

## Within the Shadow and the Disguise: Thomas Merton's Sacramental Vision

Kathleen Deignan

The passage from the *Asian Journal*<sup>1</sup> concerning Thomas Merton's visit to Polonnaruwa is a hauntingly rich evocation of his whole spiritual biography, which in a poetic way summarizes the familiar themes that were the preoccupation of his life. At the end of the impressionistic remembrance of this visit, just days before his death in Bangkok, Merton claims at last to know and have seen what he 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."<sup>2</sup> In the journal passage, he is remembering what he describes as "a beautiful and holy vision," mediated by the stunning monumental reclining Buddhas which awaited him at the ancient monastic site. Ironically, he seems to have moved beyond the shadow and disguise by means of the shadow and disguise of sacred place and sacred image, which constellated a powerful *gestalt* that had a transformative effect on his consciousness. He says that now he *knew* because now he *had seen*: "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."<sup>3</sup>

It was a moment of *gnosis* mediated by rockshape and landscape, figure, rock and tree, by frescoes and statues, mountains and stupas; by art and by nature. It was clearly a sacramental moment experienced

within the shadow and the disguise of divine creation and human creativity which transported him beyond habitual obscurations to a vibrant seeing of the evidence of what cannot be spoken, but which can be experienced through a vividly incarnational sensibility. And so, I would like to suggest that what he reports to be his penultimate spiritual experience happened—as it had throughout his life—precisely within the shadow and disguise of art and nature which awakened and sustained his fully vibrant sacramental spirituality.

The paradox at play here between what is beyond and what is within the shadow and disguise of the world of our perception is a double helix lacing through all religions. When Christians speak of "going beyond" shadow and disguise we are describing an apophatic sensibility that perceives the ultimate as transcendentally beyond the natural world and therefore beyond the human capacity to really experience or know or name. *Apophasis* is the Greek term for unsaying and unseeing, describing a dialectical approach to the sacred which favors linguistic negation over affirmation—God is not this, not that, akin to *neti neti* in Hinduism.<sup>4</sup> It prefers to allow the Holy to remain in the shadow and disguise of mystery, and fosters a sensibility of iconoclasm—breaking through and going beyond all linguistic or artistic images that might arrest the wholly unnameable and unknowable in conceptual or formal or intellectual representations.

When Buddhists sound their final chant during meditation sessions they likewise are urging themselves on to the apophatic boundary of conscious: "*Gate', gate', para gate', para sam gate', Bodhi Svaha*"—Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone beyond the Beyond—to the formless, the nameless, the unknown and unknowable.<sup>5</sup> This modality of awareness thrives in monastic climates which support its emergence by habits of silence, celibacy, solitude and those emptiness practices which are the media of attention to what is beyond word, sensation, society and mental conditioning.

Within the Christian tradition the apophatic way arose in the East, finding its expression in Neoplatonic language and its earliest articulation in the teaching of the 4th century Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa. In his classic work, *The Life of Moses*, he exploits the biblical metaphor of the Sinai cloud to suggest the essential obscurity of the divine nature, which is wrapped in luminous darkness. The early 6th

century Syrian monk known as Dionysius systematized the apophatic way in a theology of unknowing that was echoed by its various teachers thereafter: John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, the master of the Cloud of Unknowing, Nicholas of Cusa, and John of the Cross. Each of these masters in his own way elucidated the fundamentally transcendent and hidden nature of divinity which is always and ever beyond the shadow and disguise of creation and of human perception—and which can never be fully apprehended in or through the created world, nor grasped by the human intellect. In the Christian tradition we say: thought cannot touch it, only love.

Such a summary of the apophatic way of Christianity must undoubtedly beg for Thomas Merton to be added to the list of masters of the *Via Negitiva*, and some of his interpreters clearly do.<sup>6</sup> Unarguably, Merton was drawn onto the apophatic path of formless “emptiness” guided by his mentors, Therese of Lisieux, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and other Christian masters. His interest in apophatic eastern religions began during his graduate years at Columbia University and, by the 1960s, he had produced several books on the wisdom of Asia.<sup>7</sup> Especially in the teachings of Buddhism, he had found a direct method for dismantling the false, afflictive self, which for him was the central existential problematic, experienced to be the source of all personal, social, and even ecological suffering. As he matured he experimented with forms of meditation and perception proposed by the Zen tradition, and his consciousness began to transform; a Zen-like quality arose in his later writing on many subjects. The platonic intuition cultivated by the western masters who had guided his early formation, began to yield to a direct, existential apprehension of the immediacy of things induced by Asian mentors like Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. The romanticism of his early years distilled to a sparseness of observation in later life, as he simply attended to the “wild being” he shared with creation, sensing it “strange awakening to find the sky inside you and beneath you and above you and all around you so that your spirit is one with the sky.”<sup>8</sup>

While Thomas Merton never denied the value of the affirmative approach to God which perceives the divine traces or vestiges of divinity manifest throughout the creation, he was strongly convinced that it must ultimately yield place to apophaticism.<sup>9</sup>

Now, while the Christian contemplative must certainly develop by study the theological understanding of concepts about God, he is called mainly to penetrate the wordless darkness and apophatic light of an experience beyond concepts, and here he gradually becomes familiar with a God who is “absent” and as it were “non-existent” to all human experience.<sup>10</sup>

In this Merton sounds like one of our post-modern apophatists, Jacques Derrida or Emmanuel Levinas, who have taken the language of unknowing to far frontiers in their various projects of deconstruction. Clearly Merton guarded with his entire intellectual effort, the ultimate transcendent unknowability of the divine. The gradual awakening of his Zen mind disclosed the deeper mystery of Being, beyond concepts and images, intimated through a discipline of abandoning every name, every form, every concept. “The God who has revealed Himself to us in His Word has revealed himself as unknown in His ultimate essence,” Merton insists, “for he is beyond all mere human vision.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, I suggest that for Thomas Merton, this apophatic labor to go beyond conception of the Holy Mysterious, bore fruit in a more vibrant and vivid kataphatic sensibility, the restoration of perception—a sacramental vision of the startling immediacy of an ever-incarnating divinity at once revealed and concealed in creation as mercy and love. Merton was fond of echoing the words of YHWH, the Wholly Invisible—“You cannot see my face; no man shall see me and live.”<sup>12</sup> Yet in choir each night the psalmist within him would reply: “but we are the people who long to see your face.”<sup>13</sup>

Christianity is fundamentally a kataphatic religion. The Greek word *kataphasis* infers a downward orientation consonant with an incarnational way of perceiving and speaking about divinity affirmatively, in form, image, embodiment. Whereas the apophatic orientation suggests moving away into unseeing and unsaying, the kataphatic way implies just the opposite: seeing, saying, sensing. This is the *Via Affirmativa*, accentuating the likeness more than the unlikeness of divinity to its creative self-manifestation in the creation. It presupposes not the obscurity or silence of God, but rather the divine impulse to express, expose, exhibit the sacred energies, and even more, to an erotic allurements toward its creatures.<sup>14</sup> Theologically the affirmative way refers to the immanence of God to and within the creation, and is termed “panentheism”—divinity within all. The divine orientation to

immanence and self-manifestation is the epicenter, the fundamental core of Christian experience played out in the Christian theology of creation and is most dramatically expressed in the Christian mystery of the incarnation of Christ, the very sacramental embodiment of divinity in human flesh. From these two fundamental Christian doctrines is born a whole world of epiphanies, which evokes a kataphatic way of seeing and celebrating the divine in its myriad incarnational expressions. Such consciousness may be called sacra-mentality: the sustained perception of divine presence within the shadow and disguise of all things which generates mystical wonder. This is where Thomas Merton lived: in that *chiaroscuro* realm beyond the shadow and the disguise, within the shadow and the disguise of sacramentality: the art of seeing and celebrating the sacred mysteries everywhere.

One might say that Merton was a sacramentalist from birth. Both Owen and Ruth Merton were of Welsh ancestry and both were landscape painters who not only gave him the genetic sense and sensibility of a sacramental visionary, but also tutored him in the art of seeing.<sup>15</sup> After the early death of his mother, Tom became his father's companion on many landscape-painting adventures, touring the monastic ruins in the valleys of his birthplace in southern France. One could say that his father was his first and perhaps most influential teacher of sacramentality in the form of natural contemplation, introducing his son to the celebration of the sacred mysteries embodied in nature. He would say of his father:

His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure...and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean... since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself.<sup>16</sup>

Owen Merton introduced young Tom to the beauties of the natural world, mentoring him in a profound sensitivity to the marvels and subtleties of landscape and to the aesthetic labor of rendering them in artistic form. As they travelled together to the Mediterranean and down to the border of Catalonia, and into North Africa, to the edge of the desert, and then across an ocean to the tropics of Bermuda, young Tom was being tutored in the art of beholding. He inherited this father's intense and disciplined way of looking at the world, which Merton

would later translate into a painterliness of language in describing it. Such training in "natural contemplation" became the foundation of his psychic life, and the ground of his experience of the divine, such that at an early age his religious instinct went skyward:

Day after day the sun shone on the blue waters of the sea, and on the islands of the bay I remember one day looking up at the sky, taking it into my head to worship one of the clouds.<sup>17</sup>

When it was Merton's turn to mentor his own monastic sons, he would decry the incapacity for such "natural contemplation" as one of the things that accounts for the stunting of spiritual growth among contemporary monastics, and Christians in general.<sup>18</sup> Through the Byzantine masters he had come to personal liberation and understanding of the centrality of "*theoria physike*"—natural contemplation—"a habit of religious awareness which endows the soul with a kind of intuitive perception of God...reflected in ...creation,"<sup>19</sup> an "inseeing" into the divine essence and energies of the manifest world. Recovering this creation theology at the heart and origins of the Christian tradition deepened Merton's sacramentality and gave him the lineaments of a spiritual program and praxis that enabled him to integrate his innate and vibrant sensuality and creativity. He embraced the ascetic task of purifying his natural senses on the assurance that it would bring "deliverance from the images and concepts, the forms and shadows of all the things humans desire with their human appetites."<sup>20</sup> He discovered, as promised, the awakening of the "spiritual senses" with which the contemplative could once again behold, beyond shadow and disguise, the paradise of this existence.

There is in all visible things, an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me.<sup>21</sup>

The confluence of art and nature in his sensibility was his father's real patrimony which Merton cherished and nurtured—as his own

extraordinary literary, poetic, graphic and photographic creativity attests. Merton always understood that art was contemplation, because it revealed the "ontological splendor" of what is being experienced,<sup>22</sup> disclosing the inner radiance of Being as it is manifest in the sensible world. And although he would caution that the experiences of the artist and mystic are distinct,<sup>23</sup> he still insisted that "a true and valid aesthetic formation was necessary for the wholeness of Christian living and worship."<sup>24</sup> One can hear the seamlessness of Merton's aesthetic sacramental sensibility that awakened his paradisaical mind in this journal passage:

Heavenliness—again. For instance, walking up into the woods yesterday afternoon—as if my feet acquired a heavenly lightness from contact with the earth of the path. As though the earth itself were filled with an indescribable spirituality and lightness, as if the true nature of the earth were to be heavenly, or rather as if all things, in truth, had a heavenly existence. As if existence itself were heavenliness. The same—at Mass, obviously. But with a new earthy and yet pure heavenliness of bread. The ikons, particularly of St. Elias and his great red globe of light, and the desert gold, the bold red of the mountain: all transformed!<sup>25</sup>

We know that it was not a straight aesthetic path for Merton from the formative beauty of Prades to the transfigurative beauty of Polonnaruwa. Disorienting tragedy and loss would visit him in his most formative and impressionable years, casting him into an anguished orphanhood and sense of alienation far from the sacramentality that became the signature awareness of his mature seasons. Yet, as his last dramatic spiritual experience in Polonnaruwa was sacramental and aesthetic in nature, so was his first. At eighteen years old he took himself to Rome once again to explore the great churches of the Holy City: Sts. Cosmas and Damian, Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Sabina, St John Lateran, Santa Costanza, Santa Prudenza and others. Captivated by the mosaics and frescoes, the young lapsed Anglican found himself lighting candles and praying. Later in life he would write that authentic art fosters the capacity "to look, to see, to admire, to contemplate,"<sup>26</sup> and to his surprise, before any acquaintance with formal Christianity, he had travelled by way of aesthetic appreciation to contemplation:

These mosaics told me more than I had ever known of the doctrine of

a God of infinite power, wisdom and love Who had yet become Man and revealed in His Manhood the infinity of power, wisdom and love that was His Godhead.<sup>27</sup>

The power of that first sensuous and aesthetic illumination which awakened his Christ consciousness remained with him all through his monastic life. He had to admit that his was the "Christ of the icons"<sup>28</sup>—a christology rooted in liturgy, art and worship,<sup>29</sup> greatly beholden to the Byzantine tradition which invited enlightenment through an illumination and transformation of the senses. But one season in Rome does not a kataphatic mystic make, and Merton's formation in sacramentality would undergo more explicitly cognitive delineation at Columbia University where he encountered the luminaries of the Christian tradition in his philosophy and literature courses. Faithful to his father's legacy, his master's thesis explored the relationship between "Nature and Art in William Blake."<sup>30</sup> And he reports being turned on like a pinball machine by visionary thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Dante, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jaques Maritan, and—in a curious addendum—he says, "by the sacraments of the Catholic Church."<sup>31</sup>

It was in 1938 at the Church of Corpus Christi on the Upper West Side of Manhattan that Merton formally embraced the sacramental life of Catholic Christianity. His deeper reflection on his sacramental initiation in baptism would come many years later, but it bears mention. Noting that the Latin word *sacramentum* is the equivalent of the Greek *mysterion*, he writes:

To say that the Christian religion is mystical is to say that it is also *sacramental*. The sacraments are 'mysteries' in which God works and our spirit works together with him under the impulse of divine love... the sacraments are mystical signs of the free spiritual work of divine love in our souls<sup>32</sup>

The illumination effected by sacramental awakenings makes available to our senses the mysteries of faith resplendent throughout the natural world, initiating us into Adam's original charge to imitate the divine Creator and *look* at creation, see it, recognize it, affirm its goodness, and give it a new and spiritual existence within the human soul.<sup>33</sup>

We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. He speaks to us

gently in ten thousand things, in which His light is one fullness and one Wisdom. Thus He shines not on them but from within them. Such is the loving-kindness of Wisdom.<sup>34</sup>

After Merton's baptism, his sacramental spirituality was further enhanced by the richly kataphatic Franciscan tradition (which he almost embraced, had they embraced him!)<sup>35</sup> His serious study of Bonaventure and Duns Scotus gave him necessary theological frameworks for understanding the hidden wholeness of creation. Bonaventure, a master of the neoplatonic emanation tradition, offered him an itinerary for venturing on "*The Soul's Journey into God*,"<sup>36</sup> through the mysteries of creation, the self, and the dark and trackless path of being. Following the divine footprints back to their source, Bonaventure says we "place our first step in the ascent on the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror through which we may pass over into God, the supreme Craftsman"<sup>37</sup> Merton resonated with this sacramental sensibility, celebrating creatures as vestiges that reflected the overflowing creativity of their divine Source. This is especially evident in *Seeds of Contemplation* where Merton describes creation as "the art of the Father."<sup>38</sup> Likewise, his indebtedness to the Franciscan tradition is apparent in his poetry.

For, like a grain of fire  
smoldering in the heart  
of every living essence  
God plants His undivided power -  
Buries His thought too vast  
for worlds  
In seeds and roots and blade  
and flower.<sup>39</sup>

Merton sensed the "angelic transparency" of everything, intuitively resonating with Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' language in saying of creatures, "their inscape is their sanctity".<sup>40</sup>

Every plant that stands in the light of the sun is a saint and an outlaw. Every tree that brings forth blossoms without the command of man is powerful in the sight of God. Every star that man has not counted is a world of sanity and perfection. Every blade of grass is an angel singing in a shower of glory.<sup>41</sup>

Thomas Merton entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941 and embraced what was nearly a purely sacramental existence. The Cistercian life was grounded in the liturgy of the hours, immersing the monks in the poetics of the Bible, whose still point was the daily Eucharist—the perfectly performative and sacramental expression of Christian life. Gethsemani was a dramatically symbolic world of sign, symbol and silence intended to nurture the monk's sacramentality. At Benedict's instruction even work was to be performed as liturgy, the *ora of labora*,<sup>42</sup> with the tools of one's trade treated as sacramental vessels. Merton believed the impulse to praise and worship was instinctive, but this capacity needs to be brought to life, and the medium for this quickening is sign and symbol.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, semiotics and symbology are high order functions of the human, evolved to aid our consciousness transformation, and indeed our *theosis*—our divinization. But Merton lamented that "sensitivity to religious symbolism has never been so dead as in our time, even and especially, among religious men."<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps this is one reason why Merton eventually longed to be liberated from the routinized cult and culture of his monastic environment. In 1951, in response to Merton's request for greater solitude, Abbot Dom James nominated him "forester" which entailed restoring the woodlands that had been stripped a decade earlier and provided an opportunity for embodied engagement with the vitality of living things. In 1960 he began to take up residence in a hermitage set on a knob called Mount Olivet, and there he found a wider community inviting him to the daily office of praise. Now his choir mates were frogs, birds, and cicadas—the "huge chorus of living beings (that) rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things."<sup>45</sup> His worship became "a blue sky and ten thousand crickets in the deep wet hay of the field"; his vow became "the silence under their song."<sup>46</sup> Soon the whole landscape became the primordial scripture on which he meditated as he saturated "the country beyond words"<sup>47</sup> with his psalms.

During this time Merton began to sense what "writes the books, and drives me into the woods," and celebrated gratefully the Celtic spirit that coursed through his Welsh blood. In his discovery of Celtic monasticism

he recognized himself in the hermits, lyric poets, pilgrims, and green martyrs with whom he shared a similar spiritual temperament. These were also masters of "natural contemplation" (*theoria physike*) who, like Merton, sought God less in the ideal essences of things than in the physical hierophanic cosmos. With the green martyrs of the Celtic tradition, he always enjoyed a palpable sense of the presence of the Presence which encircled him in the great encompassing of creation, and imparted to him a peace unlike any other.

Merton also identified with the Celtic monks' restless quest to recover paradise as a lived experience of the native harmony and unity of all beings. Indeed his lyrical language betrays his Celtic spirit playing at the "thin places" that interfaced the physical and imaginal realms, as he allowed himself to be taken to in-between dimensions of sheer transparency where being sensibly flows through the courseways of creation, where time alters, where space opens to the numinous. And like his Celtic monastic ancestors he made "a profound existential tribute to realities perceived in the very structure of the world and of man, and of their being." In lineage with them, he engaged in that "spiritual dialogue between man and creation in which spiritual and bodily realities interweave and interlace themselves like manuscript illuminations in the Book of Kells."<sup>48</sup>

Yearning for paradise was also a Cistercian habit of heart that engaged Merton his whole life. Not an otherworldly quest, the recovery of paradise was realized in the awakening of a sense of communion in the mystery of life. He saw himself as a "New Adam" in the garden of the new creation, knowing and naming living things as his kin, saluting all species as the "innocent nations" that comprise the earth. Like a grateful celebrant, each morning at "*le point vierge*"<sup>49</sup> (the virgin point) of dawn, he witnessed the re-birth of the cosmos "when creation in its innocence asks for permission to *be* once again."<sup>50</sup> Thus awakened, wilderness was "another country" closer to Eden than any other he had ever known, where he sat in stillness and loved the wind in the forest and listened for a good long while to God. There in the woods, he experienced himself at the center of the universe where at any moment the gate of heaven would open wide and he would perceive the undying heavenliness in the real nature of things. "Paradise is all around," he heard the dawn deacon say: all we need do is enter in.

Thomas Merton's rapturous experience of paradise was not won without the hard labor of spiritual rebirth which delivered him from the distortions of his false self, and revealed to him the beauty of his original, true nature. The final years of life were bitter-sweet for Merton. He was infirm, lonely and often depressed. Yet the sacramentality cultivated throughout his life sustained him richly—now expanded to embrace the epiphanic cosmos.

It is necessary for me to live here alone without a woman, for the silence of the forest is my bride and the sweet dark warmth of the whole world is my love, and out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers in their beds all over the world.<sup>51</sup>

These are his reflections after being offered the unexpected communion experience with M, his human sacrament, his Sophia incarnate. With her he tasted the sweetness of a shared paradise celebrated in "the gentle liturgy of shy children" who have "permitted God to make again His first world."

This is God's own love he makes in us...  
on...this paradise of grass  
Where the first world began  
Where God began  
To make His love in man and woman  
For the first time<sup>52</sup>

But Merton's sacramentality had a hard steely side as well. What the creation mystic celebrated in exquisite poetic verse, the ecological prophet voiced with protest and challenge as he confronted us with the awful irresponsibly with which we scorn the smallest values, and the portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power to threaten life itself.<sup>53</sup>

These are worlds in themselves. No man can destroy them. Theirs is the life that moves without being seen and cannot be understood. It is useless to look for what is everywhere. It is hopeless to hope for what cannot be gained because you already have it. The fire of a wild white sun has eaten up the distance between hope and despair. Dance in this sun you tepid idiot. Wake up and dance in the clarity of perfect contradiction.<sup>54</sup>

But we humans are tepid idiots, whose spiritual pathologies have infected the whole planet. Deep ecologist that he was, Merton knew that the cause and the cure for earth's degradation lay in the human soul: "we destroy everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally, in every way."<sup>55</sup> Our destructiveness and violence is symptomatic of our corporate self-loathing, especially in the affluent world, where we have numbed and drugged our deepest hungers for communion—with creatures, with the earth—with the artificial stuff of things. And so he challenged us to come to our senses again and transform our mystical sacramentality into prophetic eco-mentality; he actually said—nearly a half-century ago—that ecological thinking had to be the hallmark of the new millennium.<sup>56</sup> He also challenged us to revolutionize our prayer, the modality for cultivating sacramentality: "all you do is breathe and look around...."<sup>57</sup>

Breathe and look around: this is what he seemed to be doing at Polonnaruwa when he was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness by an aesthetic sacramental experience, the penultimate spiritual experience of his life. As it was in the beginning: statues and frescoes; the archetypal field of sacred space: a garden, a cloister, trees, rocks, evocations of Eden. On the other side of the world, this kataphatic mystic beheld the apophatic sacraments of another world, in "a beautiful and holy vision," that finally arrested the *chiaroscuro* oscillation of the mystical life. With his whole sensorium open to the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, form and design, an inner clearness exploded within him, tripped by the ikonic figures that mirrored his own true nature, beyond all the shadow and disguise which had been the preoccupation of all his asceticism. The sacramentalist had arrived in the garden where all is evidence, where all is emptiness and compassion. The sacramentalist arrived at that revelatory moment which the poet in him had earlier prophesied:

Creation finds the pressure of its everlasting secret  
Too terrible to bear.

Then every way we look, lo! Rocks and trees  
Pastures and hills and streams and birds and firmament  
And our own soul within us flash, and shower with light,  
While the wild countryside, unknown, unvisited of men,  
Bears sheaves of clean, transforming fire.

And then, O then the written image, schooled in sacrifice,  
The deep united threeness printed on our deepest being,  
Shot by the brilliant syllable of such an intuition,  
    turns within,  
And plants that that light far down into the heart  
    of darkness and oblivion  
*[beyond the shadow and the disguise]*  
And plunges after to discover flame.<sup>58</sup>

#### Notes & References

1. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, Naomi Burton Stone et al, (eds.). New York: New Directions, 1973, pp. 230-236.
2. *ibid*, p. 236.
3. *ibid*, p. 235.
4. *Neti neti* in Hinduism, and in particular Jnana Yoga, *neti neti* is a chant or mantra meaning "not this, not this", or "neither this, nor that" (*neti* is *sandhi* for *na iti*, "not so"). The purpose of the exercise is to negate conscious rationalizations, and other distractions from the purpose of a meditation. It is also a sage view on the nature of the Divine, and especially on the attempts to capture and describe the essence of God. In this respect, the phrase succinctly expresses the standpoint of negative theology.
5. This famous transcendental mantra comes from the Prajnaparamita, sacred text of the Buddhists and is used as a means to gain liberation from this world of duality and awaken to the Buddha Mind within each the chanter.
6. See William Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey*; Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984, p. 238; Paul O'Connell "Apophatism" in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, William Shannon, et al, eds., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002, pp. 8-9.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. New York: New Directions, 1965; *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York: New Directions, 1968; *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967.
8. Thomas Merton., *Sign of Jonas*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1953, p. 340.
9. See William Shannon's introduction in *TMPJ* pp. 11-16.
10. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Garden City:

- Doubleday, 1971, p. 185.
11. *ibid.*
  12. Exodus 22:20
  13. Psalm 24
  14. See Janet Ruffing's essays on kataphatic spirituality and the affirmative way in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Louisville: John Knox Press, pp. 91-92; 393-394.
  15. See Thomas Merton. *When the Trees Say Nothing*, ed. Kathleen Deignan. Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2003, pp. 21-41.
  16. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., p. 11.
  17. *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
  18. *Thomas Merton, My Brother, Basil Pennington*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996, p. 103.
  19. *A Thomas Merton Reader*, Thomas P. McDonnell, ed. New York: Image Books Doubleday, p. 384.
  20. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, p. 229.
  21. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. New York: New Directions, p. 61.
  22. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, Patrick Hart, ed. New York: New Directions, 1981, p. 445.
  23. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, p. 62.
  24. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978, p. 35.
  25. *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. V*, Robert Daggy, ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997, p. 99.
  26. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960, p. 153.
  27. SSM p. 110
  28. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love (Letters)*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985. p. 637.
  29. Paul O'Connell *TME 51-54 Merton's Christology*; George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedom: Thomas Merton's Christ*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993.
  30. Thomas Merton, "Nature and Art in William Blake" in *The Literary*

- Essays of Thomas Merton. New York: New Directions, pp. 387 ff.
31. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*. New York: Bantam Books/ Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979, p. 12.
  32. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1963, pp. 76-77.
  33. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, p. 54.
  34. Merton, "Hagia Sophia" in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, pp. 64-65.
  35. Merton's first attempt to join a religious order was with the Franciscans.
  36. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey Into God (Itinerarium mentis in Deum)*, ed. Ewert Cousins. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.
  37. *ibid.*
  38. Thomas Merton, "Things in Their Identity" in *Seeds of Contemplation*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1949, pp. 24-30.
  39. Thomas Merton, "The Sowing of Meanings" in *The Collected Poems*, p. 188.
  40. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 25.
  41. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*. New York: New Directions, 1964, p. 106.
  42. Ora et labora: The Benedictine practice of work and prayer, of work as prayer.
  43. Merton, *The New Man*, pp. 86 ff.
  44. *ibid.*, p. 87.
  45. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 360.
  46. Thomas Merton, "Cables to the Ace" in *The Collected Poems*, p. 400.
  47. *Entering the Silence* p. 424.
  48. Thomas Merton, "From Pilgrimage to Crusade", *Mystics and Zen Masters*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 97.
  49. Point vierge: the virgin point of the natural world; and of the human spirit, the center of our nothingness where one meets God. See *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* pp. 118-121; 151; 158.
  50. *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. V*, pp. 239-240.
  51. *ibid.*
  52. "Louisville Airport" *In the Dark Before Dawn: New and Selected Poems* by Thomas Merton, Lynn R.Szabo, ed. pp. 196-197.

53. *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William Shannon, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994, p. 70.
54. Thomas Merton, "Atlas and the Fat Man" in *The Collected Poems*, pp. 679 ff.
55. *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. IV*, Victor Kramer, ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996, p. 274.
56. See his correspondence with Rachel Carson, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 70.
57. From a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Hidden Ground of Love*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985, pp. 502ff.
58. Thomas Merton, "The Sowing of Meanings" in *The Collected Poems*, pp.187-189.