

**“By Their Metaphors Shall You Know Them:  
Thomas Merton’s Use of Autobiographical Metaphors.”  
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The phrase “by their metaphors shall you know them”, comes from a book by James Olney called Metaphors of Self.<sup>1</sup> In this book Olney suggests there are two major categories of autobiographers and these two categories he defines by their use of metaphors. Writing an autobiography Olney suggests, springs from a vital human impulse to order. Theories, equations, myths and cosmologies are all attempts at giving order to the world or, as in the case of an autobiography, to a person’s life. The use of a metaphor enables a writer to give order, to create patterns of connection and ways of knowing and of grasping the unknown through the known. For Olney a metaphor is “something known and of our making or at least of our choosing, that we put to stand for, and so to help us understand, something unknown and not of our making.”<sup>2</sup>

The two categories of autobiographers Olney proposes are defined by the way in which they use metaphors in their autobiographies. Autobiographers who use a single metaphor and those who use a double metaphor. For the autobiographer simplex, their personal genius, their dominant faculty or function is only a part of their whole self, whereas for the autobiographer duplex, their personal genius and guardian spirit can only be described as The Self. There are other differences between the two groups which help to clarify the distinctions. The autobiographers simplex that Olney looks at all at some time “tried to get out of their skins,” to separate their former from their present selves. In their own accounts they also all “reached a clearly defined end point in development, a specific date beyond which there was no change but only more of the same” and lastly, they have “little or no self-awareness, little or no criticism of the assumed point of view.”

In contrast the autobiographers duplex he examines all accept their “own skin”, so to speak, and the metaphors that they use for the whole self change and develop. And, finally, they can “take a point of view on the point of view” they have adopted and so “transcend the point of view through the point of view.”<sup>3</sup> I would now like to move on to look at Merton’s use of metaphors in his autobiographical writings and to suggest that Merton fits into the second of Olney’s categories, that of the autobiographer duplex.

In 1948 when Thomas Merton came to write his autobiography he gave order to his story by choosing to set it within the context of Dante’s Divine Comedy. It is interesting to note that an earlier attempt at a semi-autobiographical novel, The Labyrinth, also uses a metaphor for its title, a metaphor descriptive of the way that Merton saw his life at that stage. By the time Merton wrote The Seven

Storey Mountain his view of his life had changed. From seeing it as a labyrinth, a maze, he now uses the structure of a journey from Hell, through Purgatory to Heaven. Looking back over his early years with the death of his mother, his father's affair with Evelyn Scott, his experience in the prison of the Lycee, his father's death, his riotous year at Cambridge with the November party and his fathering a child, the deaths of his maternal grandparents and his eventual breakdown at the end of part one of The Seven Storey Mountain, that first part of Merton's life looked like hell to him. He describes himself at this stage as being "emptied and robbed and gutted" and that the "wounds inside me were ... enough. I was bleeding to death."<sup>4</sup>

The second part of The Seven Storey Mountain begins with Merton in the "lowest circle of Inferno"<sup>5</sup> and traces his long climb out of hell through the seven storeyed mountain of purgatory. This part of his autobiography essentially traces his conversion and with his baptism Merton once more resorts to the metaphor of the mountain climb saying that

"I was about to set foot on the shore at the foot of the high, seven-circled mountain of a Purgatory steeper and more arduous than I was able to imagine, and I was not at all aware of the climbing I was about to have to do."<sup>6</sup>

Merton also uses the metaphor of the exodus saying "I had come, like the Jews, through the Red Sea of Baptism"<sup>7</sup> only to enter upon a period of desert wandering. At the end of the second part of The Seven Storey Mountain Merton's life regains direction when the idea takes hold of him that he is to become a priest and, as he says "the way into the new land, the promised land, the land that was not like the Egypt where I persisted in living, was now thrown open once again".<sup>8</sup>

In the third part of The Seven Storey Mountain Merton's new sense of direction is expressed in the compass metaphors he uses for his first two chapters. In "Magnetic North", as he looked at the possibility of joining the Franciscans, Merton is moving in roughly the right direction but some of his reasoning was moving him off course from true North. In the next chapter, after his rejection by the Franciscans, Merton returns to the metaphor of the mountain climb and begins "a long and arduous climb ... from ... a great depth."<sup>9</sup> With his discovery of Gethsemani, which was indeed paradise for Merton, the compass needle turns from magnetic North to True North. So in A Secular Journal after describing his first visit to Gethsemani he asks "how does it happen that this abbey is an earthly paradise?" and he calls it "the only good 'city' in the whole United States."<sup>10</sup>

At the age of thirty-three when Merton wrote The Seven Storey Mountain looking back at his life, he could best order his story using the metaphor of a journey, a journey that he saw expressed in Dante's Divine Comedy. Mott has pointed out that "originally" The Seven Storey Mountain "followed Dante's

Divine Comedy more closely"<sup>11</sup> but, even if Merton has moved away a little from that particular metaphor for his journey as Mott suggests, it is still I feel, the dominant metaphor in his autobiography.

By the conclusion of The Seven Storey Mountain, Merton's style is almost that of the autobiographers simplex - there is a sense that he has reached a clearly defined end point in his development and appears to be attempting to get out of his youthful skin. But there are also clear indicators that this is not the case, Merton has already sowed the seeds of both his struggle with his vocation as a writer as well as his desire for further solitude. He also makes it quite plain that though in one sense he may have arrived, as he says, "we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going"<sup>12</sup> and so can conclude the book with the words "Let this be the end of the book, not of the searching".<sup>13</sup>

For the rest of Merton's life the major part of his work is autobiographical, seen in his journals, poetry and letters. Like the autobiographer duplex Merton is almost obsessed with his search for his true self, a search through which he finds both God and his brothers and sisters. He also has a compulsive need to write about that search, and to write about himself writing about that search. He is in Olney's words a "theoretical autobiographer" or an "auto-autobiographer", Merton, like the autobiographers duplex "tells the story of himself telling the story of himself".<sup>14</sup>

As with other autobiographers whom Olney places in the duplex category Merton's metaphors change and develop. In The Sign of Jonas Merton uses the metaphor of Jonah, again a metaphor of movement and journey. As Jonah attempts to go in one direction God, so to speak, picks him up by the scruff of the neck, and points him in another direction. The same happens with Merton, part of him wishes to stop writing, but his superiors encourage his writing projects, similarly part of him desires more solitude and he finds himself given jobs, like that of Master of Scholastics, which put him more into the centre of the community. Merton return to this metaphor of Jonah and the whale a number of times in his monastic life, it expresses for him the sense he sometimes felt that he was going round and round in circles which came often from his experience of his life as holding opposite, contradictory elements in tension. As, for example, in a letter of 1966 to Miguel Grinberg where Merton empathises with Grinberg's feelings of being in "the belly of the whale" saying that "sooner or later the whale ends by taking you where you are going and setting you down on your own doorstep, though you may not recognise it at first."<sup>15</sup>

As Merton's life progressed so the metaphors he used to express his understanding of himself developed. He described himself as "an innocent bystander" and then, not long afterwards, changed that description to that of a "guilty bystander", a prophetic figure on the margins of society, a stranger to that society. In the last years of his life Merton would speak of himself as a pilgrim

and of monasticism as a pilgrimage. It is a metaphor he used to describe his Asian journey saying that he went to Asia as "a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just 'facts' about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience."<sup>16</sup> Possibly it was the best metaphor that Merton would find, one that would encompass his whole life. This metaphor of the pilgrim expresses his sense of his life as a journey in search of God and in search of the holy, the promised land. Understood from the perspective of the Celtic pilgrim monks such as Brendan, whose Voyage he had been reading in the mid-sixties, and from the perspective of the Buddhist monastic idea of *angya*, it is a metaphor that unites Merton's life. It brings together his feelings of exile and of homelessness, his desire for travel, for movement, and his restlessness in his search. Jonathan Montaldo uses an image that I like, comparing Merton to a divine hound of heaven, a "spiritual hound", following the scent of the holy, the scent of the Christ that he first discovered in Rome back in 1933.

This model of the pilgrim also expresses Merton's sense of geography, place, and the importance to him of the physical world, concerns which he expressed in his interest in Celtic monasticism, the Shakers and in his photography. It was something he inherited from his parents with their artistic gifts. It can be seen in Owen's paintings and in Ruth's interest in interior decoration foreshadowed in a letter of 1911 where she wrote that "there is no more fascinating subject in the world than the influence of surroundings on human character."<sup>17</sup> This sense of geography and place come across strongly in Merton's final epic poem The Geography of Lograire where his geography spreads out from his hermitage in the Kentucky woods, transcending time and place to cover all ages and all points of the compass. Or, in words which Olney uses to describe one of his autobiographers duplex, but which apply equally well to Merton - "a man of multifold vision who sees in all directions at once, with a comprehensive, 360 degree vision of the created world"<sup>18</sup> unlike the cyclops-like vision of the simplex autobiographer.

Over the course of his writings Merton's metaphors changed. He moved from metaphors such as that of The Divine Comedy and the mountain climb which expressed his early desire to renounce the world and to ascend to God, to new metaphors which suggested that the "human way out" is in fact a circle, and that when God is found through contemplation we also discover our true self and our sisters and brothers. This development reflects those words of the poet Yeats where he said that "if it be true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again."<sup>19</sup> This would be a good description of Merton's journey where he would fit on the circumference of the circle rather than in the centre. In A Vow of Conversation he wrote of himself

"My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, and I am always seeing that center from somewhere else. Hence, I will always be accused of inconsistency. But I will no longer be there to hear the accusation."<sup>20</sup>

William Shannon also placed Merton on the circumference of a circle in one of his descriptions of him, but noted that, whilst Merton was always on the circumference he continually looked inwards towards God who was the centre of that circle.<sup>21</sup>

The central position that autobiography and metaphors occupy in Merton's work has frequently been stressed. In 1967, when Merton himself attempted to evaluate his work, it was the more autobiographical of his works that came off best. When in 1949 he had attempted to write a purely scholastic book, The Ascent to Truth, he dried up in a "state of intellectual siege"<sup>22</sup> suffering from writers block - he could not write theology shorn of autobiography. I would suggest that this was not a failing but was one of Merton's greatest gifts.

The importance of autobiography to theology can be seen in recent years in the rediscovery of the use of stories as a way of doing theology. The best stories though are surely those told in biographies and autobiographies. They often deeply and immediately engage our interest, and through the understanding they can give us of "another life in another time and place" we can gain an increase in our awareness "of the nature of our selves and our share in the human condition".<sup>23</sup> Following this line it has been suggested that "by attention to compelling biographies, particularly to the dominant or controlling images theologians may do better work."<sup>24</sup> In his ministry Jesus used such images as the Exodus, the suffering servant, the homeless Son of Man in his teaching, images which he also often applied to himself. Similarly, autobiographers, and Merton in particular, can show us how these images along with other "great, archetypal images of faith apply to their own lives and circumstances, and, by extension, to our own."<sup>25</sup> A good example of this is Merton's use of the archetypal image of the pilgrimage or journey.

The Benedictine monk and scholar, Sebastian Moore, has approached this question from a slightly different angle in a recent article concerned with current trends in making sense of theology. He suggests that theology had to be autobiographical. For him theology is the "work of understanding and communicating the interaction of our story with the Jesus story," it is "the making-contemporary of the drama of Jesus as the transforming of my story" so that my story is no longer simply my transition from "womb to womb"<sup>26</sup> but is enlarged by the great story, by the incarnation, so that my story becomes my journey from God and back to God. We can see Merton doing this explicitly in his poem "The Biography", included in A Man in the Divided Sea, where he says

"If on your Cross Your life and death and mine are one,  
 Love teaches me to read, in You, the rest of a new history.  
 I trace my days back to another childhood,  
 Exchanging, as I go,  
 New York and Cuba for Your Galilee,  
 And Cambridge for Your Nazareth,  
 Until I come again to my beginning,  
 And find a manger, star and straw,  
 A pair of animals, some simple men,  
 And thus I learn that I was born,  
 Now not in France, but in Bethlehem."<sup>27</sup>

The self that is discovered on a journey such as Merton's is a self that is revelatory of God, a fact witnessed to in Augustine's famous words "know yourself, know God." Here we are returned once again to a constant theme in Merton's writing, that of the search for the true self and the search for God.

The idea that theology needs to be autobiographical can also be seen in the work of Bernard Lonergan. He suggested that "reflection on conversion can supply theology with its foundation and, indeed with a foundation that is concrete, dynamic, personal, communal, and historical."<sup>28</sup> Elena Malits in her doctoral dissertation, set out to apply this to Merton taking him as a paradigm case for exploring Lonergan's work on religious conversion. The conclusion Malits reached was the Lonergan's models of conversion worked fairly well for Merton's intellectual and moral conversions but that they were ineffective in trying to understand Merton's religious conversion. In talking of religious conversion Lonergan reverted to metaphorical descriptions but the metaphors that he used were, in Malits's opinion, few and "rather bloodless". In comparison poets and autobiographers tended to find better metaphors which could act as springboards from the known into the unknown and, she suggested, Merton's "autobiographical model" especially with its "dominant metaphor of a journey into the unknown" disclosed more faithfully "the shape of religious conversion than Lonergan's systematic account" could do.<sup>29</sup> In attempting to speak about God, theologians reach a point where it is necessary to use models, images and analogies because there is no other way. Where Lonergan's systematic method failed Merton's autobiographical method, with its use of metaphors to order that experience succeeded.

Through his use of autobiography, and through the metaphors which ordered that autobiography, Merton shares his search with us. In his writing Merton provides us with a map of his journey. That map tells us of his journey, his pilgrimage, and of his discovery of God on that journey. Each one of us has to make our own journey, no one else can make it for us, but the maps provided in the autobiographical works of authors such as Merton can help us on that journey.

The statement "by their metaphors you shall know them" is, I feel, something of an understatement of the importance of metaphors in autobiographies, and particularly in religious autobiographies. Through the metaphors Merton used we can get to know not only Merton, but also we can get to know God and to know our own true selves. Merton's inability to write theology shorn of autobiography was, I would like to suggest, one of his greatest assets and one of the major contributions that he made to theological developments in our time.

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