

Merton's Seeing Eye

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WE ARE LOOKING AT Thomas Merton as monk, as poet, as prophet, and we could in fact go on and make that list much longer. This man eludes all categories. One might as well try to bottle fog, as his fellow monk Matthew Kelty said of him in a memorable epitaph after his death.

This is indeed one of the more extraordinary things about this extraordinary man: we all identify with him in so many differing ways and at so many different levels and different moments in our lives. It is as though we always manage to encounter the man we are looking for, are needing at any particular juncture.

My starting point now is the Merton of 1968. This is very appropriate in the year in which we remember that it was on December 10th, 1968 that he died in Bangkok. And if I start with the Merton of the *Asian Journal* that is particularly appropriate in my own life since this last year I have myself been both to the Philippines and to India. So I read again what it meant for Merton, the terms in which he undertook that journey, the frame of mind in which he set out, what it came to mean to him. In a prepared talk for Calcutta on monastic experience and East-West dialogue he said that he was not coming to India as research student or author, not to obtain information about other traditions, but as a pilgrim, to drink from the ancient sources of monastic vision and wisdom, not to learn more quantitatively but to learn more qualitatively, in order to become a better and a more enlightened monk. This asked of him that he learn from the East in terms of the East.

"This exchange must take place under the true monastic condition of quiet, tranquillity, sobriety, leisureliness, reverence, meditation and peace – of nonhurrying and patient waiting."¹

At first this eluded him. He catches the bewilderment that he feels in Calcutta (as any of us do for the first time in India) as he piles

up words, cascading words, which reflect his reaction in this bewildering place.

"How many purple flowers in the ponds. How many lotuses. How many long brick walls...all the cows and the slate-blue buffaloes...the sidewalk markets, the rickshaws, the fantastic and dowdy buildings, the tattered posters... Further and further into town. Buildings. Crowds. Rags, dirt, laughter, torpor, movement. Calcutta is overwhelming: the elemental city, with no room left for masks."²

This profusion of strange sight and sounds was also the first impression of his visit to the Dalai Lama. Here he found a mountain with a lot of miscellaneous dwellings, rocks, woods, farms, gulfs, falls and heights. A succession of rimpoches each in his shrine-like cell among tankas, flowers, bowls, rugs, lamps and images.³

How does one impose any sort of coherence? Any sort of structure? At one point he uses the phrase "mandala awareness of space" — he sees all this profusion gaining order from the seated presences, burning with flame-like continuity, centres of awareness.

All this leads, as I think everything else in his life does, to that encounter at Polonnaruwa. He gives us such a vivid picture of it as he writes in the *Asian Journal* of setting out with the Vicar General lagging behind, complaining, grumbling how much he dislikes "paganism," saying that Merton will get better pictures in other places, that the guides are all out to cheat them. The Vicar General represents of course a total contrast to the sensitivity and openness of Merton, who has taken off his shoes and is approaching barefoot: his is, in contrast, the closed mind, and rather than see the statues he sits in the shade and — what is so much less threatening — reads about them in the guide book.

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything — without refutation — without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening. I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock and

tree. And the sweep of bare rock sloping away on the other side of the hollow, where you can go back and see different aspects of the figures.

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious...

The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life. is charged with dharmakaya...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.⁴

Here Merton is showing us the qualities of dialogue, or openness. Here is his concern with light, with clarity. This is seeing through, seeing beyond, this is going beyond the half-tied vision of things. Everything, it seems to me, seems to lead up to this moment but perhaps most immediately those earlier journeys of 1968 which had taken him to the monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico and to the sisters in the Redwoods in Northern California. We are shown this in what he wrote in *Woods, Shore, Desert*, the notebook that ends with the words: "Hang on to the clear light!"⁵

This is the end of a long journey which had begun when he entered Gethsemani on December 10th 1941, which was in itself the end of one journey, that restless searching, the wandering of the gyrovague. Then he was able to start another journey, the true, the interior journey, which is the real journey. This was a journey from a centred place, from rootedness, from the sense of belonging. Place is a vital element in the Benedictine and Cistercian traditions. Vital for they live under the vow of stability, and stability means being grounded "in one good place" as Merton himself put it so felicitously. A recent book by a monk of Gethsemani, Francis Kline, now abbot of another Cistercian house at Mepkin, is called *Lovers of the Place*, and at one point he writes this:

Taming the heart requires a sense of place. It roots not just the mind to a set of principles, but also the body to a piece of land. Each has an

important lesson to teach the other. Spiritual doctrine remains in the head and not in the heart unless it is lived out in time in a given place.⁶

He then goes on to say:

The heart of course also has its learning and longing beyond any given place, and looking beyond itself to God, becomes the place where God comes to dwell for longer and longer periods — so that the place becomes a garden, one in which the contemplative life grows. Not so much a translocation as a transformation of the same ground.

Merton found himself planted in a place of great beauty, and he was profoundly aware of its beauty and its significance. He looked outside himself, he looked beyond, and we can see both visually and in words, in his photographs and in his writing, how he saw: his awareness of shape and texture, of the relationships of things, above all, his awareness of the play of light and dark, the play of shadow. Everything in his monastic life built on what was already there in his earliest years as the son of artist parents who had chosen, as Cezanne did, to live in the south of France. On the very first page of *Seven Storey Mountain* he wrote

My father painted like Cezanne and understood the southern French landscape as Cezanne did. His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself.⁷

When he was ten he lived for two years with his father, now a widower, in the amazing small French town of St. Antonin, and again he wrote almost lyrically of the experience of living in a small medieval town where everything seemed to converge on the church, where the spire of the church was inescapable wherever one was, where the whole shape of the town and its surrounding landscape seemed to be showing a contemplative vision.

Here, everywhere I went, I was forced by the disposition of everything around me to be always at least virtually conscious of the church...The whole landscape, unified by the church and its heavenward spire, seemed to say: this is the meaning of all created things: we have been made for no other purpose than that men may use us in raising themselves to God, and in proclaiming the Glory of God... Oh what a thing it is to live

in a place that is so constructed that you are forced, in spite of yourself, to be at least a virtual contemplative!"⁸

His Cistercian life deepened this sense of awareness of the visual. For the counterpart to stability is non-attachment: the monastic knows that this land is not for this generation but for generations to come: there can be no sense of possession or ownership, but of detachment. And with this goes a sense of listening to the land on its own terms, letting it speak in its own voice, and as a result seeing more acutely into the heart, the true essence. This is mindfulness, attentiveness, awareness, which is found in all monastic traditions, Christian or not. It is brought home daily to the Cistercian monk or nun as they start each day with the office of vigils, whose name is in itself a reminder of the urgent need to be vigilant, watchful, awake, aware. It prevents going through life half awake and half asleep, with the "half-tied vision." It is also symbolic in that it starts in the dark and is a daily movement from darkness to light, from death to new life.

Merton was himself never an artist as were Ruth or Owen. Yet he had the opportunity to express himself visually as a result of a fortuitous — or a God-Given — accident after the journalist, John Howard Griffin, came to visit him at the hermitage bringing his camera. Merton showed such a childlike delight in it that Howard Griffin let him have it on loan and so Merton began to take photographs. He approached this with that sense of reverence and respect which is so fundamental to what the Rule of St Benedict has to say about the handling of matter and of material things. Howard Griffin also noticed a parallel with the way in which Merton handled people, all those streams of people who came to visit him and talk with him. He focused on them, gave them his full attention, so that nothing seemed to be held back, and yet left them free to be their own selves. He did not try to control, to manipulate, to alter the other to fit his concepts. Already in 1948, in one of his earliest expeditions to Louisville, he is writing of how he sees people in the streets (a passage which is an anticipation of that more familiar passage when he found himself standing on the corner of Fourth and Walnut)

'I found that everything stirred me with a deep and mute sense of compassion. Perhaps some of the people we saw going about the streets were hard and tough — but I did not stop to observe it because I

seemed to have lost an eye for the merely exterior details and to have discovered, instead, a deep sense of respect and love and...I went through the city realising for the first time in my life... how much value people have in the sight of God.⁹

Loving and seeing, seeing and loving — Dante would say that seeing comes first: "The state of blessedness is based in the act of seeing, not of loving, which comes second." But the vital thing is seeing, not just looking — a distinction which sometimes has to be learnt, as his young friend Ron Seitz discovered as, each with their cameras, he and Merton walked through the woods...

Tom would see me walking along in front of him, and stopping to hold my camera to my eye, snap, then move quickly someplace else and snap, always turning my head around looking for something to snap again and again, here and there, almost anywhere.

"Stop! Stop!...enough. You take more pictures in an hour than Ansel Adams (you know him?) takes in a month — maybe two or three a day if you're lucky and something finds you... Hold up a minute, let's try something, maybe talk about just what..."

And Tom would go on to teach me, when photographing (or any other time, for that matter), to stop looking and to begin seeing! — Because looking means that you already have something in mind for your eye to find; you've set out in search of your desired object and have closed off everything else presenting itself along the way. But seeing is being open and receptive to what comes to the eye; your vision total and not targeted...The same holds for listening as opposed to hearing! — You can't approach sound or music already knowing or expecting what's to come, excluding all else surrounding it. That way you're making it do, not allowing it to be...¹⁰

In the photographs that he has left, Merton shows us something of the way in which he saw: how he saw the world around and the gentleness with which he handled it. For the two are interconnected: if you love a place then that place is changed by that love; if you pray in a place then the place is changed by that prayer. Here he is writing on October 12th 1947: "This whole landscape of woods and hills is getting to be saturated with my prayers and with the psalms and with the books I read out here under the trees...everything I see has become incomparably rich for me."¹¹ The outer and the inner landscapes reflect one another. Merton saw it clearly in the landscape of northern California, in the sea and the rocks, and he wrote of how his photography brought out "the great Yang-Yin of sea rock mist,

diffused light and half hidden mountain...an interior landscape, yet there. In other words, what is written within me is there. 'Thou art that.'"¹²

Perhaps it is misleading to speak of Merton as a photographer. It was something totally natural for him because, as someone once said of the art of photography, it never makes the mistake of trying to turn from the material to the immaterial in hopes of conveying spirituality. This is simply of course the wholistic approach of the monastic way of life in its refusal to separate the material and the spiritual. The ordinary, the earthly, whatever is given, has an incarnational character. As he said it so simply himself, his camera was merely another tool for dealing with things everybody knows about but isn't attending to.

His notebooks give us short flashes in words of how he saw and felt the world around him. They are a comment on the way in which he took photographs, and both of them, the written words and the visual images, tell us much of the contemplative vision which lay at the heart of his life of prayer.



To go out and walk slowly in this wood — this is a more important and significant means to understanding, at the moment, than a lot of analysis and a lot of reporting on things "of the spirit." (March 2 1966)

One has to be in the same place everyday, watch the dawn from the same house, hear the same birds wake each morning to realise how inexpressibly rich and different is "sameness." This is the blessing of stability, and I think it is not evident until you enjoy it alone in a hermitage. (May 28, 1965)

Said Terce with great joy, overflowing joy, as if the land and woods and spring were all praising God through me. Again their sense of angelic transparency of everything, and a pure, simple and total light... It was all simple. But a simplicity to which one seems to aspire, only seldom to attain it. A simplicity, that is, and has, and says everything just because it is simple. (January 6, 1965)

The whole hillside was so bright and new I wanted to cry out, and I got tears in my eyes from it! (Feb 17, 1966)

In the afternoon, lots of pretty little myrtle warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them... Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being? (November 4, 1964)



There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being..

Talking is not the principal thing. Nothing that anyone says will be that important. Here we do not feel that much needs to be said. We already know a great deal about it all. It is in all this that you will find your answers. Here is where everything connects.

Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New York, New Directions, 1973, p.313)
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3. Ibid., p.100
4. Ibid., pp.233-6
5. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore Desert*, Santa Fe, Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982, p.48
6. Francis Kline: *Lovers of the Place. Monasticism Loose in The Church*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1997, p. 49)
7. Thomas Merton: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1948, p.38. Ibid., p.37
9. Thomas Merton: *Sign of Jonas*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1953, pp. 91-2
10. 'The Way that Thomas Merton Saw' from Ron Seitz, *A Song for Nobody*, p.133
11. *Sign of Jonas*, op.cit. p. 69
12. *Woods, Shore, Desert*, op.cit., p. 42