

Through A Glass Purely

by
Deba P. Patnaik

The True Seeing Is When There Is No Seeing.
Shen Hui

“No, honestly,” Thomas Merton’s letter to John Howard Griffin on January 10, 1967 reads, “I see no reason why an occasional picture taker like myself, who doesn’t even know how to develop a film, can be considered a photographer.”¹ He, in professional skill and life-long commitment to the medium, was not a practitioner like his friends, Griffin, Shirley Burden, and Eugene Meatyard or renowned photographers like Minor White, Aaron Siskind, or Harry Callahan. Nor, in my view, did Merton, as he modestly writes in the same letter, happen “to press the shutter release accidentally, when the thing was pointing at an interesting object.”² Michael Mott, in his official Merton biography, describes Griffin’s account of Merton’s attentive manner of taking a photograph.³ More importantly, his particular images manifest thought and deliberateness in the choice and shooting of the visual subject. It is not especially relevant or useful to raise questions about his calibre and classification as a photographer. I believe, it is pertinent to discuss why, late in life, Merton turned to photography, what it meant to him, what does it say about him, and what do the images convey.

Merton’s vocation in life was that of a Trappist monk and later a hermit. He was a prolific and serious writer; equally productive and accomplished a poet. He has left a treasure trove of art-work – calligraphic and brush paintings and drawings in the manner of Chinese, Japanese, and Zen artists. Merton was a man of prodigious energy, passion, and imagination; his mind inquisitive, voracious, and expansive. He possessed a keen and curious eye. His journals and letters are replete with ample evidence. For example, “on the tongue of one bloom [violet iris] walks a great black-gold bee”⁴, or the hills catching the light “with delicate cups of shadow and dark ripples and crinkles.”⁵ Thomas Merton had the gift of a photographer’s sensibility.

¹ Merton, Thomas. *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, edited by Robert E. Daggy, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 134-35.

² *Ibid.*, 134.

³ Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 344.

⁴ Merton, Thomas. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, edited by Victor A. Kramer, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 316.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 321.

The editors of *The Intimate Merton* state, “Writing was his [Merton’s] way to taste and see.”⁶ In his own words: “To write is to think and to live ... even to pray.”⁷ But, he insatiably craved for and deeply enjoyed “moments of eloquent silence and emptiness” beyond the cloister walls.⁸ The world of nature and simple ordinary things – “Return to reality and to the ordinary, in silence”⁹, “to see it and feel it [his italics]”¹⁰ – held for him a special kind of appeal and enchantment – not of magic but of mystery. He asserted, “I myself am a part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place, and a day in which I have not shared truly in this is no day at all.”¹¹ His life in the Monastery was demanding. The daily ritual of the cenobitic life as well as all the writing and interacting with frequent visitors was not totally quietening or tranquil. A man of paradox, his Journals reveal his anguished conflicts and struggles. The years of the 1950’s and 1960’s, as Mott points out, were a period of turmoil and searching.¹² Merton yearned for a “normal human balance” as a devoted Christian and monk.¹³ Photography, I suggest, exposed a way of finding that “balance”, and was a fitting counterpoint to writing – a time for stillness, solitude, and self-reflection.

An avid writer, Merton was, in general, confined to specific themes, topics and issues. In photography, he felt free, open and quiet – nothing to debate or discourse, nothing to argue or explain; only animated by imagination, silence, and connectedness with what he visually experienced. It served him as a mode of attuning “to the other music that is beyond the words” – emptying of even thinking and to be in a state of contemplation.¹⁴ That would explain the eclectic and evocative nature of his imagery. Shorn of triteness, sentimentality, and superfluity, they inspire a sense of “infused contemplation.”¹⁵ Listen to what Harry Callahan maintains: “a picture is like a prayer”¹⁶ – octave of prayer, to borrow Minor White’s expression.¹⁷

⁶ Merton, Thomas. *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals*, edited by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁸ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 194.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, especially the chapters “Mount Purgatory” and “Mount Olivet.”

¹³ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 327.

¹⁴ Merton, Thomas. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart, (New York: New Directions, 1981), 129.

¹⁵ Merton, Thomas. *What Is Contemplation?* (Holy Cross, IN: St. Mary’s Press, 1948), 7.

¹⁶ Coleman, Alan D. “Harry Callahan: An Interview,” *Creative Camera International Year Book*, (London, 1976), 76.

¹⁷ White, Minor. *Octave of Prayer*, (New York: Aperture, 1972).

Photography fulfilled Merton's "urgency of seeing, fully aware, experiencing what is here."¹⁸ It magnified his experience of "pure seeing", rather, more accurately, his images are its realization.¹⁹ This parallels the "inseeing" he admired in poet Rainer Maria Rilke, which lets one "into the very center."²⁰ The artist, according to him, is both a "maker" and a "seer"²¹ – see-er/seer, who combines "aesthetic illumination"²² and "sapiential awareness [that] deepens our communion with the concrete."²³ And this fusion illuminates Merton's photographs.

He found the camera to be "the most eager and helpful of beings."²⁴ [Note his use of the word being.] Nevertheless, he was cognizant of the medium's inadequacy: "nothing resembles reality less than the photograph."²⁵ He comments on the camera's limitation in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

To convey meaning of something substantial you have to use not a shadow but a sign, not the imitation but the image. The image is a new and different reality, and of course it does not convey an impression of some object, but the mind of the subject: and that is something else again.²⁶

Let us turn to two passages from *The Asian Journal*:

No, a camera cannot reconcile one with anything. Nor can it see the real mountain. The camera does not know what it takes: it captures materials with which you reconstruct not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful, of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it – especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene.²⁷

Again:

The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN.²⁸

¹⁸ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 123.

¹⁹ Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 281.

²⁰ Merton, *Literary Essays*, 30.

²¹ Merton, Thomas. *Notes on Art and Worship*, 21. Unpublished mimeograph in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

²² Merton, Thomas. *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, edited by Patrick Hart, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 323.

²³ Merton, *Literary Essays*, 100.

²⁴ Merton, *Road to Joy*, 141.

²⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁷ Merton, Thomas. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin, (New York: New Directions, 1975), 153.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 156-57.

Does it mean Merton is undercutting photography? Is he being sophistical? I do not think so. Consciously or unconsciously, in these passages, the erudite poet-thinker raises critical issues pertaining to the medium which photo critics and historians, aesthetics-theorists, and artists continue to debate. The significant aspect of these extracts is that they underscore the aesthetic process and intention of the contemplative-philosopher, besides indicating the paradoxical nature of the art-form.

One could argue, knowing Merton's paradoxical inclination, photography attracted him because it inheres paradox. It is the most fleeting and ephemeral among the arts – painting, graphics, and sculpture. Yet, it attempts to arrest time and space. Scholars argue about its claim to bear witness to reality and truth. Merton too implies these questions, as can be noticed, in quotations cited in this essay. His photographs hold a window to the paradox of time and place. He explores, at the same time, the metaphoric and symbolic as well as the iconic and the emblematic signification of an image. His images do lend themselves to multiple allusions. Remarkably, none of his photographs is a manipulated image. In their lucidity, simplicity, and lack of self-projection, they echo Merton's remark on Zen: "If Zen has any preference it is for glass that is plain, has no color, and is 'just glass'."²⁹ [Compare, St. John of the Cross likening man to a window.] They project a "transparence" that accentuates the experience of, to quote Susan Sontag, "luminousness of the thing itself."³⁰

Zen calligraphy and painting – art in general, Merton contends:

... by its peculiar suppleness, dynamism, abandon, contempt for "prettiness" and for formal "style," reveals to us something of the freedom which is not transcendent in some abstract and intellectual sense, but which employs a minimum of form without being attached to it, and is therefore free from it.³¹

He further ruminates in an exegesis on Roland Barthes' writing:

... what he has to choose is his *writing*. Not so much the *kind* of writing as the *act* of writing ... when the choice is completely lucid, when the writer chooses simply to *write* and renounces all the rest ("message," "expression," "soul," "revolution"), then the writing itself stands out clearly as writing.³²

Later on in the essay, he explains the notion of *gestus* "the authentic *gestus* of writing begins only when all meaningful postures have been abandoned, when all the obvious 'signs' of art have been set aside."³³ Barthes' writing, characterized by Merton as "writing degree zero", like his close friend, Ad Reinhardt's painting, infuses "a kind of quietism ... a

²⁹ Merton, Thomas. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York: New Directions, 1968), 4.

³⁰ Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966), 13.

³¹ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 6.

³² Merton, *Literary Essays*, 142.

³³ *Ibid.*, 145.

Zenlike stillness” which emanates a “certain inscrutable excitement.”³⁴ Merton’s art and photographic work encapsulate these feelings. Paramount to him is not so much the images as product, compelling as they are, but the choice and the act of image-making.

Thomas Merton’s images are without artifice or disguise. Almost all of them are frontal shots – direct and straight, allowing the object its own autonomy and fidelity. His preferred manner of making pictures was in black and white. It gave the photographs textural depth and authenticity, stripped and emptied of drama or distraction. Like the poetry of his long-lasting friends, Robert Lax and Louis Zukofsky, they are “chaste and sparing.”³⁵ They imbibe the Zen way of seeing and expressing the visible world around with Blakean conceit, innocence, and wit – be it the image of a winter landscape, a discarded glove, a pair of black and white chairs together or a ghotied Tibetan with a poodle, leafless trees in embrace, shadow patterns, old brewery structure, or a “Men” sign with arrows stuck to a tree. Many of his images are comparable to those of Frederick Sommer, Wynn Bullock, Minor White, and Aaron Siskind in their abstraction and minimalism. As with them so too with Merton, the transformation of the thing to image transcends the normal referentiality of the photographic language. Merton’s photography, in my view, is photographing degree zero. For him it is not only “a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence,”³⁶ but also, if I may interpolate, an “essential factor in asceticism.”³⁷ For this utterly Christ-centred eremite, a moment of “self-awareness and self-forgetfulness”³⁸ – another way for Christ to develop Merton’s life “into Himself like a photograph.”³⁹

What do these photographs convey? Over 20 years ago, I published a book with a sampling of Thomas Merton’s photographs and some of my comments and thoughts.⁴⁰ As I review them and reflect today, the images whisper in another tone.

The roots say: we are here – uprooted yet alive. The mountains declare: we are here – immutable yet ever-changing like the waters. The paint cans clang: we are useless yet useful. The basket affirms: I’m empty yet full. Sculpted rocks proclaim: we are not the Buddha; if you see him, kill him.

Two chairs ask: do you see the presences? The branches whistle: do you feel the wind tangled within us? Driftwood asks: what is time?

The wheel turns.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁶ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 7.

³⁷ Merton, Thomas. *The Sign of Jonas*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), 40.

³⁸ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 7.

³⁹ Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions, 1961), 162.

⁴⁰ Patnaik, Deba Prasad. *Geography of Holiness: The Photography of Thomas Merton*, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980).

A mortal poet-contemplative, a contraption, and chemicals framed us. See. See without the smoke of theories and symbolisms.

We are what we are. We are light and dark, substance and shadow. Speak the images. We are matter and memory. We are pictures, we are mirrors. We are full, we are empty. Remember the Three Doors:

the door without wish

the door without sign

the door of emptiness.

SEE

And say: *Amen*. Say: *Shantih*