

(Re-)Learning How to See

Susanne Jennings

*All men by nature desire to know and the greatest of their
Knowledge comes through sight.*

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1:1



Note *where* God revealed Himself and *when...* God reveals Himself in the middle of conflict and contradiction - and we want to find Him outside all contradiction.¹

So inveighed Thomas Merton, writing in 1960s America against a grim backdrop of war, racial prejudice, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and growing alarm over threats posed to the natural environment. Now, in 2022 AD, we find ourselves observers of a succession of horrifying events not dissimilar to those witnessed by Merton. In taking issue (the 'where' and the 'when') with an inability to accept that the birth of Christ meant God

having taken on the human condition, and all that this entails, Merton sought to refute those who would abandon belief because of the implication that an imperfect world was *de facto* a world without God. By reminding us that the divine is to be found within a seemingly endless cycle of poverty, injustice and the displacement of innocent individuals caught up in conflict, he suggests that it is our way of apprehending God that is at fault. What we need, he appears to be saying, is a re-set.

When Thomas Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani at the age of 27, he exchanged an active social life, and all the clamour and excitement that went with it, for an altogether more sober way of life and one in which silence predominated. Taking Chapter VI ('On keeping silent') of St Benedict's Rule to heart, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (or Trappists, as they are more commonly known) communicated largely by means of an adapted form of monastic sign language and cultivated silent contemplation as a means of attuning their senses to what God might be inviting them to hear and see.² Over the years, Merton was to develop his thought on silent contemplation as that which lays the ground for apprehending the divine in the midst of 'the everyday'. Long before mindfulness meditation entered the collective vocabulary, Merton urged people to eschew 'looking' for 'seeing'. Looking, according to Merton, was predetermined (it implied that one was looking *for* something) while seeing was tantamount to returning to a state of original innocence where seer and object were united in the present moment. Following the medieval Franciscan John Duns Scotus who philosophised about this unitive state in terms of 'haecceitas' - which roughly translates out as *thisness* - Merton was to write starkly that '*now is eternity*', going on to state: 'Eternity is in the present. [It] is a seed of fire, whose sudden roots break barriers that keep [one's] heart from becoming an abyss.'³

In a letter to Dom Francis Decroix dated August 22, 1967, Merton cites Marx on the subject of religious alienation.⁴ Marx, according to Merton, located the source of this in the emphasis placed by some upon God's transcendence whereby He was perceived as beyond, unreachable, and only to be found in the afterlife. This rationale was alien to Merton and indeed to the Benedictine life to which he was vowed - a life grounded in the 'ordinary'. James Finley refers to this as the 'long slow burn of Benedictine spirituality [which is] the long slow burn of the ordinary life deeply lived [which] transforms you into the gift and miracle of an ordinary person.'⁵ This may come as a relief to those who are persuaded that an authentic existence which is touched by the divine is only accessible to the chosen few for whom 'ordinariness' is anathema. As

such, there is no need to look 'beyond' or 'outside' a daily existence that, to many, would seem to lack the drama necessary to gain access to an experience of divine encounter or illumination.

In John Berger's now classic *Ways of Seeing* he delineates a discussion that centres upon the integrity of an original oil painting versus a reproduction. The reproduction, lacking the immediacy of the original can never, he argues, succeed in closing the gap between now and the time in which the painting was executed. This is because it lacks the original trace of the artist with which a work of art whether exacted on wooden panel or canvas has been permeated:

Original paintings are silent and still ... Even a reproduction hung on a wall is not comparable ... for in the original, the silence and stillness permeate the actual material ... This has the effect of closing the distance in time between the painting and the picture and one's own act of [seeing] it.⁶

When we settle exclusively for the replication of the original, our ability to see is arguably weakened. Confronting the cycle of Advent and Christmas year upon year calls us to seek out ways to encounter Christ anew in the here and the now.

For Merton, stillness, silence and what we increasingly reference as 'mindfulness' is the necessary ground for awakening our senses to the in-breaking of the extraordinary within the ordinary. Steeped in the Rule of St Benedict which has endured since the 6th century to inform and guide the lives of all Cistercians and Benedictines, the 'everyday' is hallowed with no need to look 'beyond' or 'outside' to find God. Merton cultivated this most especially through contemplative silence and prayer and in the latter part of his life, through engagement with Zen.

Zen Photography

In *Beholding Paradise: the Photographs of Thomas Merton*, Paul Pearson reflects that this genre of photography (the term for which is believed to have been coined by Merton) is meant to 'make us wonder and to answer that wondering with the deepest expression of our own nature [and to learn] to appreciate the present moment, to appreciate what is right in front of us.'⁷ What is most striking about the meticulously curated black-and-white photographs is the translation of everyday objects, aspects of nature and studies in material imperfection into things of beauty. Having been introduced relatively late to photography, Merton came to perceive

the camera as a contemplative ‘tool’ by which the Word might be seen in created things. And so, the twisted spout of a battered old watering-can in the abbey grounds is transformed into an object worthy of our notice. Likewise, an unremarkable wicker basket lying on its side becomes a thing of enchantment by virtue of the playful interaction between light and shadow. These are astonishing images precisely because they speak of Merton’s ‘reverence for the holiness of created things’, an attitude cultivated and perfected by the Rule which states that ‘the chattels of the monastery [must be regarded] as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar’ [RB: XXXI: 10]⁸.



In a similar way, Merton’s engagements with the natural world were charged encounters. Again and again in his writings, he communicates this: ‘Christmas night has come and gone again Lovely cold moonlight going down to Mass Christmas night. Black winds, Tall stately pines. Rugged walls of the knobs. Distant woods and fields ... Lonely wind.’⁹

Intimations of the Divine

Merton recorded several profound experiences of illumination in his lifetime which may approximate to what has been termed as ‘seeing with the eyes of the soul’. In a paper entitled, ‘Seeing’, the North American mindfulness pioneer, Jon Kabat-Zinn puts this encounter succinctly as that of the ‘subject (the one who sees) and object (what is seen) uniting in the moment. [To conclude] otherwise is not seeing’.¹⁰

Among Merton’s experiences of the unification of sight with apprehension of the divine is that of his ‘epiphany’ at the Corner of 4th & Walnut in the teeming shopping district of downtown Louisville. Though

this is well-documented and even commemorated in the guise of a bronze plaque on the site where it occurred, it bears re-visiting. For Merton, it was an unremarkable day that was broken by a sense of being

suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I, theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.¹¹

And during his journey through Asia to speak at a conference in Bangkok, he gave an account in his journal of what was to be the final recorded illumination of his life:

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 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 this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery.” ... 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. ... I mean, I know 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.¹²



Sleeping Buddha, Polonnaruwa.

Encountering Divinity



For Merton, the inbreaking of the Divine was, and is, to be seen and apprehended in the most unexpected of places. A hidden recess in a pock-marked wall can, for example, point us towards the truth and beauty and, indeed, the reality, of the Incarnation. Writing in his journal on Christmas Day in 1962, Merton was to reflect:

After Vigils, for half a moment that made sense, I stood outside in the darkness with snow falling on my cheeks and listened in the deep silence to the woods at midnight. If we are thinking of Cuba and the shepherds, let us then remember that it was in one such silence as this that the shepherds watched their flocks! And heard the message of God.¹³

Acknowledgements

All Photographs by Thomas Merton. Used with Permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 354.
2. The Rule of St Benedict [RB], trans. Abbot Parry OSB, intro. & commentary

- by Esther de Waal. (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), Ch. VI.
3. Ross Labrie, *The Unanswered Question in Thomas Merton's "Fire Watch"*. *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Summer 2003), p. 565.
 4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon. (NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 158-159.
 5. James Finley, *Thomas Merton: Mystic and Teacher of our Age*. *The Merton Annual*, vo. 28, 2015. P. 181
 6. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1972), p. 31.
 7. Paul M. Pearson (ed.), *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*. (NJ: Paulist Press, 2020), p. 52.
 8. RB, Ch. XXXI.10.
 9. *Learning to Love*, p.174.
 10. Kabat-Zinn, J. Seeing. *Mindfulness* 3, 327–329 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-012-0149-7>
 11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Pres, 1977), p. 153. The passage is derived from his journal entry of March 19, 1958.
 12. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton*. (NY: New Directions, 1975), p. 233-235.
 13. Thomas Merton, *Turning Towards the World. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 279.

Susanne Jennings read Theology at the University of Cambridge. She is currently involved in the work of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge where she acts as Curator of the Lash Library and President of the Margaret Beaufort Association. Through the Margaret Beaufort Institute, Susanne led a study day (along with Dr Melanie-Prejean Sullivan) on the prophetic imaginations of Thomas Merton & Abraham Joshua Heschel, as well as another entitled *Ethical Leadership & Management in the Ecclesial & Secular Spheres* which was sponsored by the Tablet and featured talks by key speakers. She has written articles on Thomas Merton for journals in the UK, Ireland and Poland and has also given conference papers including one entitled *Thomas Merton's Engagement with Jewish and Islamic Figures for the 2015 ITMS conference in Louisville, Kentucky* which was later published as an article in the journal *Doctrine & Life*. Susanne also teaches Theology and English Literature and is a Fellow of the RSA.