

This Unspeakable Paradise – Thomas Merton and the Forest

John McLuckie

Thomas Merton's journey deeper into solitude was a journey deeper into the woods. The woods were the natural place for him to seek solitude away from the monastic buildings at Gethsemani, but his many references to the woods and to trees in his journals, letters and poems suggest that his relationship to the forest is more than one of convenience. It is not simply that the trees provide a kind of cover for his flight into solitude; they are, to him, the natural home

for the solitary. In this article, I will look at Merton's relationship with the woods around Gethsemani to explore how they offered both a context and a rich source of inspiration for his contemplative journey. I will also, very briefly, open a dialogue with some more recent considerations of forests as places of spiritual exploration as there seems to be a growing awareness in the West of the spiritual value of our woods.

Much has been written about

Merton's vision of the natural world, and it is worth saying a few words about this before considering the particular place of the woods in his contemplative consciousness. The title of this article refers to words from Merton's journal for Pentecost 1960. He writes about the experience of praying Lauds away from the monastic church and finds extraordinary riches in nature's sounds at dawn:

The first chirps of the waking birds—"le point vierge" of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it is time to "be"? And he tells them "Yes". Then they one by one wake and begin to sing ... With my hair almost on end and the eyes of the soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise, and I behold this secret, this wide open secret which is there for everyone, free, and no one pays any attention.¹

It is a repeated theme in Merton's writing that all creation is called simply to be, each part called to be what it is meant to be in simplicity. Being close to the non-human parts of creation teaches a kind of spontaneity and honesty in this simple response towards the Creator:

There are so many words that one cannot get to God as long as He is thought to be on the other side of words... That is where the silence of the woods comes in. Not that there is something new to be thought and discovered in the woods, but only that the trees are all sufficient exclamations of silence, and one works there, cutting wood, clearing ground, cutting grass, cooking soup, drinking fruit juice, sweating, washing, making fire, smelling smoke, sweeping, etc. This is religion. The more one gets away from this, the more one sinks in the mud of words and gestures.²

If the trees are 'all sufficient exclamations of silence', then the one who lives among them, who learns contemplation among them, might seek to become such a thing. For Merton, nature is not there simply to be admired or even learned from. Contemplation of the natural world and in the natural world is the way one wakes up to the realisation of one's connection to all that lives,³ the way one learns how to be in silence. As is clear from this quotation, the trees form a major part of the natural world that surrounds Merton in his chosen place of solitude, so it is to them that we now turn.

As early as his poetry collection of 1946, *A Man in the Divided Sea*,

Merton wrote of the trees as part of God's plan for all creation. His poem, 'The Trappist Cemetery—Gethsemani', makes reference to the trees that surround the brothers' graves:

The trees, our sisters, in their
summer dresses,
Guard your fame in these
green cradles⁴

And then, at the end of the poem;

The beasts and trees shall
share your resurrection,
And a new world be born
from these green tombs.⁵

From an early date, then, his vision is a cosmic one. The life of faith cannot fully be lived without connection to the whole of creation. In Merton's view, this was the impetus for the earliest Cistercian monks to seek places of solitude and natural beauty as the preferred locations for their monasteries. In *The Waters of Siloe*, he suggested that the choice of locations in the woods of France, England, Belgium and Germany was intended as a 'lesson in contemplation'⁶ and this choice was also to be his as he later settled from his restless quest for a place to locate his deeper exploration of solitude and silence.

Merton's prototype hermitage was in the old toolshed in the woods and given over to his use by the Abbot and he named it St Anne's. In his journal entry for Sep-

tember 3, 1952, Merton praises the simplicity, the poverty and the 'material inactivity' of the place, which allow him to draw close to God in solitude. He says; 'True, I have the will of a monk in the community. But I have the prayer of the monk in the silence of the woods and the toolshed.'⁷ His entry for that day turns to prayer:

What is easier than to discuss mutually with You, O God, the three crows that flew by in the sun with the light flashing on their rubber wings? Or the sunlight coming quietly through the cracks in the boards? Or the crickets in the grass? You are sanctified in them...⁸

Again, it seems to me that Merton's love of that place is not solely due to the seclusion it affords and later reflections from that humble shed are more specifically focussed on the trees:

My Zen is in the slow swinging tops of sixteen pine trees. One long thin pole of a tree fifty feet high swings in a wider arc than all the others and swings even when they are still. Hundreds of little elms springing up out of the dry ground under the pines. My watch lies among oak leaves. My tee shirt hangs on the barbed wire fence, and

the wind sings in the bare wood.⁹

This stunning passage is an example of pure attention given to the trees around him. There is no commentary, no interpretation, no theologising, just simple awareness stated with Zen-like economy. Merton often writes of the contentment he finds in that place in the woods and he describes walking barefoot among the pine needles, suggesting a connection with the earth and a sensual awareness of the textures of the forest.

When Merton's more permanent hermitage, St Mary of Carmel, is completed in December 1960, he describes it in terms of its forest location. There is a telling passage in his journal for December 26, 1960 where he sums up his experiences of another part of the woods around Gethsemani, a place he calls St Teresa's Wood. He does so as a reflection on the journey that has led to his new hermitage.

Attached and at peace in this wood because it knows me so well and I have no house there, and nothing has ever been said or declared to indicate that I was there always. Nothing said it was "my place".

There I discovered Paraguay and for a while this wood was Paraguay (1957). I read a thing of Kierkegaard with a lovely paragraph on solitude

—a bit of Henry Miller on Big Sur (in another place), much Suzuki, Vinoba Bhava. It is an oriental wood. I taught Nels Richardson a little yoga there, walked and planned with Dom Gergorio anxiously there. There walked on winter afternoon after discovering some lyrics in the *I Ching*. Read *The Leopard* and Ungaretti there. Above all, prayed and meditated there and will again.¹⁰

Several insights come from this passage. Merton feels that he *belongs* in the woods in a significant way. It is a place of reading and conversing as well as a place of praying and silence. And for a while, it served as a surrogate for the escape to a more remote place which he longed for, but which never came to fruition. In time, he grew to realise that the place of his belonging, of his deepest identity, was right there in the place he sought to flee. The place where he could most truly fulfil his vocation as a hermit, as a contemplative, and, indeed, as a writer, was in the woods of Gethsemani. This passage also indicates that his long interest in the spirituality of the Far East could be nurtured among the pines.

Merton's essay, *The Day of a Stranger*, is perhaps his most famous exploration of his identity as a forest contemplative. It was written in May 1965 and represents his mature reflection on his life in soli-

tude. He speaks of the 'necessity' of living in the woods and recounts many of the themes we have already heard—the silence of the forest, connection with nature, a place for thoughts and writings to resonate—but he takes the exploration of silence to a new level and introduces a rich metaphor, or, perhaps, archetype, which is particularly powerful for the Christian who contemplates the trees:

I have an obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness which is at the center of all other loves. I cultivate this plant silently in the middle of the night and water it with psalms and prophecies in silence. It becomes the most beautiful of all trees in the garden, at once the primordial paradise tree, the *axis mundi*, the cosmic axle, and the Cross. *Nulla silva talem profert*. [No tree brings forth such.]¹¹

Life in the woods, then, was Merton's path towards contemplative stillness and fulfilled identity. The woods were his *locus* for exploring connection with nature, our deepest belonging. They were his school for silence. They were a kind of shelter, womb and icon, a sacramental means of entering the silence of God.

This profound experience gives a place of contact with many of our own contemporaries who seek a spiritual path, but do not necessarily choose to begin their journey from within a religious tradition. The writings of Robert Macfarlane are an outstanding example of someone who seeks deep connection with nature both in its essential character and in its place in human imagination. In his recent book, *The Old Ways*, he describes a number of journeys undertaken, many with others, through the natural world in exploration of our connection with landscape, life and identity. On one such journey in Northern Spain, he sleeps in a dense pine forest and reflects afterwards on his sense of what landscape means:

I prefer to think of the word as a noun containing a hidden verb: landscape scapes, it is dynamic and commotion causing, it sculpts and shapes us not only over the courses of our lives but also instant by instant, incident by incident. I prefer to take 'landscape' as a collective term for the temperature and pressure of the air, the fall of light and its rebounds, the textures and surfaces of rock, soil and building, the sounds (cricket screech, bird cry, wind through trees), the scents (pine resin, hot stone, crushed thyme) and the un-

countable other transitory phenomena and atmospheres that together comprise the *bristling* presence of a particular place at a particular moment.¹²

This one passage gives a sense of Macfarlane's consciousness of the natural world, which I think it would be reasonable to describe as 'contemplative'. Elsewhere in the same book, he talks of learning the Sanskrit word *darshan*, and fully recognises the sense of an awe-filled encounter with the sacred that this word describes.¹³ As a writer who knows himself to be in particular *places*, and who has a keen sense of how one gives attention to the natural world, he should be an interesting conversation partner with someone like Merton.

Another recent work on the relationship between the natural world and human imagination is Sara Maitland's *Gossip from the Forest*.¹⁴ Maitland is a Roman Catholic and has previously written a number of books on theology and spirituality, perhaps most notably *A Book of Silence*,¹⁵ which explores her own journey into solitude and silence. *Gossip from the Forest* is not overtly concerned with matters of Christian spirituality, but it does engage with a number of the concerns we have already discussed—the way our consciousness is shaped by our interaction with forests, a sense of connection with the natural world, the contemplative dimension of our

engagement with nature. Her primary interest, though, is in connecting the rich tradition of fairy stories from Northern Europe with the cultures formed around life in the forest. She sees these tales as sophisticated yet earthy considerations of human maturing and virtue, demotic explorations of practical spirituality. Again we see a contemporary writer engaging with our woodlands as places of significant encounters with an enlarged sense of what it is to be human.

With public policy work in the United Kingdom taking the spiritual dimension of woodland seriously,¹⁶ it seems to me that there are fertile possibilities for conversation between those engaged in the nurturing of Christian spirituality and those who may not share our religious language but who do recognise the presence of wonder and otherness in our relationships with forests. For many, that is the starting point for the spiritual journey of life. Thomas Merton has given us rich material to draw on for such a conversation. For him, the forest is a place of belonging, of connection and of contemplation; an all-sufficient exclamation of silence and an unspeakable paradise.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, *The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume 4*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.7.
2. Letter to Rosita and Ludovico

Silva, April 10, 1965 in Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p.188.

3. We see this elsewhere, such as in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where, reflecting on a spring morning alone in the woods, he says 'How absolutely central is the truth that we are first of all *part of nature*, though we are a very special part, that which is conscious of God'. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, Doubleday, 1968), p.294.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p.116.

5. *ibid.* p.118.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1979), p.274.

7. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, *The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume 3*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.14.

8. *ibid.*

9. Entry for a Day of Recollection on November 25 1958, *ibid.*, p.232.

10. *Turning Toward the World*, p.79.

11. In his version of Day of a Stranger in Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, *the Journals of Thomas Merton Volume 5*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.240.

12. Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p.255.

13. *ibid.*, p.269. See also Robert Waldron's discussion of this term in relation to Merton's contemplative outlook in his *Thomas Merton, Master of Attention* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007), p.58.

14. Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest* (London: Granta, 2012).

15. Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (London: Granta, 2008).

16. See, for example, work commissioned by the UK's Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Wellbeing and the Natural Environment <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-173-27-0007/outputs/read/9ac46fe9-7b56-4f9d-b5c7-9300d29addc6>

John McLuckie is Vice-Provost of St Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh.

Interested in becoming more involved in The Thomas Merton Society?

The committee is looking to take on new members after the next Oakham Conference in April 2014 when a number of long-standing members will be standing down. In particular we are looking for people to help organise events and also to replace two of the editorial team of the Merton Journal.

The committee currently meets twice a year at Wisdom House in Romsey. Travel expenses are covered and lunch is provided.

If interested, please email: committee@thomasmertonsociety.org.uk.