

SHADOWS AT THE REDWOODS:

Merton Remembered

by **Paul Quenon**, O. C. S. O.

I am confused about my direction, drive back a couple of blocks to check the sign, and see a hitchhiker. He wears a straw hat, has a grey beard, totes a back pack, and lopes along in a carefree manner like some figure out of a Winslow Homer painting. I had driven all the way from Kentucky to California without picking up a rider. That this single exception should somehow put me in touch with Fr. Louis [Thomas Merton] is not too surprising in view of how that would re-occur time and again in the next three days.

I was desperately fighting sleep, probably caused by gas fumes from the heavy Jeep car my sister loaned me. I had opened the windows, removed my shirt, and still I am struggling to stay awake. A conversation would help, and this stranger has the right kind of air, like some philosopher of the highways.

After determining that his distance is shorter than mine, I take my cue from his back pack and ask: "Are you a pilgrim or a wanderer?" He says: "That is wonderful you should ask if I am a pilgrim, because that is exactly what I have been for the last three years." He described how he goes from place to place, and when he wants to camp down he goes a few hundred feet off the road. He feels that this area is like home, and is glad to be back — this part of northern California where massive numbers of the hippie generation disappeared into the forest, and still exist away from media attention which has long ago lost interest.

I tell him: "I too am a kind of pilgrim, headed for a monastery further up the road." He says he's heard of that place. Despite my reluctance, one question leads to another and he soon learns, yes, I am a monk and I am from the Abbey of Gethsemani. He says: "That is strange because yesterday I was quoting a poem by Thomas Merton in a talk." His own preference is for the romantic poets, and he writes in that style, so to quote Merton was an exception. He knew of Merton through his Buddhist Master who made friends with him in Asia: the late Chogyum Trungpa Rimpoche who later came to the United States and started communities, as well as the Naropa Institute in Colorado which has become a center for Christian-Buddhist dialogue.

He tells me of a talk the Rimpoche gave after Fr. Louis died. He was describing the different stages of realization in Tibetan spirituality. The Tibetans talk about twelve stages, and Trungpa Rimpoche said there were only two people in the West who had attained to the eighth stage. One was Carl Jung and the other was Thomas Merton. He said it is a dangerous stage to be in, and the reason why Merton died was because he did not know how to handle it.

I have heard that some people in California go around comparing the level of attainment of one another's spiritual Masters. I wonder if anyone can really tell. He went on to describe Trungpa as a most compassionate person. It is thanks to him that we have one of the utterances of Fr. Louis at the Bangkok Conference that has become a kind of axiom among monastics undergoing renewal: "From now on, Brother, everyone stands on his own feet." Actually the statement originates with Trungpa's Abbot as his departing words when Trungpa was fleeing Tibet. Ironically, the subsequent twenty years since Fr. Louis applied these words to Christian monasticism have been unceasingly devoted to discussions of structures in an effort to bring about their renewal. If there is any prophetic relevance in this utterance at all it is to correct our perspective and counterbalance our preoccupation with structures, be they evolving or not.

I tell him a story I recently heard that when a Christian monk had asked the Dalai Lama if he remembered Thomas Merton, he said yes, and raised his wrap to show the leather belt he was wearing. It was Thomas Merton's. Merton gave it to him in Asia.

Arriving at his stop-off, we exchange impossible invitations to meet again. I ask: "What is your name?" He says: "Jack."

The road to Redwoods Monastery is shaded, narrow, and — like the roads of my native West Virginia — tightly curving on the hills. The enormous redwoods create shadows deeper than I have ever seen, even along the tropical stream beds of Nigeria. The density of the fir contrasts brilliantly with shafts of sunlight coming from some unmeasurable height. Light and darkness. Carl Jung. Strange how these themes came together, nudging me into an interior geography, a psychic landscape which I so thoroughly explored elsewhere in the summers of '73 and '74. That was in Wisconsin at the Summer Institute for Contemplative Sisters, where I met Mother Myriam and Sister Diane from Redwoods. We dealt much with symbolism then, the typology of Carl Jung, the unconscious, the shadow side of the mind. There was much else of a Scriptural and social nature, but these themes seemed central. Years have passed; we have met and separated again, but those summers remain the landmark of our relationship.

We also dealt with Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring*, and the fantasy world of those books is made visible along the roadside here at tourist stops, where lifesize cedar carvings of elves, bears and gnomes stand and peer out from the shadows. There is even an inn called *Strider*.

Somehow I always knew I would pay a visit to this monastery, but I had no idea when or how. I seemed to have Diane's tacit assurance that the time would come. It took much longer than I anticipated. At last, I have come to California to take courses at the University of San Francisco, and also to continue on a photography project for Cistercian Publications which I began the previous year. It was for an appointment calendar with photographs of Cistercian monasteries. As this included monasteries of women, a trip to Redwoods was a requirement. And a reward.

In *The Hermitage Journals*, John Howard Griffin said that "Of all the few places [Merton] investigated, the Trappistines at the Redwoods seemed to have stirred his greatest enthusiasm" (p. 18). A monastery can change enough in twenty years that what inspired then may not inspire now, so I had no expectations of repeating Merton's experience. I had a limited knowledge of what I would find there — six or eight sisters, an altar bread bakery. Despite my acquaintance with the sisters, I knew little more because many of my inquiries about the place were answered with an invitation: "Come and see." So I have.

A place speaks for itself. This one speaks in low tones, with natural inflections. The entrance from the densely wooded highway is indicated only by a small clearing and a wooden sign. The dirt road leads across a

narrow bridge over a stream — geographically called a river, the Mattole River — but for an Easterner, it looks like a stream. An open field surrounded by woods holds two guesthouses which seem somehow adrift in the isolation of the surroundings. Through another neck of the woods I come to a clearing where the monastery itself, with its low lines and muted colors, lies snugly under towering redwoods.

I will later realize that the view I am seeing is the only view of the monastery, a real frustration for a visiting photographer. Whereas some monasteries open out to vast spaces, grand vistas, this one slips into corners of the forest and conceals itself. It is surrounded by a dense natural enclosure more effective than the stone block wall encircling Gethsemani. Soon I will find the space this monastery occupies forces me inward and opens out space of a different kind. A psychic space.

I park and go to the reception area, which is small and well designed in a simple style, with a touch of the Japanese. I am received by Sister Veronique, a late middle-aged woman, who speaks with a thick Belgian accent, has a restrained manner, and shows attention to her guest with much sobriety. In a private letter Ping Ferry wrote about how “the sisters were much aflutter when TM was in their midst” (*Woods, Shore, Desert*, p. 55). Sister Veronique hardly makes this seem credible. Welcome me she does; flutter, no way. She talks of preparing to attend a Zen retreat in Oregon, organized by Dom Bernard [McVeigh], Abbot of Guadalupe. When she shows me to my room she points out the unit two doors down where Fr. Louis had stayed. The guestmaster at Christ in the Desert, where I stopped on my way west, volunteered the same information: an adobe hut across from mine where Fr. Louis had been. She removes her sandals and leaves them at the door before stepping into my carpeted unit to show me around.



Before long I am sitting in church, waiting for I know not what. It seems spacious for its size, with a wall size window behind the altar opening out on to the base of a massive redwood, which is actually four trees growing into one, planted around with irises and rhododendrons, with a meadow beyond. As I breathe in the atmosphere the feeling comes upon me as swiftly and directly as a *deja vu*: a recollection of Fr. Louis. It is more than the lingering remainder of the conversation in the car. It is something

present. In a second I have it: the odor of this church is exactly the same as Fr. Louis' hermitage! Looking around a second time I can see why. The construction materials are the same: unpainted concrete block walls, a concrete floor smoothed to a polish, unpainted pine furniture, and redwood siding outside. The Victor Hammer furniture in the hermitage is redwood, and the white pine outside adds to the bouquet.

The church and the refectory are designed by local Eureka architects Trump & Sauble, and I would later see much the same method employed at the men's monastery at Vina, California — large glass walls used extensively, so that inside a building one is aware of the surrounding grounds and community. At Vina the design work was done by Bob Usher, the original owner of the property of Redwoods Monastery, who joined the community of monks as an Oblate after a career designing movie sets in Hollywood. There has been a recent revival of interest in his work thanks to his donation of the collection of his drawings and sketches to the Film Study Collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. *FMR Magazine* also has a current article on his work (Franco Maria Ricci, No. 26, May-June 1987). Some of the buildings at Redwoods have also been designed by Usher, but here the windows seem to open on spaces uninhabited except for deer, foxes, raccoons, etc.

At Vespers, Mother Myriam [Dardenne] arrives looking thinner but not much older than I remember her. She is recovering from a subarachnoid hemorrhage suffered in November of 1986. There appeared to be no ill effects now, and she is very much herself. After Vespers, we exchange greetings and renew acquaintances.

After supper I go out alone to explore some of the wooded hillside in the evening light. My excitement increases with every step. The forest floor is covered with a carpet of golden leaves, something I would hardly expect in July. It is like an enchanted grove, with smooth bark trees making pronounced curves in every direction. Madrone trees, I was to learn. Above these the redwoods, on a scale I am not used to. Everything seems dwarfed beside them. This is hobbit land and I am the size of a child again soon to discover the hide out of elves and furry-footed halflings. The bending lines of the Madrone are ornamental trusses in a woodland palace. But for my stubborn adult mind, I would soon see the invisible presences. Then Merton's voice intrudes: a thing's reality is in what you see — a Zen admonition really to see what you are seeing.

I have no patience for argument between fantasy and fact, so I move

on. Let the seeing take care of itself. On the ridge is a shaded wooden structure, the size of a small hermitage without windows or door, and with a roof on top — as fanciful a fact as you could ask for. It is a wooden watertower. I'm not sure even Kentucky can boast of such as this! Later on, when I tell Veronique of my walk she asks: "Did you see Mother Madron?" I say no. "I will tell you tomorrow how to get there." I wonder if this is some kind of a statue. "No. You will know when you see her."



The first order of business of the next day is to visit Fr. Roger, and he shows me the grounds. He occupies one of the units of the guest facilities, and we begin talking immediately of his computer, on which he says he has all his books. He has done volumes of research for many long years, mostly on medieval mystics, especially Cistercian nuns.

He takes me on pilgrimage to each one of the more ancient redwoods and talks of the history of the place, of fires, of lumbering, of regrowth. I ask if they have the same problem as the monks in Kentucky with neighbors growing marijuana on remote corners of the property. He says in California the property owners are obliged to expel the grower from the land, or they are subject to arrest. He takes me around to "the grove," an acre where the oldest trees are, from 800 to 2,000 years old. It is difficult to absorb the age and immensity of these creatures in a short time. I have to return to the grove again to spend time alone with them.

Merton wrote in his journal of "the immense silent redwoods. Who can see such trees and bear to be away from them? I must go back. It is not right that I should die under lesser trees" (*Woods, Shore, Desert*, p. 46). Perhaps the reason is because these trees make death seem irrelevant. These were standing when the first Trappists came to the United States. They were already old when De Rance was shaping his reform, when the Reformers were reshaping Europe, when St. Bernard was spreading enthusiasm for Cistercian life everywhere. The Order itself is a hundred years short of the age of some of the trees on the property of its daughter house in California.

Later Diane tells me in detail about how the Redwoods Community, along with local landowners in the Whitethorn Valley, and a considerable number of visitors to the area, are working to preserve the last virgin old growth forests in the Mattole River watershed. This has been going on for

two years, for some, ten years. The issue, of course, is not only local but extends north throughout the remaining old growth forests in California, Oregon and Washington.

I have a meeting with Kathy for a briefing on taking photographs around the monastery. I met Kathy more than ten years ago in a symposium at Gethsemani, when she was still a Junior, a young woman lovely, if awkward, in her self conscious efforts to communicate. Now she has ripened into a no less lovely middle age, more self confident, less burdened with her grace of self consciousness. I explain my own ideal in photographing monasteries is to communicate the hidden quality of the life. As a monk you tend to fade into the context, and this is best represented by rather anonymous figures in a setting that is nevertheless spiritually charged. I have conflicts with my editor because of this, since she says pictures of people and personalities are appealing in the bookstalls. Somewhere there may be an appropriate compromise, but my sympathies are with the nuns.

I ask Kathy what is the sound I have heard in the trees — it sounds like a horse's feet on cobblestones. She says it is the ravens, and describes it like the sound of a cobbler working on his bench. I had seen them but mistook them for crows. She says the deer have been coming down into the valley and she hopes I can get a picture of them.

That afternoon I have a date to go to the ocean with Diane, in particular to see Needle Rock where Merton photographed some memorable scenes of the shore and of a huge dead tree. But since it is the 4th of July we will avoid the crowd and go tomorrow evening. So after spending a few hours with the camera around the buildings, I set out for an afternoon in the woods, hoping to see what draws so many people into the California wilderness.

I follow the clearing through an orchard and cultivated area, and enter the edge of the forest. There a bare wooden cross marks the place as somehow special, or perhaps is saying the whole wilderness is special. A few steps beyond this a tree off the path causes me to stop and take a second look. The immensity of the smooth trunk first strikes me, then the apparent distress of the whole tree. Then I know: this is Mother Madron. She is leaning backward with arms outstretched., supported by two straight redwoods. At her base the roots are pulling out of the ground, spreading open a hole, the birth canal of an ancient woman in perennial labor. She seems exhausted and yet immensely strong — at once dying, and opening to fecundation. One could imagine how Indians might have made this a site

for fertility rites. Later I will discover a photograph of this tree in *Woods, Shore, Desert*, which does not make it very obvious why the tree is called Mother Madron.

A newly-scraped dirt road leads up the valley through an increasingly dense forest. After awhile I feel that I could walk for miles without really seeing anything, so tightly closed in is the foliage. It does not seem to have the accessibility, the welcome and mystery of the paths I am familiar with in the east. Or perhaps I need only to have a guide, but soon I turn away from this featureless resistance to penetration, and decide to return to "the grove," where I might sit and overhear the conversation of light and wind among the lofty redwoods.

I am carrying a paperback copy of *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen, which is a journal of travels in the Himalayas of Nepal. To read about exotic places in a place to me exotic might be too much of a good thing. But it serves its purpose of distracting my mind from the surroundings, so I can return to it from time to time with renewed attention. The passage of time is important. I begin to sense how the shadows move, how the sun passes through the branches, still holding course due west; how it remains the cosmic center, as it has for centuries, making a cathedral out of this vegetation. I am beginning to fit this fabled place into my scheme of reality, and to sense what it would be to live with such presences.

Fr. Louis did not get to die under such trees. He has a rather modest Kentucky cedar by his grave; one that smelled sweet on that drizzly afternoon of his burial, when I put my arms around it to take down a loudspeaker after the crowd left. I have no doubt that Fr. Louis meant it when he told the nuns he would settle at Redwoods after he came back from Asia. Just as he meant it when he said he would go to Christ in the Desert in New Mexico, to Alaska, to Nicaragua. There are a dozen versions of what he said he would do next. I think they are all true, and he meant them all. He fulfilled them all in the only way he could: by releasing the spirit. He saw something he wanted to identify with in all these places, and in a way he finally did identify — I can sense it in this place, as much as I can sense it in the hermitage at Gethsemani.



Vespers: in choir all is light — the strong Pacific sun pouring down from the high window, the flame of the white candle, the golden day lilies,

the nuns in white cowls oblivious to their splendor in what they do every day. I would rather participate and not bother with photographing it all, but I am glad of the opportunity to get a view from many angles, if only to retain it as a vivid memory.

At supper with the sisters I speak mostly of Dan Berrigan's visit to Gethsemani in March. He spent a semester at Berea College in Kentucky, teaching the Book of the Apocalypse and spent a weekend with us. He spoke of the filming of *The Mission* in Argentina, and seemed ambiguous about the value of the whole project: whether, since there is already so much media rhetoric, it can have any more than a passing influence. There is so much violence in the film, he would certainly hesitate to show it to children, — maybe even to monks.

The film crew was given leave by Robert Bolt to change the script, and Berrigan was responsible for the ending. The original left a dramatic imbalance between the protagonist of violence and that of nonviolence, sort of like Milton's Satan who is more convincing than Milton's God. So it called for change. However, the film did not try to resolve the moral issue between the two sides, but left it open, and in that way is true to history.

Perhaps that is the wisdom behind Berrigan's decision not to pursue the controversy between himself and Ernesto Cardenal on nonviolence. Both being deeply influenced by Merton, one would expect the conditions ideal for a thoroughgoing discussion, but it quickly came to a standstill after it began ten years ago, and was not resumed when they recently met in Nicaragua. Berrigan thought that ultimately they would not agree, and it would be futile. They maintain a polite disagreement. I can say no better about people in my own monastery, deeply influenced by Merton, who never resolve their disagreements. Nor did Merton himself make direct efforts to do so in community. He would state the truth plainly as he saw it, and leave things to take their own course.

o o o o o

I eat with the sisters again on the following evening, and they are interested in hearing about my experience in Nigeria, where I spent a couple of years at our monastery, Our Lady of Mount Calvary, near Enugu. I talk about the African's attitude toward dreams, which among the Ibo, at least, is rather negative. Part of this is due to their temperament, which is outward-directed and pragmatic. They make good business people, are

goal-oriented and ambitious, at least by African standards, and little inclined to introspection. The Irish missionaries who brought them the faith would advise them to ignore dreams as not true. This perhaps was necessary, given the mentality of the people at the time. If someone had a dream of fighting with his neighbor, the next day he would go to his neighbor and get into a fight. There was a literal mindedness that was suppressed but never corrected. As a consequence, there is a reluctance to explore dreams, and a barely concealed fear of them. They live closer to their unconscious, without being sufficiently differentiated from it, and are rather easily moved by it or trapped in its projections and fears. This, at least, was my amateur impression. Not every tribe is the same in this regard, and the few Yurobo I talked to seemed to have much more access to their dream life.

Sometime during the meal a couple of deer came into the valley outside the glass wall of the dining room, and ate pears off the trees.

There remain a couple of hours before dark, so Diane and I finally drive to the ocean to see "Needle Rock," named after a pyramid shaped rock off the shore which has a hole through it. After this morning's Mass one of the neighbors told how he saw Merton at Bear Harbor further up the beach when he was visiting. He did not know who this stranger was, but he had so much energy and enthusiasm, he thought: "Either this is a saint or a madman." I might have told him it was both. I was soon to see what provoked such enthusiasm.

The road winds steeply down the ridge and ends on a plateau, where a house is located and a tree I immediately recognize from a photograph Fr. Louis took. It is still standing, a little more spare, and just as dead as it was twenty years ago. The nuns call it *The Merton Tree*. Amazingly, it is untouched by carving knife, despite the fact that this is a popular beach. With my camera I quickly take advantage of the evening sun which emphasizes every contour of the trunk. The branches describe a cryptic alphabet, a snarled syntax, with coarse innuendos; engage in a gauche comedy, an inner argument among themselves by which the tree strikes a balance that has kept it standing for many decades. Merton-like. The bone-bare tree that he photographed under a grey sky remains just as enigmatic under the sharp accents of the setting sun. I leave it and follow the steep path to the beach.

The sand is black! It does not just appear black, it is clean black. And the beach is completely unoccupied. It looks like a mistake in a dream,

which I must never assume to be true. Dreams are not true, except psychologically! The water crashing through the eye of "Needle Rock" makes it a spot fatal for any swimmer. I try to capture the effect of the sun passing through, water turning to light.

Meanwhile, Diane has found a log to sit against, and is gazing out at a seal occasionally peeping above the waves. We bring one another up to date on what we have been doing, who we have seen or heard from since the summer of '74, who has left religious life. There is little nostalgia in this. We will always treasure those summers, but too much time has passed, other high points have come and gone. Life has brought many rewards, and we live in gratitude for the present.

I do not ask her about Merton's visit long ago. It does not push itself to the surface. She had already told me about "Tom" over a decade ago, an impression that corresponded well with the impressions of those who were attending his conferences in the Chapter Room at Gethsemani in '68. He would come up with these glib statements that seemed portentous after the event: "I don't care what you guys do with monastic renewal, I'm going to be out there pushing up the daisies." or more seriously: "Everyone's lifeline describes a kind of arc and descent, and you can tell when it is coming to an end." All of these numerous private and not so private confidences have been dismissed by the Merton experts. And Diane's intuition no less would be dismissed. How when Tom spoke he made God seem so obvious that she thought: "Ah, he will have to disappear because he is giving away the secret."

That was twenty years ago, and now we find ourselves in a very different landscape of disaster. We talk little about Merton but much about U. S. covert actions in Central America, exploitation of Navajo lands, and natural resources throughout the country, about AIDS — present realities we might have dismissed as nightmares in the '70s. (No, dreams are not true!) I put in a word for generating a dialogue between the right and the left in this country, and working for an open atmosphere. It is so hard, and people are getting isolated in their own position, both in national and ecclesiastical politics.

On the way back to the car we see a goat perched on the cliff face. Hard to say which way he came and which way he will go. Such is how our generation finds itself now. He doesn't mind it; it gives him a good view of the ocean. So should we complain?



As we drive back, our conversation says nothing of what I am actually feeling: the joy of sharing in the same quest and the same monastic story, the communion in solitude that our link with Merton and the Cistercian reality has given us. I will leave early the next morning. We don't say good-bye because it never seems to stick. The past has given us so much to share, there is reason to think the future will bring more. In the end, life will be too rich to be measured by any farewells.