

Thomas Merton and James Joyce

by
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Riverrun, the first, probably the most famous, and assuredly the most inclusive word of *Finnegans Wake* would bear us “past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay,” bringing us not just “back to Howth Castle and Environs,” and now even to Thomas Merton. The river, as it were, run far enough, is confluent with the *Waters of Siloe*, that is to say, with the monk, Merton. This is not to homogenise – secularise Merton or monasticise Joyce. Let us be content to sound the depths of the river, see what we find, and possibly sit in wonderment at the peculiarity and unity of the human condition.

The foundational wonder is that as the aspirant Merton approached the Catholic faith he also approached the apostate James Joyce, an apostasy manifested to all the world in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We might almost say that that master of irony, James Joyce, was, wittingly or not, Merton’s spiritual godfather. We shall suggest that Merton and Joyce, not only as it were, “spoke the same language”: They shared inner space as well as a common geography. In our case it may well be the want of geography of the exile. As I think the climactic chapter of *The Cloud of Unknowing* puts it: “When you are ‘nowhere’ physically you are ‘everywhere’ spiritually.” Let us see.

Merton’s fascination with Joyce would seem to have something of the rhythm of a river. He relates in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, or, if you will, *The Portrait of the Monk as a Young Man*, that in 1938 his “reading became more and more Catholic.” He goes on: “I became absorbed in the poetry of Hopkins and in his notebooks.” But within a few lines he opens with what many, possibly Merton himself, would consider a *non sequitur*. Let us quote it at length:

And here is a strange thing. I had by now read James Joyce’s *Ulysses* twice or three times. Six years before . . . I had tried to read *Portrait of the Artist* and had bogged down in the part about his spiritual crisis . . . I finally dropped it in the middle of the ‘Mission’. Strange to say, sometime during this summer – I think it was before the first time I went to Corpus Christi – I re-read *Portrait of the Artist* and was fascinated precisely by that part of the book, by the ‘Mission’, by the priest’s sermon

on hell. What impressed me was not the fear of hell, but the expertness of the sermon. Now, instead of being repelled by the thought of such preaching – which was perhaps the author's intention – I was stimulated and edified by it . . .

So then I continued to read Joyce, more and more fascinated by the priests and Catholic life that came up here and there in his book. That, I am sure, will strike many people as a strange thing indeed¹

By the next paragraph Merton is talking about Thomism, the metaphysical poets, "especially Crashaw," and remarking that his life, by September of 1938, "began to be surrounded, interiorly, by Jesuits." "Surrounded by Jesuits"? The reader of the *Portrait* will recognize just that as Joyce's complaint!

Within two months the aspirant entered the Church at Corpus Christi. But this profession of faith hardly inhibited his enthusiasm for the apostate. A highwater mark may well have come the next year. On November 19, 1938, a year and a day after his baptism, Merton made the following entry in his journal, recently published as *Run to the Mountain*:

Now look you: there have been three important things that have happened this year.

1. The publication of *Finnegans Wake*.
2. The War in Europe . . .
3. The Picasso exhibition.²

The astonishing thing, of course, is that *Finnegans Wake* ranks over the war in Europe. Well, Merton might wryly reply: Better a good book than a bad war. And a good book may last longer, flow farther. Our point at this juncture can only be that Merton considered *Finnegan* a very good book indeed. He goes on to say that it "proves Joyce is the greatest writer of our time."³ Nowhere do I see Merton foreshadowing this estimation.

With the coming of the young monastic, however, consciousness of Joyce may have ebbed. A silence is borne out here by *Entering the Silence*, the second volume of Merton's journal, covering the years of 1941-52. As over against the first volume, where Joyce overshadows, let us say, a John of the Cross, in volume two he is not even mentioned. I suspect that this general bent will be borne out in subsequent volumes. It was a time for a St. Bernard, a John of the Cross, and a Julian of Norwich, all essential, extraordinarily enriching, and enduring experiences for Merton. But Joyce may not have so much disappeared from consciousness as 'lain fallow there, with potential for cross-fertilization. Certainly, in 1968, the last year of his life, Merton wrote two exceptionally perceptive essays on Joyce,⁴ appreciations suggesting that an integration had taken place in him between, if you will, the catholicity of Joyce and the Catholicism of the green monk. Within months, as it were, in the course of his passage to India, Merton was himself overrun by the

river, which we might denominate not so much the Ganges as, with Joyce, Anna Livia Plurabelle, i.e., the River Liffey.

Some might insist that the monk was overrun by the river in more than one way, and that congress with the likes of Joyce was part not so much of the diffusion as it was the undoing of the more manageable monk of a splendidly unadulterated baroque church. Merton himself confesses it "a strange thing" in the pertinent passage of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, an adjective he actually uses three times, that is to say, perhaps too much. His peculiar appreciation of Joyce was not necessarily that peculiar. Let us be content for the moment to note that T.S. Eliot himself, not reputedly indulgent towards heterodoxy or heathenism, wrote, in *After Strange Gods*, that "the most ethically orthodox of the more eminent writers of my time is Mr. Joyce." Again, "I consider Mr. Joyce's work to be penetrated by Christian feeling."⁵ I cannot but observe that when Eliot gets to the likes of D.H. Lawrence he does not say 'Mr.'! Joyce the green rebel may have left Dublin and Catholicism but assuredly the first and possibly the second never left him. In mysticism, as we know, things can be even more present by their absence.

Nothing human is alien, but Merton and Joyce shared a great deal more than common humanity. Let us explore some obvious and less than obvious links. As writers they "spoke the same language," and it was, against the ascendancy of homogenization and contraction of language, complex, comic, and ironic. Their love of language was enlisted against the pollutants of what Joseph Campbell and John Morton Robinson saw as the "one-dimensional declarative sentence and conventional vocabulary."⁶ Hence, the 'macaronic' that play and parody of language that Merton owes above all to Joyce. One might also observe that the macaronic idiom is contemporary with the early and later Merton, that is, the Merton most conscious of Joyce. Michael Mott, in his monumental biography, underscores Merton's indebtedness to Joyce, even if he somehow missed Bloomsday by two days.⁷ It was June 16, not 14, 1904. This was of course the celebrated day of *Ulysses*. Against the background of a meretricious culture of 'hype' there is in both writers a candid, if not confessional, honesty. Joyce, for example, did not stoop to burlesque a sermon in the "Mission," a reason Merton, inhabiting a different space and time, could respond to it positively. The unapologetic integrity of Joyce's art, was, if you will, sermon enough. The vagaries of Stephen Dedalus in the redlight district of 'nighttown' are recorded for posterity to ponder, and they are clearly if covertly the vagaries of the author. The fleshly indelicacies of the young Merton were trimmed from *The Portrait of the Monk*. But he never expressed the compulsion to ecstasize that is observable with some of our televangelists. Merton was honest, and he could bleed. Accordingly, we have his famous prayer in the middle of *Thoughts in Solitude*. He knew that spirituality is fundamentally human. He also knew that it is likely to be also very ordinary. Joyce left a manuscript, *Epiphanies*,⁸ illustrating how the extraordinary can be found in the ordinary. The ordinary he found the proper province of men of letters; the extraordinary, on the other hand, was deemed more the function of journalism. And therefore, Leopold Bloom, among the most ordinary

of men, becomes *Ulysses*. Merton, for his part, found "mystical theology" in "a black and russet worm."⁹

The stuff of art is less the obvious than the ironic. Let us let Anthony Burgess add: "after all, the original Epiphany was ironic enough to the Magi – a child in a dirty stable."¹⁰ We have indication in our times what happens – and every indication is a deadening of sensibility – when the 'extraordinary' becomes 'ordinary', as with our ubiquitous tabloids. Finally, neither writer accepted boundaries. Merton rejoices in *Run to the Mountain*: "So *Finnegan* is the history of the world."¹¹ And he had the breadth to appreciate not just Joyce's totality but John of the Cross' *todo*. Not least of his ironies is how alone in the wilderness of Kentucky he could be multi-dimensionality and multi-culturality incarnate.

The word incarnate can take us from literature to life. And if the most apparent difference in their lives was that they were a coincidence of opposites – but more coincident than opposite. We might appeal to a common, ideational father in Nicholas of Cusa, but the roots of the pair intertwine in a much earlier Celtic mist. There would seem to be something to a collective unconscious, and Merton and Joyce were both Celts. Merton's consciousness of his Celticity seems to have been awakened by a visit from New Zealand of Aunt Kit towards the end of the fifties. He claimed his Welsh background with alacrity, musing that it was the Celt in him that sent him "into the woods" and made him do "the strange things"¹² Merton's unsystematic theology, with its poetry, appeal to nature, relaxation of structure, and, need we add, unpredictability, (e.g., his reaction to the "Mission"), can be deemed essentially a Celtic theology. Disavowals aside, Joyce could be as Celtic as the Book of Kells, to which he likened *Finnegans Wake*, and *Finnegans Wake* was not just "the history of the world," but, if you will, a natural theology – itself something most unpredictable!

But this can get us ahead of ourselves. If Merton and Joyce are kindred, they can be kindred as Shem and Shaun, brothers in *Finnegans Wake*, the one at best emblematic of the Paraclete, the other its parodist. Brothers have a common mother, and Merton and Joyce may have had a mysteriously kindred, ultimately creative, mother problem. We can no more than allude to this within these confines, lest we be lost in esoteric psychological reduction; but the mother conflict, if we can employ the phrase, may have contributed to a common search for more inclusive roots, to a primordial unity. Our brothers were both cosmopolitan, and therefore in some sense exiles. Joyce's widely resonating "silence, exile and cunning"¹³ may have equivalent application. The exile, Merton, actually entered "the silence." If we can believe David Cooper's rewarding but rather overdrawn account of Merton's disingenuously foreswearing writing, he was not above a note of 'cunning'. Merton simply struggled with the perennial conflict of the humanist (and in this case, contemplative) Christian that harkens back to the dream of St. Jerome, accused by Christ of really being a 'Ciceronian.' The perennial conflict, as it were, is between writing poetry and becoming it, the word, as we say, incarnate.

The fundamental and common conflict was, I submit, vocational, and it was apparently resolved at cross purposes. The essential accounts of the respective crises are in the two *Portraits*. But though the monk-to-be may throw the gauntlet to the world and the artist-to-be to the Church, the conflicts were never completely resolved. And therefore Merton and Jerome's dream. One need only read the last sentence of the monk's *Portrait* – SIT FINIS LIBRI, NON FINIS QUAERENDI [It may be the end of the book, but not of the seeking] – to see, within the idyllic monastic peace, portents of trouble ahead. This we have seen realised, a reason Merton is not only so interesting but so prophetic.

The artist is at least as interesting, quite possibly as prophetic. Our assumption is that the Stephen Dedalus of *The Portrait of the Artist* is at least semi-autobiographical. Merton does well to warn us: "woe to the critic who is unequivocal in identifying Stephen with Joyce himself."¹⁴ But they cannot be separated either. Joyce could even sign letters "Stephen Daedalus," and specifically identified himself with Stephen in a letter to Nora Barnacle.¹⁵ Moreover, the famous penultimate sentence of *Portrait*, with Stephen crossing the Rubicon – or the Irish Sea – "to forge in the smithy of my own soul the uncreated conscience of my race" is substantially reiterated in a letter of 1912 to Nora.¹⁶ Given that *Portrait* was not published until two years later, it may well have originated there. Art imitates life. Joyce may have chosen to be a 'Ciceronian', but Stephen's rather histrionic *non servian* is premature. It protests too much. Stephen is haunted, and I infer that Joyce was haunted for a long time. Stephen, at once attracted and repelled by an opening to the Jesuits, will not serve at the altar, but he would make "an altar of the world." He would be "a priest of the eternal imagination, transmitting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everlasting life." "Yes," the artist moans in a weak moment, "I was born to be a monk."¹⁷ The conflict surfaces in Joyce's only play, *Exiles* (1914): "The church lost a theologian in you, Richard."¹⁸ *Ulysses* (1922) opens with an *Introibo ad altare Dei* and ends, if you will, with Molly Bloom's earth resounding "It's missa est," that is, with her magnificat-mantra: "yes."¹⁹ This is possibly the greatest 'amen' in our 'profane' literature. The theologised eroticism of the artist, we can add, would be diffused and tempered by the tides of time.

Merton and Joyce are ironic, and the irony is how the monk, Merton, is by far the more prolific writer, or 'artist', and the artist, Joyce, if you will, the more demonstrative 'priest'. Small wonder the Stephen of *Ulysses* could complain: "You behold in me . . . a horrible example of free thought!"²⁰

We are not inferring that Joyce was a 'spoiled priest', as the Irish might say, or Merton hardly a spoiled writer. God, or the abbot who set Merton to writing, provides. And Joyce can seem reconciled and finally realised in *Finnegans Wake*, fulfilling a destiny. Here is excavated and recovered a catholicity and cosmism rather lost to the baroque church. Here is inclusion and unity itself. Anna Livia Plurabelle is not just the River Liffey, but the Catholic Madonna if not also the Hindu Goddess Maya. She is the fecundity of nature, the playfulness of *natura naturans*, the glory of creation resplendent in the ordinary. Water. Jacques Maritain²¹ wrote that "The

Fire Watch" epilogue to the monk's *The Sign of Jonas* is the greatest piece of spiritual prose of the twentieth century. He may be right, but I would put alongside it parts of the artist's *Finnegans Wake*, especially passages within its climactic Book IV. *The Wake* is a work of almost twenty years, quasi-monastic years one might say. Here the artist vaults, or is vaulted, from literature to love, to I think the word incarnate. And here is Celtic theology paradisaical, St. Kevin in Glendalough-the-Green. Here is Kevin, as the artist-monk tells:

... of increate God the servant, of the Lord Creator ... who, given to the growing grass, took to the tall timber ... in the search for love of knowledge through the comprehension of the unity in altruism through stupefaction ..²²

Here "most holy Kevin," proceeding from his "honeybeehivehut . . . with ambrosian eucharistic joy. . . exorcised his holy sister water," in an allusion to the magnificent and simple prayer-poem of St. Francis. And here, as our artist-monk-priest says of 'Hydrophilos' Kevin:

... he meditated continuously with seraphic ardour the primal sacrament of baptism or the regeneration of all man by affusion of water. Yee.²³

We have seen a theology *inversus* of the religious rebel, issue, by a trick of God or torpor of the devil, into a theology *universus*. The prodigal son of 'nighttown' seems awakened at Merton's 'point vierge', the virginal point.²⁴ But did he have Merton's fire: was he mystic? I would respond with the thought of Henri Bergson of Plotinus: Like Moses it was given to him to look upon the promised land, but not to enter it. But Moses and Merton are not bad company.

James Joyce died January 13, 1941; Thomas Merton died to the world December 10, 1941. Did the monk unwittingly live out his life for him? Did the artist need it?

Notes and references

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5. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), Pp. 41,52.
6. *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1944), p. 358.
7. M.Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), Pp.128, 180.
8. (Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Buffalo Press, 1956).
9. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 184.
10. "A Paralyzed City," *Dubliners and the Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook*, ed. M.Beja (New York: Macmillan, (1973), p. 227.
11. P.4.
12. Th. Merton, *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), Pp. 200-01.
13. In *Portrait, The Essential James Joyce*, ed. Harry Levin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1948), p.247.
14. "News," p.15.
- 15: *Selected Letters*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking, 1957), Pp. 21, 22, 24.
16. Ibid., p. 204.
17. *Portrait*, respectively, Pp. 223, 225, 226.
18. In *The Essential*, p.276.
19. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1960), Pp. 9, 704
20. Ibid., p. 26.
21. See David D.Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1989) , p. 47.
22. (New York: Penguin, 1939), p. 604.
23. Ibid., Pp. 605-06.
24. *Conjectures*, p.158.