Thomas Merton

By

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…"irrational worship" proclaims the liberating vision of the wholeness of creation:

I am earth, earth

Out of my grass heart

Rises the bobwhite.

Out of my nameless weeds

His foolish worship.

This liberating vision, however, must be sought in solitude and in the emptiness that solitude may bring. In “Song: If You Seek" Merton outlines the essence of this emptiness and reveals in the process the confluence of both Zen and the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, the fourth century solitaries whose spiritual insight and psychological perspicacity so moved Merton that he translated many of their sayings. The speaker of "Song: If You Seek" is solitude:

If you seek a heavenly light

I, Solitude, am your professor!

Solitude prepares the imagination for inspiration, stills the restless intellect, and beckons the spirit to new possibilities:

I go before you into emptiness,

Raise strange suns for your new mornings,

Opening the windows

Of Your innermost apartment.

In solitude one can rediscover paradise as the Desert Fathers and Zen masters prove. To do so, however, requires a divestment of the ego so thorough as to virtually deny its reality; it requires a levelling of the will and a subsuming of all desire into the one yearning for wholeness; and it requires the realization of a spiritual vulnerability that

places the seeker wholly in the hands of the Other. In short, the seeker must self-empty. To be emptied is to love, for the greatest act of love for the Christian is kenosis, the self-emptying love of the crucified Jesus. It is this kenotic love that every seeker of the "heavenly light" must know if solitude is to reveal the innocence and purity of heart that is paradise:

> Follow my ways and I will lead you
>
> To golden-haired suns,
>
> Logos and music, blameless joys,
>
> Innocent of questions
>
> And beyond answers:
>
> For I, Solitude, am thine own self:
>
> I, Nothingness, am thy All.
>
> I, Silence, am thy Amen!

Stripped of all presupposition and reflexive awareness and completely enveloped in the Other--the Non-Object of the seeker's quiest--the emptied Subject recovers, in solitude, paradise.

Paradise will forever ellude the seeker should it be desired, for desire presupposes an object to be possessed. Desire's fulfilment rests in the acquisition of the object desired. The logic of Zen and of the Christian mystics necessitates, however, the dispossession of desire or the death of the ego if the seeker is to be in turn possessed by paradise.

With the language of Zen, a language of extra-rational meaning, contradiction, and negation, and with the language of Blake, a language of innocence, private mythology, and mystical symbol, Merton sought to unveil paradise in the undefiled vision of emptiness. Paradise, for Merton, is neither eternal nor temporal but a "Yin-yang palace of opposites in unity" as he argues in **The Way of Chuang Tzu** (1965). It is Four-Fold Vision.

Throughout these mystical poems Merton is concerned with an acquiescence of soul and mind, with a creative passivity, an openness to impression, that purifies the "doors of perception" and liberates humanity from the tyranny of the Cogito. The poems are concerned with both an imaginative and a spiritual liberation that is Blakean in conception and Zen-like in imagery.

With the concIuding poem of the mystical sequence, "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing," the presence of John of the Cross can be seen in harmony with Blake and Zen.

This poem can be read as a summary of the themes of emptiness, paradise, and "unbracketed" perception. The plant is both the soul and the imagination. It must love the winter, a season of spiritual and creative desolation, in spite of the aridity of soul and paucity of ideas that it brings. The winter is the "dark night of the soul," the terrifying Absence that is a Presence.

It is the desert filled to overflowing with emptiness,

Secret

Vegetal words,

Unlettered water,

Daily zero.

in the winter the plant is dormant, insular, and cautious. But it is also in winter that the plant may retreat into itself, realizing the wealth of its nothingness, the peace that surpasses understanding:

Fire, turn inward

To your weak fort,

To a burly infant spot,

A house of nothing.

O peace, bless this mad place.

In the very caverns of the mind Silence beckons with the light of inspiration:

O Silence, golden zero

Unsetting sun.

Love winter when the plant says nothing.

The paradoxes of mystical intuition, the anti-logic aphorisms of Zen, and the tension of the Blakean Contraries, without which there is no progression, define the tenor of these mystical poems.

Zen, Merton affirms, allows us to see the vital need for "irrational worship" and the unreasonableness of rationality:

> The point is that facts are not just plain facts. There is a dimension where the bottom drops out of the world of factuality and of the ordinary. Western industrial culture is in the curious position of having simultaneously reached the climax of an entire totalitarian rationality of organization and of complete absurdity and self-contradiction. Existentialists and a few others have noticed the absurdity. But the majority persist in seeing only the rational machinery against which no protest avails: because, after all, it is "rational," and it is "a fact." So, too, is the internal contradiction. . . .
>
> It might be good to open our eyes and see.

Zen enabled Merton to see; it was his means of intersection with memory, innocence and eternity. Zen allowed him to be a child again, to see with fresh eyes, and to taste the mercy of God. But in one sense, as theologian Jacques Goulet observes, Merton was always the child:

> He's utterly the child. He lives intensely the present moment. For instance, his journal entries consist of many judgements about people and ideas that are full of superlatives. This particular writer is the greatest writer, this thinker the greatest thinker, or the worst. Merton is totally present to the moment at hand. There is no person past or future, just the present Merton completely in love with you, focussed on you, when he speaks to you. He's your friend, and when you're gone he is somebody else's. Now, it has to be admitted, for many people this is disconcerting and they dismiss him as an extremist. But when a child cries, the whole person cries, and when a child laughs, the whole person laughs. People often demand the adult in Merton and they get the child. He is too honest to be otherwise.
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> Take the matter of his Columbia University erotic cartoons for example, or indeed his relationship with the Louisville nurse. We all have a blueprint of someone we consider a saint, the ideal monk, a holy one, and when the idealized person no longer fits the blueprint, either we change our expectations and the blueprint is altered or we register our disappointment with the idealized figure's failure to meet our specifications. We blame Merton for not conforming to our mould. We don't allow Merton to be Merton--the perennial child, full of wonder and surprise.

Merton, the Zen child, the Blakean child, not only opened himself to everyone and to every

experience with both freshness and a dangerous indifference to caution, he also longed to

identify promiscuously with all. This child-like predilection to imaginatively embrace all was never erased by adulthood, it was just transformed into his capacity for universal empathy. Theologian Anthony Padovano speaks of Merton as a paradigmatic figure, a symbol of the century:

> Merton exemplified for me that rare figure who can reconcile the antinomies, hold in harmony the contradictions of life. That sounds very speculative, so let me be specific. I think, for example, that in the nineteenth century we were very much engaged in either/or thinking. It was either authority or conscience; it was either West or East. It was either male or female. I think that in the twentieth century we have splintered those artifical boundaries, and as a consequence there is now a vague embarrassment about being too much anything, whether male or female, Catholic, American, Canadian, Western whatever. To my mind, Merton, in both his life and in his work, tried to bring all the real and apparent contradictions together, and I think he did it with effective symbolism, with a sense of drama, eventually becoming a symbol himself.

Merton's effort to unify, to balance the Contraries, in his life and work was his supreme Blakean task. He wanted to be genuinely catholic, excluding nothing, including all:

> the more I am able to affirm others, to say "yes" to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says everyone.
>
> I will be a better Catholic, not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further.
>
> So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the rapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot "affirm" and "accept," but first one Must say "yes" where one really can.
>
> If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it."

The struggle to unite in himself the disparate strains of feeling, culture, history, and religion was there at the beginning. His extraterritoriality came naturally: born in the south of France to an American mother and a New Zealander father; educated in several countries; an intellectual mongrel at both Cambridge and Columbia universities; an artistic and spiritual bohemian; rooted in one religious tradition but eager to incorporate the "truth" of all; the perfect gyrovague or wandering monk, eclectic and yet fiercely traditional, the living contradiction that would unite the Contraries.

Like Blake, in whose **Jerusalem** the Four Zoas, the "Four Mighty Ones ... in every man" unite, Merton dreamt that a time would come when

> every Man stood Fourfold; each Four
>
> Faces had: One to the West,

One toward the East, One to the South, One

to the North, the Horses Fourfold. . . .

Awaking [Man] to Life among the flowers of

Beulah, rejoicing in Unity

In the Four Senses, in the OLitline, the

Circumference & Form, for ever.

In forgiveness of Sins which is Self-

Annihilation; it is the Covenant of

Jehovah. (**Jerusalem**)

In the unity of the Four Zoas with their mysterious harmony of tension there can be found the Universal Man/Jesus, for

a Perfect Unity

Cannot Exist but from the Universal

Brotherhood of Eden

The Universal Man, To Whom be Glory Everyore,

Amen. (**Vala or The Four Zoas**)

The achievement, to use a distinctly unZen-like phrase, of "perfect unity" was closer at hand than Merton realized. Having sent Geography to his publisher in September 1968 with the accompanying note that he considered it "a much more significant piece of work than most of what I have done before," Merton eagerly turned his full attention to the preparations for his Asian journey.

As his meticulously kept journal reveals, Merton's appetite for knowledge and intellectual curiosity were insatiable; his sociable nature was given ample exercise; his experience of the interior life deepened. He met scholars, clerics, religious leaders of many faith traditions, ordinary folk, dignitaries, and elevated figures of international reputation, like the Dalai Lama, about whom he wrote after his visit:

> He is strong and alert, bigger than I expected (for some reason I thought he would be small.) A very solid, energetic, generous, and warm person, very capably, trying to handle enormous problems--none of which he

> mentioned directly. The whole conversation was about religion and philosophy and especially ways of meditation. He said he was glad to see me, had heard a lot about me.

Merton was touched by the Dalai Lama's familiarity with his work. He came to believe that there was a real spiritual bond between them, that they "were somehow very close to each other." His affection for the Dalai Lama was reciprocated.

> As a result of our discussions, I got a certain feeling I was with a person who had a great desire to learn. So I thought it quite fit, appropriate, to call him a Catholic Geshe. This means "a scholar" or "learned one." Also I could say he was a holy man. I don't know the exact Western interpretation of this term holy, but from a Buddhist viewpoint a holy person is one who sincerely impliments what he knows. That we call holy. And, despite his knowledge or his position, lives a very simple way of life and is honest, and respects other people. I found these qualities in Thomas Merton.

Merton impressed more than the Dalai Lama with his spiritual integrity. His personal holiness touched not a few. And he was touched, and touched deeply, by the Ineffable. He recounts the experience in some detail in the **Asian Journal**. He was in Sri Lanka and he had visited Polonnaruwa, a ruined city of palaces and of Hindu and Buddhist temples. It is renowned for its three gigantic Buddha figures carved out of mammoth stones. While gazing on these colossal figures Merton had an epiphany of deep significance presaging mortal closure:

> 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 all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya [the essence of all beings] . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. 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 . . . my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and I have seen 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.

In Polonnaruwa Merton experienced something of what Blake meant by Four-Fold Vision. Beauty, spiritual validity, naked reality all came together for him in a powerful instance of claritas, of "pure seeing," of divine love. Merton saw what he "was obscurely looking for."

On December 10th he made his last public appearance when he gave his address, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," to various religious gathered at the Aide a l'Implantation Monastiqtie conference held at Samutprakarn, just thirty-odd kilometers

from downtown Bangkok. Impressed by the similarities that exist between the monk's and the Marxist's critique of inauthentic structures--social and conceptual--Merton spoke eloquently of the need for transformation. For the Christian monk, this transformation involves nothing less than a commitment to become a completely new person. The demand is total and the gift is total in the shadow of Polonnaruwa.

Merton died by accidental electrocution on the same day as this address. The world was stunned; his friends reeled in disbelief; his brother monks were desolate. At the age of fifty-three, in the prime of life, healthier than he had been for decades, emotionally and spiritually whole, he died an unpredictable and bizarre death. But there was a fearless symmetry to it, full of Blakean bravado, charged, cruel, brilliant.

It was to be in the East where he would be posessed by Fourfold Vision. It seemed right; it was perfect.

He didn't discover the East; the East discovered him. Freed at last to be the quintessential monk of the West, he united in himself the traditions, as he dreamt he would, of all that seek the holy. He became the Universal Man/Jesus/Four-Fold Vision, one who sought to "contain all divided worlds."