

Always Stretching Forward toward Christ:

Thomas Merton's Restless Journey

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“All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. That is the way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead. Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me. I can assure you...I am far from thinking that I have already won. All I can say is that I forget the past and I strain ahead [*epektesein*] for what is still to come. I am racing to finish, for the prize to what God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus.” [Philippians 3:10-14]

Thomas Merton remained a monk for twenty-seven years because he never abandoned his love for the journey of becoming a monk. In spite of decades of monastic routine (perhaps precisely because of it), he could muster a poet's joy for the smallest turns of difference in time or temperature that marked a day as singular and new. Merton's private joys—often muffled below the public voicing of his cares—situated him among those rare human beings who love

the life they are leading and who have found their own true place.

Listen to his joyous content with his life at the Abbey of Gethsemani:

This marvelous vision of the hills at 7:45 A.M. The same hills as always, as in the afternoon, but now catching the light in a totally new way, at once very earthly and very ethereal, with delicate cups of shadow and dark ripples and crinkles where I had never seen them before, the whole slightly veiled in mist so that it seemed to be a tropical shore, a newly discovered continent. A voice in me seemed to be crying, ‘Look! Look!’ For these are the discoveries, and it is for these that I am high on the mast of my ship (have always been) and I know that we are on the right course, for all around is the sea of paradise.¹

Monastic life inculcated in him this heightened awareness, an alertness to the possibilities of the hour, what he called “the grip of the present.” Alert expectancy was a habit he cultivated for a fruitful examined life. His monastic stability and its cloistered horizons paradoxically made keener his temperament to be more ready to depart rather than to settle down in fixed ideas or perspectives. Merton was never afraid to walk away from himself

¹ Thomas Merton *Turning Toward The World*. Journals Volume 4. Edited by Victor A. Kramer (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997): 331-332.

when, through experience, prayer and study he found himself still too narrow and non-inclusive to be a monk who is a thoroughly catholic human being.

By appropriating the insights of a long monastic tradition, Merton learned that waiting for a “word” he could not speak to himself was the essence of prayer. Stillness, poverty of spirit, keeping vigil, guarding thoughts, and fasting from his selfishness were essential practices toward a monastic humanism. In one of the last books that he prepared for publication, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, he defined contemplation as “essentially a listening in silence” and as “an expectancy.”

The true contemplative is not one who prepares his mind for a particular message that he wants or expects to hear, but is one who remains empty because he knows that he can never expect to anticipate the words that will transform his darkness into light. He does not even anticipate a special kind of transformation. He does not demand light instead of darkness. He waits on the Word of God in silence, and, when he is ‘answered’, it is not so much by a word that bursts into his silence. It is by his silence itself, suddenly, inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great

power, full of the voice of God.²

This dimension of contemplative practice that entailed stability in keeping his mind awake in the dark was the mature fruit of what had already been seeded in Merton by his reading of Gregory of Nyssa while still a young man. Only twenty-six years old, he had lived at Gethsemani only two weeks in December, 1941 when he wrote this prayer before Midnight Mass at Christmas: “Your brightness is my darkness. I know nothing of You and, by myself, I cannot even imagine how to go about knowing You. If I imagine, You, I am mistaken. If I understand You, I am deluded. If I am conscious and certain I know You, I am crazy. The darkness is enough.”³

Merton had very early on learned to keep vigil in silence with his heart’s eye on the horizon of the next moment. The next moment might reveal for him, in light or in shadow, the presence of the Beloved he awaited. He kept his mind’s eye open for the unexpected epiphany of the Lord’s presence. Waiting without projecting his own needs into the next moment became his dark form of hope. In personal prayers eventually published, Merton communicated to his readers the holy darkness that was his rite of passage into God’s presence.

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me” is the declaration that begins Merton’s most famous prayer now printed on cards that find their way to refrigerator doors and bathroom mirrors. His confession of ignorance in this prayer resonates with anyone who reads it.

² Thomas Merton *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Cistercian Publications, 1973): 122-123.

³ Thomas Merton “Meditations, December, 1941” Unpublished Manuscript (New York: Columbia University Library).

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing and I hope I never do anything apart from that desire. And I know, that if I do this, you will lead me on the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I shall trust you always, though I may be lost and in the shadow of death, I shall not fear. For you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁴

Originally published in his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*, this prayer names ignorance and insecurity as two of the generative guardian angels who attended his hope-filled monastic life and his literary art.

Not to know where his life was going was always to begin again every day to take up his life of loving learning and desiring God. His ignorance was a stimulus to his continuing formation in seeking God. His insecurity animated continuing transcendence of past experiences so as to incarnate new and more inclusive ways of living. Knowing he was ignorant was an exciting wisdom that poised Merton to reach out to his life's "next thing" and to turn the next corner in his search for the "secret of God's Face" (*The Seven Storey Mountain*). Merton's acute restlessness was holy. His intellectual and affective restlessness allowed him to keep leaning forward toward the "thin places" between

4 Thomas Merton *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1958).

night and the edge of dawn that signals a new day. Restlessness and insecurity kept him sober and watchful, although never perfectly it is true, so that he might not miss a gate to the rose garden or pass a door that might lead to peace, a deliverance from the cycle of loss and recovery and loss again (T.S. Eliot).

This is all very over-blown language to respond to critics who slap me in the face with the question of why Merton was always so restless, why he seemed never content and wanted to be on a different road every other day. “Wasn't he, after all is said and done, no more than a well-published but basically defective neurotic?” I would qualify my simple answer: “Yes, I think so, but in my judgment I would also say, as he himself said, that 'his ruin was his fortune'.” Merton embraced his spiritual poverty, his practice of faith through a glass darkly in a monastic life in which questions predominated over answers.

Scholars have called Thomas Merton a "spiritual master" and the back covers of his books proclaim him one of the most significant spiritual writers of the 20th century, however the monk and writer's own assessment of his identity was considerably more modest. He wrote in his private journal in 1965, after twenty-four years of celebrity and monastic life, a statement of the real value of his legacy: “I am nobody's answer,” he wrote, “not even my own. Here is his witness to a truth in the spiritual life he had learned the hard way: no matter our ascetic practices and how much we pray, no matter how many books we read and papers we publish, no matter our status as Pope or spiritual celebrity, we will eventually need to find that place where we can kneel and wait for a mercy that we know in our restless

hearts that we can never bequeath to ourselves (Saint Augustine).

One of Merton's conscious goals in writing private journals toward the end of his life and in his consenting to their complete publication after his death was to demolish any future for his guru status as a “spiritual master” and to insure a more complex reception of his literary legacy. And while that legacy is indeed an authentic testament to an evangelical way of living based on imitation of Christ, particularly as transmitted by a Benedictine monastic rule, he knew his private journals would prove a stumbling block, even a cause for scandal, for readers expecting to find in his journals a spiritual master to emulate.

Merton's fully published journals in seven volumes do not reveal his ascent to ever-higher stages of spiritual attainment. They reveal instead his gradual descent into a spiritual poverty that fully turned him toward God's mercy, like a hollowed-out tree turns toward the lightening that is about to strike it (Meister Eckhart). Many a paragraph in his private journals is saturated with his tears, with his realization that he was not the monk, not even the human being, that his public books had led readers to think he was. He was to the very end imperfect. Merton's private journals are a narrative of how he was gradually being liberated from his aspirations to be a spiritual celebrity and from the “selfies” his autobiography took of him as a fully realized holy monk.

In writing journals Merton is acutely conscious of his intended reader: he incites his reader to identify with his words and his journey. He invites a personal involvement with his life's epiphanies for him that reminded him he must always be more deeply becoming a

person who prays and seeks God. He considered his best work to be autobiographical, what he called his “art of confession and witness”. His journals particularly confess and witness to three elements of his personal history for which he wrote himself most grateful: his adult baptism at the age of 23 in the Roman Catholic tradition; his monastic and priestly vocations, and finally for his ability as a writer that allowed him to express his thanks to God for these first two blessings.

Reflecting on my long experience of reading Merton since I was thirteen and now since October 4th having entered what I am, with hope triumphing over experience, calling my “holy seventies,” I seem in retrospect almost destined to have heard his "voice" so early in my life. His voice has always educated me. His words still open my heart's inner ear. He still animates me to lead an "examined life." Through my long dialogues with Merton's texts, I have recognized our co-dependence on a providential Divine Mercy that neither of us could hope to bequeath to ourselves. His writing has taught me that only God's love for me in spite of who I am, a love mediated by the community of my friends who love me in spite of themselves, can save me from my false self.

To expose the fault lines between his ideals and his day-to-day struggles to achieve them, to mind the gap between his published pious rhetoric and his struggling practice, was a major motive that impelled Merton to write and publish his private journals.

Precisely because his world-famous autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* had freeze-framed for his readership a glowing portrait of his pious self, his decision to continue with private journals, publishing an edited version as *The Sign of Jonas* in 1952, became a

spiritual practice of honesty with regard to the crooked road his life had taken by the pursuit of both monastic vows and the exigencies of a literary career. His journals became, he wrote, "part of a documentation that is demanded of me--still demanded, I think--by the Holy Ghost."⁵: Merton allowed his journals to reveal the contradictions and inconsistencies that had always attended his monastic journey. His journals expose the otherwise hidden sins that mar his reputation as a public holy man. His journals became a means for him to practice what I call the virtue of his compassionate transparency. Let this journal entry be a case in point:

Someone accused me of being a "high priest" of creativity. Or at least of allowing people to think me so. The sin of wanting to heard, of wanting converts, disciples. Being in a cloister, I thought I did not want this. Of course I did and everyone knows it.... St William, says the breviary this night, when death approached, took off his pontifical vestments (what he was doing with them on in bed I can't imagine) and by his own efforts got to the floor and died. So I am like him, in bed with a miter on. What am I going to do about it? I have got to face the fact that there is in me a desire for survival as pontiff, prophet and writer, and this has to be renounced before I can be myself at last.⁶

Merton was first to admit that any treasures of spiritual insight embedded in his writing were a harvest from graced poor soil.

5 Thomas Merton *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*. The Journals, Volume 3. Edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996): 20.

6 Thomas Merton *Turning Toward The World*: 87.

His journals expose the real fissures in his character that rendered him a weak vessel in which by God's grace important lessons for others were nevertheless contained. This is, of course, a theme in the Pauline corpus of the New Testament. And while Merton is no Saint Paul, what Protestant theologian Karl Barth said in his *Epistle to the Romans* of Saint Paul can be applied to Merton. Barth wrote about St. Paul's real value:

When pilgrims on the road of God meet one another, they have something to say. A man may be of value to another man, not because he wishes to be important, not because he possesses some inner wealth of soul, not because of something he is, but because of what he is not. His importance may consist in his poverty, in his hopes and fears, in his waiting and hurrying, in the direction of his whole being towards what lies beyond his horizon and beyond his power. The importance of an apostle is negative rather than positive. In him a void becomes visible.⁷

The deep significance for us of Merton's legacy of “confession and witness” may consist in his errors and in his acknowledged failures. He exposes our shared human fate to stand with our feet straddling a divide between who we long to be and who we actually are. Merton's self-confessed limitations and errors illuminate. As Merton elaborates the contradiction of his desiring purity of heart, while witnessing in himself the ability to evade the humility for its procurement, he places before his reader's eyes everyone's struggles with conflicting desires which attend everyone's interior life.

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, E.C. Hoskyns, trans. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968): 33-34.

Merton focuses for his readers the inadequacy of confining religious experience to the esthetic, or to the intellectual and academic, so as to hide from others and even from one's self one's deeply conflicted personal experience. Writing to Etienne Gilson, Merton had pleaded:

“Please pray for me to Our Lord that instead of merely writing something I may be something, and indeed that I may so fully be what I ought to be that there may be no further necessity for me to write, since the mere fact of being what I ought to be would be more eloquent than many books.”⁸

Merton confessed what all of us know: one can write beautifully about an ideal spiritual life while not being able to live an ideal and beautiful spiritual life. Merton publicly exposes his spiritual poverty so that he could own it. His practice of writing journals is thus akin to the practice of confession urged by Gregory of Nazianzen: “He who manifests his thoughts is soon healed. He who hides them makes himself sick.” The confession of his clay feet not only subverted the admiration of his readers but was an invitation to realize with him the always be stretching forward toward the Father, through Christ Jesus and with the Holy Spirit alone to be acknowledged as the only Spiritual Master.

Now having entered my “holy seventies,” the tone of Merton's private journals in his maturity captures my attention most. His voice from his longed-for hermitage, on the cusp of his fifties, has a

8 Thomas Merton *The School of Charity*. Edited by Patrick Hart (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990): 31.

more broken and uncertain modulation which strikes me, from where I am hearing it now, as utterly honest and convincing. After finally getting everything he always thought and said he wanted--being solitary in a hermitage--Merton was taken aback at finding himself still capable of acting much like the same young man he was on Perry Street in New York's Greenwich Village. Away from his monastic community, Merton, though never leaving off the daily disciplines, discovered himself much too easily and once more acting wild.

Merton's voice from the hermitage rivets me as he journals himself through encounters with seasons of insecurity which tore away at the disguises he had worn to hide the hard truths about his more visceral self. In his long-hoped-for hermitage Merton experienced a "dread" for which his prayer, he did not know it fully until then, had always been preparing him. After decades of publicly theorizing on the spiritual life and of practicing monastic disciplines, Merton in his hermitage found himself humbled, his back to the wall, as he experienced himself making a mess of his "answered prayers" for a solitary life by becoming "a priest who has a woman."⁹

Merton appeals at this end-game stage of his mortality because his hermitage experience allowed him no more mirrors to reflect upon himself garbed in the saffron robes of a "spiritual master." His journals of 1966 confess the unmitigated defeat for his self-idealizing personality as a hermit and witness to his scandalized readers, as Jesus Himself witnessed, that only God is good.

At the early age of thirty, having just completed the final

9 Thomas Merton *Learning to Love*. Journals Volume 6. Edited by Christine M. Bochen (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997):79.

draft of the autobiography that would make him famous, Merton had already realized that his contradictions would not be problems he could ever solve, but were mysteries he would have to live (Gabriel Marcel):

In one sense we are always traveling, and traveling as if we did not know where we were going. In another sense we have already arrived. We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are traveling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore, in that sense, we have arrived and are dwelling in the light. But oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!¹⁰

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10 Thomas Merton *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941).

Appendix of Gregory of Nyssa Texts

***From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings.*
Edited by Jean Danielou (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995)**

***Epektasis* is best understood within the context of Philippians 3:13 which Gregory quotes frequently: “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made perfection my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining (*epekteinomenos*) forward to what lies ahead.” This forward-looking view of the Christian life lies at the heart of Gregory’s theology on spiritual advancement in that it represents a movement of perpetual ascent toward God who is immovable. According to Gregory, we can never attain ultimate unity and stability in the divine good but simply expand towards it.**

“By participation in the transcendent, [the soul] continually remains stable in the good; in a certain sense, it is always being created while ever changing for the better in its growth towards the good; however, its present state of goodness, even if especially great and perfect, is only the beginning of a more transcendent, better stage. The Apostle’s words are verified: stretching out (*epektaseos*) to what lies before is related to forgetfulness of early accomplishments [Phil 3:13]. The good which is superior to the one already attained holds the

attention of those participating in it while not allowing them to look at the past: by enjoying what is more worthy, their memory of inferior things is blotted out. E.J. Brill, Leiden 174.15

“Let us recapitulate the sense of the text. The soul which looks to God and conceives that desire for incorruptible beauty always has a new desire for the transcendent, and is never dulled by satiety. Such a soul never ceases to stretch forth (*epekteinomene*) to what lies before, going out from her present stage to what lies ahead. Anything great and marvelous always seems inferior in comparison to what succeeds it since what the bride has found seems more beautiful than her earlier discoveries. Thus Paul died each day [1Cor 15:13], because at all times he partook of a new life, being dead to the past and forgetful of previous things. E.J. Brill, Leiden 366.15

“All your anxiety comes from your desire for harmony. Seek disharmony. Then you will gain peace.” Rumi

John Eudes Bamburger:

“The True Man of No Title: Homecoming as Ultimate Transformation”

“Gregory of Nyssa was one of Fr. Louis’ favorite authors. He was attracted to the Greek fathers generally, especially Maximus the Confessor, Pseudo-Denis and Gregory Palamas, for all were great mystical theologians. But Gregory of Nyssa offered a special interest to him and one reason for it was his teaching on epketesis. The idea of

epektesis is that the perfect spiritual man is not one who has “arrived” at a high degree of moral perfection and contemplative knowledge of God. Rather, he is the man who, having attained a high measure, presses on in pursuit of still purer, more vital experience of God’s light and truth. The perfect man is the man who is ever moving forward, deeper into the mystery of God. Heaven, itself, in this view, consists in eternal progress into the love and light and life of God where each fulfillment contains in itself the impulse to further exploration.” P. 14

We can see then why it was that Moses, though he had seen God face to face, asked God to show Himself still more:

“Indeed He would not have shown Himself to His servant if the vision would have been such as to terminate Moses’ desire; for the true vision of God consists rather in this, that the soul that looks up to God never ceases to desire God... The [person] who thinks that God can be known does not really have life; for she has been falsely diverted from true Being to something devised by her own imagination. For true Being is true Life, and cannot be known by us. If then this life-giving nature transcends knowledge, what our minds attain in this case is surely not life. ...Thus it is that Moses’ desire is filled by the very fact that it remains unfulfilled.... And this is the real meaning of seeing God: never to have this desire satisfied [emphasis added].

These passages, then, bring us to the very heart of Gregory’s thought. As we have seen, the Darkness is not merely a negative thing, not merely the negation of all knowledge of God. Indeed, God is truly known insofar as the soul participates in God. To know God “in the mirror of the soul” and to know God in the Darkness are not two

different experiences, but two aspects of the same phenomenon. This awareness of God always falls short of the divine reality, and hence it is always oriented towards a more and more perfect knowledge. Mystical knowledge is thus always a mixture of knowledge and ignorance, possession and quest, immanence and Transcendence—it is a “luminous Darkness.” This imperfect awareness is the only authentic knowledge of God, inasmuch as it retains within the finite area of knowledge the infinite realm of ignorance.