods alone are pure enough to be a Christ symbol ...' See *The Habit of Being, Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Noonday Press, 1979), p.190. In describing the 'View of the Woods,' Frederick Asals writes, 'View has become *vision*,' suggesting the literal has become metaphoric with 'symbolic overtones'. See Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor, The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 70.

39. *The Habit of Being*, p.190.
40. Vande Brake, p.28.
41. *Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories*, p.356.

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