

RECREATED INNOCENCE IN THOMAS MERTON'S *THE SIGN OF JONAS*

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Thomas Merton's journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, spans the years 1946 to 1952. Through this narrative Merton tells a story about contemporary monastic experience. His aim is to report, to memorialize, and to celebrate a community of monks engaged in a "life of prayer and of penance, of liturgy, study, and manual labor."¹ Merton describes the patterns and rhythms of a monk's life: "his taking of vows . . . the monastic community, the bare flight of time" (*SJ*, p. 8). The range of experience described in the journal is wide. It runs from accounts of private moments of solitude to complaints registered about the growing level of noise at the monastery; from perceptions about the community's preoccupation with obedience and rule to expressions of deep gratitude for and love of his Trappist brothers. In response to what he construes to be the more active character and practice of fellow Trappists, Merton frequently accords a position of privilege to the meditative practices of reading and writing.² Merton's interest in and love of reading and writings poses a quiet critique of corporate views about rule, devotion, prayer styles and the like, but his reading and writing also highlight how Merton gained access to conditions necessary for interior silence and contemplative solitude.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 3. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

2. Early in the journal, for example, Merton lists those spiritual classics — *The Living Flame of Love*, *The Way of Perfection*, the *Itineraries* — that "have gone deep into me and have shaped my life and prayer." These and other works, says Merton, "have made me realize what had been going on inside me without my having been quite aware of it" (*SJ*, p. 29).

Within the context of the journal, the rare book vault is a special retreat for Merton. He sees the place as a gold mine of quiet, “as nearly sound proof as any corner of this noisy Trappist monastery” (*SJ*, p. 147). As he withdraws from the rest of the community and from his own “sin of overactivity” to this place of quiet repose, a language of renewal and restoration emerges. “The vault,” writes Merton, “is a fascinating place, very quiet But on its shelves are things that make me very happy.”³ The work done in the vault has significance because Merton learns “all about the presence of God and the mysteries of Christ” (*SJ*, p. 147). In the vault he is not only steeped “in the presence of God until it makes me numb,” but he is also free to “get back to resting in God in silence . . . [and] once more [become] a rational being” (*SJ*, p. 166). Rediscovery of solitude in the vault means personal renewal — “love, love, love burned in my heart” — and private renewal means different feelings about his place in the community — “office was better than it had been for months” (*SJ*, p. 147). Within the space of the vault, the monk’s attitude becomes not that of marking time but of enjoying the tranquility of being “in a very happy room . . . in which a monk is where he belongs, in silence . . . his hand and eye moved by the living God in deep tranquility” (*SJ*, p. 256).

Thomas Merton’s written reflections often symbolize the vault, rendering this place into a figural space of womb like regeneration. One particularly good example of how the vault gains this figural and highly subjective cast can be found in an entry from 23 December 1949.⁴ This episode, which, involves a devotional piece of writing addressed to Mary, the Mother of Christ, produces for Merton a new awareness about the way that he represents himself within the narrative journal form.

In this entry, Merton is seated at his desk in the vault. He has taken some time away from writing a new preface to a Random House edition of St. Augustine’s *City of God* to pray and to write in his journal.⁵ The passage

3. *SJ*, p. 63. The attention Merton gives to the books in the vault underscores the care and pleasure he takes in them. In one passage he describes the history, the physical make up, and the artistry of the books. A reader often meets with catalogues of the books with which Merton surrounds himself, but the contents of a book, a photograph, or a binding are just as likely to be noticed and remembered.

4. All references to this particular journal entry will be cited in my text without page numbers. The entry includes pages 255-257.

5. The passage begins with scattered responses to St. Augustine. These responses modulate between understanding the theologian as “light” and “window.” The metaphor of light describes Augustine’s privileged status as theologian among other theologians. The metaphor of light also suggests the effect of Augustine’s work on Merton: “The work feeds me, strengthens me, knits my powers together in peace and tranquility.” In describing Augustine’s privileged relation to other theologians, he is identified as “the calmest and clearest light” because “the light of God shines to me more serenely through the wide open windows of Augustine.”

Merton’s description then shifts from a visual metaphor to a tonal metaphor. The tonal metaphor begins with the monk’s attitude of listening to a watch tick on a table in the vault. As the passage continues, the silence of the vault gains precedence over the sounds in the vault. This is accomplished first through

marks the beginning of an "altogether different tonality" impinging upon time and place in which the monk is situated. This tonality is invoked through Merton's reflection on the figure of Mary. Merton understands her as *Theotokos*, who actively "shapes," "forms," and "gives birth" to a recreated world. By calling her "Mother," Merton evokes the Advent season's spirit of rebirth and transformation: Mary's love "forms an Apocalypse in me . . . gives birth to the City of God."

Thomas Merton's invocation of Mary takes shape out of his own "annunciation" of praise for Fra Angelico's work "The Annunciation." As he looks at this picture which Clare Boothe Luce has sent him, he first observes the way Angelico has represented Mary in the space of the porch: "I look at the serene, severe porch where Angelico's angel appears to her." This observation leads to a declaration of praise: Angelico "knew how to paint her. She is thin, immensely noble, and she does not rise to meet the angel." Merton's appreciation of the artist's expertise summons in him a wish to imitate the artist's image of reverencing this extraordinary woman. But the monk's plea — "Mother, make me as sincere as the picture" — signals a totally different event.

It is through a language of imitation that Merton places himself in relationship between a sacramental event, not yet fully disclosed to human consciousness (i.e., Mary's "too clear presence") and a representative of that event. Merton can himself become most like a "picture" of sincerity only by praying to Mary for such resemblance. "Let me have no thought that could not kneel before you in the picture . . . I will act like the picture." Although motivated by a desire to imitate the artist's expertise, the monk's prayer does not intend to represent Mary as Angelico's picture does. Instead, the plea to "let me have no thought . . . No image, No shadow" signals an interruption of the narrative's convention of reporting the "monk's ordinary existence." The monk's prayer, then, functions to subvert the meaning of Angelico's expert representation in order to evoke a latent awareness of Mary's presence in the vault, as it exists prior to language and representation. Reading *The Sign of Jonas* in this way in turn

Merton's suggestion that the watch to which he listens does not function properly. It does not accurately mark time but "loses time" instead. The figurative sense here — "The watch loses time" — alters the original meaning of how a watch works (e.g., marking how much time remains for work or study before office). The metaphor of listening suggests that the monk's proper function in the vault is to lose time, not to mark it.

Merton then turns attention from the watch to a train whistle. The train whistle, heard "out in the valley a moment ago" is posed against a "now" in which "everything is very silent except for the faint clanking of ropes against the metal flagpole in the garden as they move in the wind." In the passage the presence of silence looms in contrast to the faint clanking of a rope. Because it is the wind that caused the clanking, the wind could also soon cease and so silence the one obstacle to quiet. Merton's portrayal of silence here works to interrupt the usual sense of "now" through the narrative's use of figurative language.

suggests something to us about the way in which Merton's writing may have altered the way he understood himself. John Eudes Bamberger has described him as having "a very passionate nature for all kinds of things." According to Bamberger, Merton felt that he had indulged that nature too much before coming to Gethsemani. "Prior to entering the monastery he felt he had lost his human innocence, and he could not feel he deserved compassion because of having been too violent in his ways with people, too selfish and greedy."⁶

This fear of loss of innocence was to be a key preoccupation throughout Merton's monastic career and is associated with a certain fear of being rejected by people. This fear gains special power when it is observed along with his relationships with women. In both Monica Furlong's *Merton: A Biography* and Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, the reader notices just how decisive this particular fear of rejection became. In her biography, Furlong looks hard at Ruth Merton's treatment of her son. She sees the beginning of his "exile" as resulting from Ruth's early death. "But in a deeper sense," she writes, "Ruth's death symbolized a loss of a center, of roots, that was to shape the rest of his life."⁷ Mott also shows that Merton associates his sense of rejection with his mother, herself an artist and intellectual, by pointing to a 1967 letter in which Merton complains to an "intellectual woman" friend for seeming to reject him. "I don't take sweetly to rejection, I can tell you."⁸

Indeed in various parts of the Mott biography our attention is directed to Merton's own analysis of his relationship with women. Early in the biography, for example, Mott quotes from a 1965 journal entry. Written on the eve of his fiftieth birthday, this passage situates the older Merton's view of, as Mott puts it, "what had gone wrong" for Merton during his early adult years:

I suppose I regret most my lack of love, my selfishness and glibness (covering a deep shyness and need of love) with girls who, after all, did love me, I think, for a time. My great fault was my inability really, to believe it, and my efforts to get complete assurance and perfect fulfillment.

(Mott, p. 83)

Part of what comes through here is the older Merton's sympathetic, yet critical, recognition of a younger person's dilemma. In Cambridge and New

6. John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O., as quoted in *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*; ed. Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 114. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Bamberger*.

7. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 15. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Furlong*.

8. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 17. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

York, the younger Merton's efforts to "get complete assurance" probably found expression in sex, but also "in a desperate busyness and ambition, and frantic drinking, smoking, and 'having a good time,'" or in "the warm male friendships of his Columbia days."⁹ Underlying this behavior is, as Furlong suggests, a person possessing "a profound sense of himself as orphaned and outcast" (*Furlong*, p. 333). Merton himself, in speaking of this sense of self in *The Secular Journal*, links it to a "spiritual dryness" and "an acute experience of longing — therefore of love."¹⁰

While certainly more self-aware by 1965, Merton is "still haunted," says Mott, "both by the inability to love for fear of rejection in the distant past, and what he called his 'refusal of women'" (*Mott*, p. 411). Mott consistently points us to the view that: "For Thomas Merton 'the refusal' had not been a refusal to love so much as a refusal to accept love, and especially from women."¹¹ This refusal to accept love from women is an historical and psychological exigence peculiar to Merton. It is a problem which Merton certainly carries into the monastery. For example, in a February 1949 entry from *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton speaks of being "haunted by beautiful thoughts . . . a virgin spirit," and wonders how "my spirit, which has been raped by everything stupid, could again become a virginal spirit" (*S*), p. 152).

Thomas Merton's apostrophic prayer in *The Sign of Jonas*, then, makes explicit how language is used by this monk to produce a radically altered experience of self. By reviewing his own experience of self as sinner in relation to Mary, Merton resymbolizes himself as immersed within an "altogether different tonality" of place and time. The apostrophe to Mary in effect interrupts Merton's penchant as a writer to memorialize his past and suggests instead an entire configuration of meaning about prayer and solitude that exists outside of the ongoing narrative confession of Thomas Merton.¹² The prayer — "Mother, make me as sincere as the picture" — not only signals an interruption of the temporal flow of this narrative, but also

9. *Furlong*, pp. 333-334. Furlong seems confident that Merton suffered long and hard for the "event that happened in his nineteenth year at Cambridge in England." She concludes that it was his getting a girlfriend pregnant which drove him to a "lifetime's expiation in a Trappist monastery." See pp. xiv-xv.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), p. 264.

11. *Mott*, p. 423. It is not altogether surprising, then, that a note of pessimism is struck on the subject of women and sex as late as his fiftieth birthday in 1965: "So, one thing on my mind is sex, as something I did not use maturely and well, something I gave up without having come to terms with it" (p. 83).

12. See Jonathan Culler's discussion on the rhetorical figure of the apostrophe in his book, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 135-154. In his account Culler argues that apostrophe displaces an irreversible narrative sequence "by removing the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locating it in a discursive time" (p. 150).

serves to designate a difference between Merton's memory of past sins, losses, orphaned identity, etc., and a present moment that admits Mary's symbolic presence of renewal as an existential reality.¹³ The attitude of listening to the silence of the vault, then, calls into question the writer's memory and historical identity, and instead offers an alternative identity as someone who is immediately and directly empowered by the sacramental presence of Mary.

John Eudes Bamberger has said that one of Thomas Merton's most important experiences of God was that "somehow he was able, because of the experience of God, to believe that God had recreated his innocence" (Bamberger, p. 114). During the early years at the monastery, the female figure most identifiably associated with this movement towards a "re-created innocence" is Mary, the Mother of Christ.

My account of this single episode from *The Sign of Jonas* suggests something about the way that Merton alters the lived experience of orphan, exile, and wounded. Bamberger, describing Merton's devotion to Mary in the interview with Victor A. Kramer in this volume, says that "he had a very simple faith in her, and apparently he had a very deep love for her. It wasn't sentimental at all, very theological and so on, but it was very real."¹⁴ I hope this account begins to suggest the figural nature of that reality.

13. For helpful background information see Jean Danielou's article, "Le Vierge et le Temp" in *Dieu Vivant*, no. 10, p. 27ff. Danielou suggests the underlying reason for Mary's "certain strange presence" in the vault: "Ily a une relation mysterieuse entre Marie et les pocheurs."

14. See also John Eudes Bamberger in *A Thomas Merton Oral History*, by Victor A. Kramer (Decatur, Georgia: Deweylands Press, 1985), p. 418.