

An Apophatic Landscape

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I WANT TO BRING three things into conjunction, for no other reason than that they are swimming around in my head, and break the surface of the pool quite frequently when I think of Thomas Merton. They are: *The Cloud of Unknowing*; the landscape of Oakham; and the mystical tradition, which is given the esoteric title of apophaticism. Other things might surface too, but it is the conjunction of these three that speak a feeling in my mind, and I call it 'The Apophatic Landscape.'

Oakham is a market town in Rutland, England, where Merton went to school from the autumn of 1929 to the Christmas of 1932:

Today, a fine rain, very grey, a little raw outside, like days in England.

Oakham is the last hilly place before you get towards the flat eastern side of England, looking towards Cambridge, and the Fens. It is what we might call the East Midlands. Dr. W. G. Hoskins in his guide to Rutland describes it like this:

...limestone walls shining from afar in the clear winter sun and the rows of stacks in the corners of the great ploughed fields; fields that themselves gleam like a rich, brown velvet, ready for the barley and the wheat.

Merton opens his chapter in *The Seven Storey Mountain* on Oakham like this:

In the autumn of 1929 I went to Oakham. There was something very pleasant and peaceful about the atmosphere of this little market town, with its school and its old fourteenth-century church with the grey spire, rising in the middle of a wide Midland vale.

and again, "the grey murk of the winter evenings in that garret where seven or eight of us moiled around in the gaslight." 'Moiled' is an interesting word there, quite an uncommon one: one of its meanings is to work in wet and mire,' and a 17th century

commentary on Leviticus 18.20 uses the word in a rather different way, of David's relationship with Bathsheba, "As David, how he did moil himself with Bathsheba."

Merton's experience at Oakham School as described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (the American version of his best selling autobiography *Elected Silence*) is full of psychological drama, and intellectual snobbery. Much of it reflects the grey light in which so much of that period is described. It is where he hears of his father's death by telegram in the Headmaster's study. The father who had been such a companion to him. Merton's reaction as recalled in the *Seven Storey Mountain* was partly one of relief that it was all over, partly huge sadness and depression, and then after a while a sense of freedom to do just whatever he liked. This freedom, he recalled, was used to make a greater captivity.

His School Chaplain takes a bashing for basing his whole theology on the premise that 'Love' in St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 13, could be replaced by the word 'gentleman.' Whatever became of 'Buggy' Jerwood? More correctly, the Reverend Frederick Harold Jerwood: Jesus College, Cambridge B.A. 1903, Cuddesdon College 1910, deacon 1911, priest 1912, Curate of All Saints Northampton 1911-1914, Chaplain and Assistant Master at Oakham School from 1914. So he had been at the School for 15 years when Merton arrived, and was still teaching them how to row on top of the desks because there was no stretch of water in the town.

The description of his illness in his last year at school, is given in Dantesque terms, 'but now I lay on this bed, full of gangrene, and my soul was rotten with the gangrene of my sins and I did not care whether I died or lived.' Whether it was really as bad as all that we shall never know, but that is what Merton remembered it as eighteen or so years later in the autobiography. It provided for the author a significant lead up to the visit to Italy, shortly after he had left school, where he began to experience the reality of Christ through the Byzantine mosaics of Rome. The light had to come out of an intense darkness to be even more illuminating. Yet he did not have to wait for Rome to trace the seeds of his burgeoning faith. There was a moment in his school experience when his reading of Blake's poems, and the knowledge of his intellectual life and ideas, that coalesced in an epiphany, latent and subdued though it was:

One grey Sunday in the spring, I walked alone out of the Brooke Road and up Brooke Hill, where the rifle range was. It was a long bare, hog-back of a hill, with a few lone trees along the top, and it commanded a big sweeping view of the Vale of Catmos, with the town of Oakham lying in the midst of it, gathered around the grey, sharp church spire. I sat on a stile on the hill top, and contemplated the wide vale, from the north, where the kennels of the Cottesmore hounds were, to Lax Hill and Manton in the south. Straight across was Burley house, on top of its hill, massed with woods. At my feet, a few red brick houses straggled out from the town to the bottom of the slope.

And all the time I reflected, that afternoon, upon Blake. I remember how I concentrated and applied myself to it. It was rare that I ever really thought about such a thing of my own accord. But I was trying to establish what manner of man he was. Where did he stand? What did he believe? What did he preach...

The Providence of God was eventually to use Blake to awaken something of faith and love in my own soul in spite of all the misleading notions, and all the almost infinite possibilities of error that underlie his weird and violent figures. I do not therefore want to seem to canonize him. But I have to acknowledge my own debt to him, and the truth which may appear curious to some, although it is really not so: that through Blake I would one day come, in a round-about way, to the only true Church, and to the one living God, through his Son, Jesus Christ.

The association of that place and that walk up Brooke Hill with the influence of Blake is so archetypically true of what goes on in adolescence when the influences are so all-surrounding, and art is infused with the environment and both with the growing body. "In three months, the summer of 1931, I suddenly matured like a weed..." and all that again with the expanding mind. Notice, too, the aloneness and the reflection in the open air, and the intensity with which he questions himself, and the big questions to which he was always returning: what manner of man, where did he stand, what did he believe, what did he preach.

The weather was 'grey spring,' muted, and soft. "I myself am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place, and a day in which I have not shared truly in all this is no day at all. It is certainly part of my life of prayer." (*Journal* 4, p. 300). His memory of Oakham was one of greyness. The cloud of dank, dark autumn and winter days. 1929, low watt light bulbs, rugby matches finished in the dark. There was a rugger side to Merton. Longing in the cloudy

greyness and the dark, searching and reaching, because the end was always beyond, and the now always just a symbol of what was to come.

One or two other flashes of the Oakham climate of prayer come back to Merton much later in his life. One a poem, untitled, in which he recalls a contrast between the heightened tragic emotion of Euripides's writing and the "Sons of a cool & gentle England:"

When class was in the garden at Greylands
And we tried to translate Euripides
Not knowing Greek

We cared little for a dead hero
However mad
Or for his mad language

Prefects and cricketers
We were alive & sane and careless in our own strength.
We spoke English.
We smiled
At the master's cat.

Holidays came
We left the crazy Titan
Before the hot shirt
Drove him to kill his own children.

We were alive & sane
Sons of a cool & gentle England.

That was in 1931. Since then
There have been hotter seasons
We go on translating
More & more Euripides
With less and less Greek.

The fury of Herakles
Has swollen beyond bounds.
And now we are never out of danger
We have forgotten our smiles & our strength.

It is as if the world had got far more dangerous since the days at school, more serious. The stories are becoming true, and there are no holidays in which to forget them, or to realise that they are only stories.

The third epiphany is described in Journal No. 4, an entry of September 29, 1962:

This morning, in John of Salisbury, ran across a quote from the *Georgics* which has entered into the deepest part of my being since I learned it thirty years ago at Oakham and was moved by it then, studying I think one June morning before the Higher Cert., by a brook behind Catmose House.

*Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
Atque metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum
Subiecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari.*

(Happy is he who can have known the causes of things, and has placed under his feet all fears and inexorable fate and the rumbling of greedy Acheron.)

Inexhaustible literary, spiritual, moral beauty of these lines: the classic ideal of wisdom. What a gift to have lived and to have received this, as though a sacrament, and to be in communion of light and joy with the whole of my civilisation - and my Church. This is indestructible, Acheron (whose strepitus (rumbling) was never so full of ominous rumblings) has nothing to say about it.

And John of S. — glossing this with words about faith as a way to the highest truth, adds:

Impossibile est ut diligat et colat vanitatem quisquis et toto corde quaerit et amplectionem veritatis. (It is quite impossible for someone to seek and foster vanity and wholeheartedly at the same time to seek also for the embrace of truth.)

And me, glossing Merton, glossing John of Salisbury, glossing Virgil, to say how he remembers the place and the month of June, and how he recalls the significant within a climate, as though the words and the weather interacted, and came out of air and were to go back to air, but leaving their imprint, their scent on the soul.

The *Cloud of Unknowing* is a book, a treatise or series of pieces of advice on the contemplative life. I mention it now because it surrounds itself with all the ingredients I am dealing with in this paper. It was written by an anonymous country parson in this area of England, the East Midlands. Merton knew the work well, wrote about it in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1966), and wrote an introduction to William Johnston's *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing* (1967). It is also a prime example of the influence of the apophatic way of thinking (though 'thinking' is not at all the right word) for a way which clouds out thinking. We might today say accessing God. Another

connection is that throughout the middle years of Merton's time at Gethsemani, one of the tensions in his life was between the Cistercian way and the Carthusian way. The *Cloud of Unknowing* was known to have had a great influence on the Carthusians in the 14th century, and speaking to them it spoke also to Merton's contemplative and eremitical spirit.

So we have a bundle of jostling influences, stretching across time and place: 14th century — 20th century; Oakham — Kentucky; coenobitic — eremitical; Cistercian — Carthusian. No one area of influence takes centre ground, and to deal with them all in a paper like this is difficult. I am reminded of how T.S. Eliot, confronted with a similar bundle of influences, when trying to bring them into some sort of unity, wrote *The Four Quartets*. Similarly, David Jones wrote *The Anathemata*, both modernist poems, attempting to hold together disparate ages and cultures, while allowing each their separate genius. I believe our post modern age has given up the struggle on this one, and Merton's own attempt in his poem, *The Geography of Lograire* suffers from having a toe in the postmodern waters, in which nothing can really relate to anything else.

Holding things together in a grand design was not Merton's way. He was a very unsystematic theologian. What did hold his work together was partly his skin, although that often cried out for mercy at the sight of yet another request for an article, or an introduction. But what I value most in Merton is his capacity to enthuse, and excite, and embrace such a wide range of concerns and people, and to hold them together at the point of contemplation, where all things are held but also all things are allowed to slip away. To know that this activity of loving, because love was the impetus for his voracious enthusiasms, was also around in Oakham in the 14th century. As all things are gathered into the fellowship, or *koinonia*, of those who 'list' towards God, and enjoy God's love which initiates all attempting. Anthony T. Padovano puts it like this:

Merton was consistently aware of the anonymous community we forge with people whose spirit is bonded with ours. Often, we never meet them; sometimes their agenda is adversarial, at least on the surface. Nonetheless we form together the company of those who defend life under siege and we collaborate with them without knowing clearly the identities of those who make common cause with us."

All that to say that time and centuries should not constrict us in our sense of fellowship with the communion of saints, and *The Cloud* is as contemporary as you like. The message of *The Cloud* is expressed in the first three chapters, and this from Chapter 3:

Lift up your heart to God with humble love, and mean God himself, and not what you get out of him.

Do not give up then, but work away at it until you have that longing (list). When you first begin you find only darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing.

That cloud which surrounded Moses in Exodus, and Elias in the Book of Kings, was a cloud of unknowing in which language ceases to be able to express the glory, and in which talking to God goes on, without seeing Him. "One of the ways of attacking this problem," says Merton, "has been opened up by so called apophatic theology, the theology of 'unknowing,' which describes the transcendent experience of God in love as a 'knowing by unknowing' and a 'seeing that is not seeing.' The language of apophatism is not peculiar to Christianity, and it had currency in Asia long before Christian times (for instance in Lao-Tzu and in the Upanishads)... For centuries mystics have groped for words in which to account for the supreme reality of this experience which not only illuminates a man's mind and fills his heart with new strength, but really transforms his whole life." (*Mysticism of the Cloud*, vii).

Apophatism took an interesting contemporary turn with Merton. Certainly he knew all the history. His book on St John of the Cross, the classic exponent of apophatic theology, was written in the cauldron of Merton's apophatic days, *The Ascent to Truth*. More interesting is how it affected his whole way of thinking and communicating. If you listen to the tapes of Merton teaching, they are a strange mixture of authority and irony. His delivery is quite forceful and combative, punchy, it's that rugger side of him again, and yet every so often, he breaks out into a joke, or a swipe at himself, or a tangential thought which he follows just for fun. He could spot the humour in the moment. So he was talking about music and plainsong, and a bird sings outside the window, and he breaks off his talk and picks up the connection very playfully.

What has this got to do with *The Cloud* and apophatic theology? Merton knew a tremendous amount, but he was also continually

aware of a greater reality than knowledge, which puts all human knowing into the perspective of humility. If we know we can only know nothing, really, of what God is, then our reading, writing, thinking, planning are all done in a cloud. We can put no ultimate trust in them. We can be deceived by them. We can lose our way in them. So the cloud disorients us to reorientate us towards the one thing that does really matter above all others, which is the love of God. We learn about that love in the cloud:

Lift up your heart to God with humble love and mean God himself.

An English public boarding school in the 1930s was not unlike a Cistercian monastery. I guess that something of the community life, the downright awfulness of much of it, the rugger side of things, the thrashings, the bad food, and the wondrous delight of getting away from it, out into the countryside, up Brooke Hill, or into the pages and poems of William Blake, rather than putting him off, in a strange way drew him back. It was an institutional and emotional world he knew and had conquered. Nothing would ever be so bad again. School was the place where he had experienced and survived the news of his father's death and that he now was really alone in the world. It may have been dreadful but it was a part of the reality of his experience, and one which he may have been wanting to recapture, in a redeeming way, in the monastery.

Looking back on Oakham in the *Conjectures* period he saw the countryside, the landscape, as one of his many angels: "all the villages and fields and hedges and corners of woods around Oakham, The tower of Oakham Church and the broad vale." For these he was truly grateful. The rebel he was in the sixth form was also the rebel he was in the monastery, the same rebellious need to be other, an individual in community, outside as well as inside.

"It had become evident to me that I was a great rebel. I fancied that I had suddenly risen above all the errors and stupid idiots and mistakes of modern society...and that I had taken my place in the ranks of those who held up their heads and squared their shoulders and marched into the future." (*Seven Storey Mountain*, p.93).

By nature I think Merton must have been claustrophobic, always searching to be outside, physically in the woods and close to natural things, and intellectually out there in front, going where no-one has gone before, and always imagining that the grass was greener on the other side of the enclosure. *The Cloud of Unknowing* had a great influence

on the Carthusian movement in England. Some have thought that its author must have been a Carthusian, but Evelyn Underhill is not convinced:

It has been thought that the author was a Carthusian. But the rule of that austere order, whose members live in hermit-like seclusion, and scarcely meet except for the purpose of divine worship, can hardly have afforded him opportunity of observing and enduring all those tiresome tricks and absurd mannerisms of which he gives so amusing and realistic a description in the lighter passages of the *Cloud*.

The seduction of the hermit or Carthusian life to Merton was intense in the late 40s and early 50s. He was in correspondence with Dom Humphrey Pawsey, a Carthusian monk of St. Hugh's Charterhouse in England and who went on to be Superior of the Sky Farm foundation in Vermont, and Dom Jean-Baptiste Porion from La Grande Chartreuse. He discussed with them his desire "to embrace the eremitical life." That desire took various forms through the years, until it found some reconciliation in the hermitage. Perhaps there his Carthusian spirit, the spirit of the *Cloud*, found its home. The hermitage within the monastery grounds provided a greater degree of solitude without breaking off the Cistercian belonging. An ideal answer and a happy one.

Did that mean that the whole notion of apophaticism slipped away in a new found happiness and release from the darkness of the Oakham moiling? St. John of the Cross seemed to become less quoted, and the South American poets took over. The boarding school gloom was being dispersed. The holidays were coming. The smell of cabbage and brimstone were being replaced with the smell of wood smoke, and the heart and the mind were looking beyond the walls to the world.

One thing he did not lose from his apophatic past was the love of the night, and the lights shining in the darkness. The night was always for Merton darkness redeemed, not light obscured. ('Six Night Letters,' *Eighteen Poems*, cf. also 'Night Flowering Cactus.')

It begins to sound strange speaking of someone I have never met in such intimate terms as if I knew all the answers about him. Such presumption! So perhaps all I am talking about is myself, which is only one step less embarrassing. So I'll stop.