

The Influence of the English Mystical Tradition on Thomas Merton's Life and Writings

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THESE COMMENTS TEND TO paint, in broad strokes, a picture of Merton's reading of the English mystics. The factors which motivated Merton's reading the English mystics stem from a desire to re-connect with a spirituality which first opened him to God, to share the joy of that openness with those living the Cistercian life in a time of change, and to establish, in a vitalized and refreshing way, a common ground with twentieth century pilgrims in the pursuit of God.

By 1963, Merton, having been director of novices since 1951, centred precisely on the problems facing those being formed in the monastic life. It would be difficult not to read into his comments a similarity with the nature of the problems the mystics faced living in fourteenth century England. Writing to Archbishop Paul Philippe, Merton records problems faced in monasteries as "problems of spirit and not merely of institution."¹ In that same letter of April 5, 1963, he observed that monastic life needed "men who are alive with the Spirit of the Risen Saviour and are not afraid to seek new paths guided by the light of perennial tradition and the wisdom of Mother Church."² These qualities of seeking "new paths" guided by "perennial wisdom" were precisely the qualities Merton found in the English mystics of the fourteenth century. It was no surprise, then, that Merton, writing to the Carthusian Denys Rackley, mentioned Hilton, and the author of *The Cloud*, as part of "penetrate[ing], with deeper understanding the good things [monks] already have [for liturgical and monastic life]."³

Merton developed a theology of living from Hilton's teachings on restoration, particularly "restoration in feeling." Contemplatives, according to Hilton, had the special ability, identified as restoration

in feeling, to "recognize the workings of grace."⁴ This was the special awareness allowing Merton to live his life deeply centred in God, to continue, however imperfectly, living as a monk. This spiritual lifestyle was what Merton wanted for all who were attracted to contemplation. Merton learned from *The Scale of Perfection* that the God who gives the gift of life is the same God who touches lives with grace. Hilton's orthodox teachings, especially those linked to the sacraments of baptism and penance, appealed strongly to this relatively new convert. Hilton's certainty of the power of God's life of grace would have appealed to Merton's awareness of how grace worked continuously in his own on-going conversion. When Merton read Book Two of *The Scale*, he would have noted gladly that baptism and penance, for Hilton, had the power of "maintaining [the soul] in grace... [as well as] to save [the soul] from hell."⁵ Another way in which Merton would have easily identified with the teachings of *The Scale*, was through Hilton's numerous references to Pauline anthropology, especially those passages in the letter to the Romans concerning the restoration of the life of God in mankind through the sacrifice of Christ. This notion of restoration is best developed by Merton in his book on grace and restoration entitled *The New Man*: "We become 'spiritual' men, (*pneumatikoi*) by believing in Christ and by receiving baptism."⁶

Of relevance, as well, is the fact that Hilton's teaching on "reformation in feeling" can be easily identified with the title of Merton's outstanding treatise on prayer, *The Inner Experience*. Real living takes place interiorly. Merton's inner experience while reading Hilton was eye-opening. Merton desired that spiritual eye which could perceive God's secrets. He desired to be numbered among those to whom God would show His secrets "which can only be seen by sharp eyes."⁷ Merton felt at ease with the flexibility of Hilton's approach: "The *Scale of Perfection* is a 'ladder' and hence, it has steps or degrees, but Hilton...does not insist too much on analysing and measuring out the precise stages through which the spiritual man is assumed to pass, on his way to mystical union."⁸ The plainness and directness of Hilton's approach to contemplation spoke worlds to Merton's living situation:

It does not matter what exercise a man makes use of, he has not reached reform in feeling nor come truly to contemplation, unless he has attained this humble self-knowledge and is dead to the world as far as

his affections are concerned. From time to time he must feel himself in this peaceful darkness in which he is hidden from the world and sees himself for what he is.⁹

During times of real crisis, Merton found great consolation in the teachings of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. He learned from the teachings of *The Cloud* that crises in identity or faith are part of living, part of the journey in faith, part of the contemplative vocation. He noted that "this [the work of *The Cloud*] is not merely a way of prayer, a manner of devotion: it is a way of life."¹⁰ His best description of the "work" of prayer described by the Cloud-author was similar to the way he might have explained his reason or his need to remain in the contemplative vocation: "It is a pure response to the mysterious appeal of a hidden and incomprehensible God."¹¹ In those many moments when Merton's life made no sense, at least to himself, he reached out to the God of crises whose answer was that the hidden God is the answer and the critical question: "this perfect stirring of love that begins here in this life is equal with that which shall last eternally in the bliss of heaven, for they both are one."¹² Sometimes Merton felt the 'bliss' in the centre of the crisis. Somehow in the economy of the apophatic way of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, crisis made sense; worry did not. From the dark spirituality of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, he learned that perseverance in crisis was a breakthrough to the greater joy of life with God. The best summary Merton gave of the work of *The Cloud* was stated in "Part V" of *The Inner Experience*. This section is entitled "Infused Contemplation." Here he captured all that the theology of *The Cloud* meant to him:

Even when there is no very definite experience of a hidden presence in the darkness of contemplation, there is always the positive and urgent movement of love which, on the one hand, wants to forget and 'trample down' all clear knowledge of everything that is not God, and on the other strives to 'pierce the cloud of unknowing' with the 'sharp dart' of its own longing. And the anonymous fourteenth century writer gives his explanation, which is also that of St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross. Though the essence of God cannot be adequately apprehended or clearly understood by man's intelligence, we can nevertheless attain directly to Him by love, and we do in fact realize obscurely in contemplation that by love we 'reach Him and hold Him close.' And when love reaches Him we are satisfied. Knowledge is of no importance. We know Him by love.¹³

Whenever Merton wrote about *The Cloud of Unknowing*, he was never far from seeing its connection to Zen. For example, Merton wrote to William Johnston on January 25, 1965, and he noted a reference in Johnston's edition of *The Cloud* as having similarities to Zen practice: "For instance, on p.166 that thing 'which is hid betwixt' two opposites would give a very suggestive point of entry into the Zen experience and point up the similarity, on a certain level, between it and the experience of *The Cloud*."¹⁴ Previously, in 1964, Merton wrote to Fr. Aelred, an Anglican priest in Oxford. He told Fr. Aelred of "an interesting ms. from a Jesuit in Japan treating *The Cloud* in its relation to Zen."¹⁵ There was definitely a correspondence between Merton's crisis of self-discovery, the teachings of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the practice of Zen.

Merton's comments regarding Lady Julian centre around the years 1961-63. He aligns Julian with women of courage like Raïssa Maritain. Christine Bochen, editor of *The Courage for Truth*, Merton's letters to writers, expressed the nature of Merton's association with the Maritains: "With Merton, they shared a commitment to art, wisdom, and social action. Like Merton, they recognized contemplatives as the source from which all else flowed."¹⁶ The correlation between Raïssa and Lady Julian is noted by Merton as based upon his notion of "Hagia Sophia," God's holy wisdom portrayed as a caring mother.

Merton's feelings about and response to Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* are manifold and always positive. More than to any other mystic, he responds to the person of Julian of Norwich as much as he does to her teachings on prayer. Merton hailed Julian as "the best known and most charming [of all the English mystics]... one of the greatest English theologians."¹⁷ He ranks the *Revelations of Divine Love* as a description of an experience of God "equal to those of St. Teresa of Avila or St. Margaret Mary."¹⁸ Merton's love for Julian and her teachings could very well stem from the clarity of orthodox doctrine in *The Revelations* which appealed so much to his experience of being a convert to Catholicism. He described the revelations recorded by and reflected upon by Julian as "a document that bears eloquent witness to the teaching and tradition of the Catholic Church...a meditative, indeed a mystical, commentary on the basic doctrines of the Catholic faith."¹⁹ His love for Julian stemmed on the one hand, from her orthodoxy. On the other hand, Julian's teaching never placed the institutional trappings in the way of the individual's experience of

and pursuit of God. Julian presented Merton with a view to the reality of an approachable God. For this, he was eternally grateful and eternally loyal. Julian's teachings captured all that Merton wanted to say about his own love for God. Merton became infatuated with Julian's certainty that "love is our Lord's meaning...before God made us, he loved us."²⁰ The degree of intimacy he felt for Julian was expressed so well in his essay "Day of a Stranger," which appeared in *The Hudson Review* in 1967:

There is a mental ecology, too, in living balance of spirits in this corner of the woods. There is room here for many other songs besides those of birds... Here should be, and are, feminine voices from Angela of Foligno to Flannery O'Connor, Theresa of Avila, Juliana of Norwich, and, more personally and warmly still, Raïssa Maritain.²¹

There were two things which impressed Merton about Richard Rolle: he was "one of the first English vernacular poets [and] he is a genius of fire and light."²² At the same time, Merton was careful to note that "[Dom David] Knowles tends to question his [Rolle's] mysticism."²³ As early as 1939 Merton read and was impressed by Richard Rolle's emotional teachings about unitive prayer and the methodology Rolle suggested for those committed to that life-style. Living on Perry Street in Greenwich Village, Merton recorded his thoughts about wanting to continue to read the works of Richard Rolle. The remarks were part of a journal entry for Monday, October 23, 1939. Characteristically, Merton wrote with a desire to read: "I do not turn around to see the good fire I have lit, because I am writing very fast and presently want to read Richard Rolle."²⁴ Rolle's teachings became especially important when Merton faced the crisis of being asked to withdraw his application to the Franciscans and had to learn to abandon the rest of his life to the will of God. This was a time when Rolle's teachings on heat, sweetness and song were a soothing remedy for his young yet tired soul: "If a man be tempered in his flesh, he shall then cast down the flesh, that the spirit be not overcome."²⁵ He learned from reading Rolle's *Mending of Life* and *Form of Living* that God often communicates his love for his creatures in a sensual fashion. He found much consolation in Rolle's teachings on the psalms: vocal prayer is fed and sustained by "offer[ing] all the syllables of our prayer with a fervent desire up to God."²⁶ He needed the heat, sweetness, song, the insuperable and inseparable and special experience of Rolle's methodology to find

his way back to discerning the will of God for him. Rolle's equation of contemplation as love, love as contemplation was Merton's invitation to solitude and to a special kind of prayer: "A strong, sweet love ravishing and burning willful and unfleschable draweth all the soul into the service of Christ, and it suffereth it to think upon nothing but upon Him."²⁷

Merton's chosen pathways of mystical prayer involved reading and reflecting upon the teachings of Meister Eckhart, the English mystics, and St. John of the Cross. Through this process, Merton's friends, Fr. Daniel Walsh, Professor Mark Van Doren, Robert Lax, Edward Rice, Naomi Burton Stone, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Robert Giroux, and Dom Jean Leclercq, to name but a few, lighted his intellectual pathway along the interior dimensions of faith. He read the English mystics, and their characteristic simplicity and directness were special and therapeutic in his life. These mystics, English men and women, gave Merton a temporary experience of the timeless childhood of grace which was his for the asking, the praying, and the living.

Notes and References

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30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, pp.549, 551-52