

BLAZING IN THE SPARK OF GOD: THOMAS MERTON'S REFERENCES TO MEISTER ECKHART

Erlinda Paguio

The second reading in the prayer service that took place the night before Thomas Merton died in Bangkok on December 10, 1968 was taken from Meister Eckhart's *Spiritual Talks*. It begins with the counsel that, in all things, man must practice to have God constantly present in both his intentions and in his love. Wherever he is—whether in a church, in his cell, or in the midst of a crowd—he must have the same disposition in his desire for God. The true possession of God has its source within the soul who turns to God and fervently yearns for Him. This true possession is not a matter of thinking about God all the time. Man should not be content with a God who is a mere figment of his thought. When the thought passes away, God also goes. Man must possess God in substance, God who is beyond the thought of man and of every other creature. That God stays with us forever unless a man voluntarily turns his back from Him.¹ The man who possesses God substantially takes hold of Him by the divine part of his own nature; and God gives him spiritual understanding in everything. For him, everything has a divine flavor. A man attains this gift by learning to penetrate the depths of things, by developing an inner solitude wherever he may be, and by soaking himself with the presence of God so that he becomes, by God's grace, one with Him (*NCFM*, p. 51).

It is not known who selected these excerpts from Meister Eckhart's *Spiritual Talks*, but it is interesting to discover that the

1. *A New Charter for Monasticism: Proceedings of the Meeting of the Monastic Superiors in the Far East*. (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1970), p. 50. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NCFM*.

same passages from the Raymond Blakney translation of Meister Eckhart's works were copied by Merton in his Working Notebook dated April-June 1966.²

This paper will attempt to summarize Merton's study of Meister Eckhart's works, particularly during the 1960's. Equipped with a thorough knowledge of Christian mystical tradition, Merton was able to expand his understanding of spiritual matters by studying Jewish mysticism, Zen Buddhism, Islamic mysticism, and other oriental religions. His in-depth study of Meister Eckhart coincided with his study of Zen Buddhism. He found that in spite of theological differences between them, there was a marked similarity in their experience of quiet and awareness of Being. This reality was to have a profound influence on Merton's life and in his writings. Central to this influence is the theme and imagery of the "spark of the soul", which Merton borrows from Meister Eckhart. The "spark of the soul" is that power in the soul which is simple and free, and with which the Father gives birth to His Son. Although the term spark will be used in a variety of ways, the underlying importance of becoming aware of its reality in one's soul, and its significance in one's life, is always present. The "spark of the soul" is life; it is love; it is God within us; it is God within all beings.

THE "SPARK OF THE SOUL" IN MERTON'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

Merton began to read Meister Eckhart during his student days at Columbia University. D. T. Suzuki, the author of many authoritative books on Zen Buddhism, and who was also deeply touched by the spiritual experience and writings of Meister Eckhart, influenced Merton to a deeper study of Meister Eckhart. In Michael Mott's biography of Merton, there were two prophetic entries in Merton's reading list: C. de B. Evan's translation of *Meister Eckhart* and D. T. Suzuki's *Zen Buddhism*.³ Merton always included Meister Eckhart in the list of spiritual writers he recommended to correspondents who sought his help in spiritual matters. Although he liked the Meister's writings very much, he admitted that he did not quote him as often as Dag Hammarskjöld did in *Markings*.⁴ Presumably because he feared

2. Thomas Merton, *Working Notebook, 1966 April-June*. Thomas Merton Studies Center. Hereafter referred to as *TMSC*.

3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 117. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SMTM*.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*. (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux), pp. 345-346.

editorship due to the fact that seventeen articles of Meister Eckhart's ideas were considered heretical, and others were described as evil sounding, dangerous, and suspect of heresy in Pope John XXII's *In Agro Dominico*, Merton acquired similar ideas on contemplation from Ruysbroeck, Tauler, St. John of the Cross and others, instead of quoting Eckhart. In the recently published *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, Brother Patrick Hart provides us with a clear idea of the travails that Merton went through with the Cistercian Order and diocesan censors.⁵

In his correspondence with Etta Gullick, who sought Merton's assistance in the preparation of an edition of Benet of Canfield's *Rule of Perfection*, Merton commented that Benet's writings were very much like Meister Eckhart's. Merton expressed to her the necessity of opening one's heart, of flowing with God and of renouncing mental objects in allowing God to call us and lead us to Him. Merton observed that religious persons like them tend to be too rational; they do not allow anything to remain unconscious though all that is best is unconscious or superconscious.⁶

Gullick sent Merton two important works on Meister Eckhart: E. F. Kelley's article on Eckhart in the *Downside Review* and Vladimir Lossky's book on Eckhart. Merton remarked that although he liked Eckhart very much, he felt being let down every now and then when the Meister goes beyond all bounds. Yet he considered Eckhart more brilliant than all the other Rhenish mystics and more interesting than any of them, even if Tauler provided him with a more steady diet.⁷ In another letter to Gullick, Merton continued to express his admiration for the Meister who is more and more wonderful especially when interpreted properly. He becomes less incomprehensible. He wrote that "there is more in one sermon of Eckhart than in volumes of other people. There is so much packed in between the lines."⁸ Merton was convinced that he was in the midst of the most fundamental intuition of unknowing. This, according to him, was the first source of his faith, and has always been with him throughout his life.⁹

Merton's assessment of Meister Eckhart as one of the truly great mystics surfaced again in another letter to Gullick. He thought

5. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*. (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux), p. xii.

6. Thomas Merton [TM] to Etta Gullick [EG], March 5, 1961. *TMSC*.

7. TM to EG, June 10, 1961. *TMSC*.

8. TM to EG, July 1, 1961. *TMSC*.

9. TM to EG, July 25, 1961. *TMSC*.

that Eckhart was an exception to western mysticism, particularly the Dionysians of the West, whom he thought tended to be "departmentalized." Merton wrote, "I think more and more of him. He towers over all his century."¹⁰ Three years later, he expressed the same esteem for the Meister. "In the hospital I have read a lot of Eckhart and am more and more convinced of his greatness."¹¹ Merton believed that Eckhart's doctrines may be considered orthodox if they are carefully studied as a whole and if questionable texts are compared with other sources. He realized that Eckhart's use of the vernacular in expressing mystical truths could lead to misinterpretation, yet he also understood that all mystics use extreme terms.¹²

Merton's concentrated study of Meister Eckhart in 1966 is affirmed by John Howard Griffin who was appointed to research and write Merton's official biography. Because of his illness, Griffin was not able to finish his project. His *Follow the Ecstasy* corroborates Merton's letter to Gullick about his intensive reading of Eckhart. Griffin writes that in the hospital, "Merton plunged into a study of Eckhart."¹³ Michael Mott writes that Merton was reading Eckhart when Margie, the student nurse with whom he fell in love, entered his room.

Merton has been much criticized for his affair with Margie, but it is important to understand its significance in the development of his life. He was most helpless after his operation, and he was deeply touched by the attention he received from her. Griffin tells us that while Merton was recuperating in the hospital, he tried to read Eckhart, but failed to concentrate. He was much too distracted by thoughts of Margie¹⁴ (*FE*, p. 79). Griffin notes how Merton considered Eckhart his "life-raft" in the hospital. It appears that Meister Eckhart became for him a source of consolation and assurance during this time. He even copied this quotation: "Blessed are the pure in heart who leave everything to God now as they did before they ever existed" (*FE*, p. 110). Note the significance of this line for him. He was aware of his present condition, yet he prayed that he could get back into that spirit of innocence of leaving everything to God completely as it were before Creation.

10. TM to EG, January 18, 1963. TMSC.

11. TM to EG, April 16, 1966. TMSC.

12. Thomas Merton, *Working Notebook #21*, April-June 1966. TMSC.

13. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy*. (Fort Worth: JHG Editions/Latitude Press, 1983), p. 79. Hereafter referred to in the text as *FE*.

Several months later, when beset with conflicts that accompanied his relationship with Margie and his vocation as a hermit, Merton turned to Eckhart again. Griffin quotes this entry from Merton's journal: "By August, the uneasiness was again resolved by reading Eckhart" (*FE*, p. 118).

This event in Merton's life leads us to two poems he wrote after his 1966 operation. "With the World in My Bloodstream" and "I Always Obey My Nurse" utilize the theme and imagery of the "spark." The confluence of his studying Eckhart and his experience of loving Margie and being loved by her is unmistakable. Thérèse Lentfoehr, one of Merton's close friends, evaluates "With the World in My Bloodstream" as Merton's most poignant and most significant poem. According to her, its singular importance for Merton is evident in his placing it first in the originally planned Part II of the much longer poem *Cables to the Ace*.¹⁵ Merton uses the theme and imagery of the "spark" five times in the poem that is set in the hospital. He is completely conscious of his clinical surroundings, of his feelings, his sensations, his thoughts, and his anguish. He asks, "I wonder who the hell am I," and searches for an answer to the question, "But whose life lies here and whose invented music sings?"

So the world's logic runs
Up and down the doubting walls
While the frights and planes
Swing my sleep out the window
All around, overhead
In doubt and technical heat

In oxygen and jet streams
In the world's enormous space
And in man's enormous want
Until the want itself is gone
Nameless bloodless and alone
The Cross comes and Eckhart's scandal
The Holy Supper and the precise wrong
And the accurate little spark
In emptiness in the jet stream.
Only the spark can understand
All that burns flies upward

15. Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence, On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*. (NY: New Directions, 1979), pp. 67-69. Hereafter referred to in the text as *WS*.

Where the rainy jets have gone
 A sign of needs and possible homes
 An invented back bone
 A dull song of oxygen
 A lost spark in Eckhart's Castle.
 World's plasm and world's cell
 I bleed myself awake and well.

Only the spark is now true
 Dancing in the empty room
 All around overhead
 While the frail body of Christ
 Sweats in a technical bed
 I am Christ's lost cell
 His childhood and desert age
 His descent into hell.
 Love without need and without name
 Bleeds in the empty problem
 And the spark without identity
 Circles the empty ceiling.¹⁶

Merton's use of the theme and imagery of the "spark" is set within the context of his realization of Christ's Cross coming to him, and at the same time his awareness of his love for his student nurse. Reference to Eckhart's scandal is related to the "precise wrong" and the "accurate little spark." The "spark of the soul" theme in Meister Eckhart was much misunderstood by his contemporaries, and along with other misinterpreted ideas, this led to his condemnation by the Church. In Merton's case, the "accurate little spark" seems to refer to his all too human love for the nurse—a source of scandal for a hermit like him who has taken a vow of celibacy. Yet Merton writes that "only the spark can understand..." This "spark" appears to be Merton's point of poverty, the "virgin point", the "point of nothingness" where a person becomes one with his Creator. Merton speaks of this "point vierge" in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. He believed that this "point of nothingness" is at the center of our being. It is untouched by sin and by illusions. It is "a point or a spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our

16. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. (NY: New Directions, 1977), pp. 617-618.

mind or the brutalities of our own will....It is His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship."¹⁷

In this critical point in his life, Merton could rely only on God's mercy. Hence, he could say, "only the spark can understand..."

Merton then calls himself "a lost spark in Eckhart's Castle." Here he recalls Meister Eckhart's Sermon # 24 (Blakney edition) which is based on Luke 10:38. "Our Lord Jesus Christ went into a castle and was received by a virgin who was a wife."¹⁸ In this sermon, Meister Eckhart refers to the "little castle" as that tabernacle of the spirit in which Jesus enters. He says that one must be a virgin if he is to receive Jesus. He also says that it is necessary to be fruitful in the sense that as one receives Jesus, he must return Jesus to the Father with gratitude. The person who does this is in Eckhart's terms, "a virgin who is a wife, and who is free and unfettered in affections." Merton's awareness of his feelings for his nurse seems to have led him to call himself "a lost spark in Eckhart's Castle." So strong are the contradictions in his life at this point that he is led to identify his life with Christ suffering on the Cross. He sees his helpless body as Christ's frail body, as "Christ's lost cell." Other analogies that reflect Merton's surrender to Christ's love, and his mystical union with Him are his considering his body as Christ "childhood and desert age", and "His descent into hell."

There is a marked progression in Merton's use of the theme and imagery of the "spark": he refers to human love as the "accurate little spark"; then to his point of poverty as "only the spark can understand..."; then he refers to himself as the "lost spark in Eckhart's Castle." When he uses the "spark" image again, he says, "Only the spark is now true, Dancing in the empty room." The entirety, the wholeness of divine and human love which Merton experienced at this moment convinces him of the truth and genuineness of both loves. At the end of the poem, "the spark without identity circles the empty ceiling." Is Merton referring to himself who had initially asked "Who the hell am I?" Is he referring to Meister Eckhart's "spark of the soul" that is "neither this nor that"? Is it love that cannot be compartmentalized?

17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Paperback, 1968), pp. 140-142. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

18. *Meister Eckhart*, a modern Translation by Raymond Blakney. (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), pp. 207-211. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Blakney*.

Lentfoehr writes that an earlier version of this poem was slightly shorter and had a different ending.

And love without need without name
 Without answer without problem
 Love is the Way and love is the home. (WS, p. 69)

In the poem "I Always Obey My Nurse", Merton elaborates further on this love which he calls "the little blind fire" which leaps from one wound to another. It is love that is generated from Christ's wound, but which leaped also between him and his student nurse. The redemptive and beautiful character of this love is extolled. He writes that God made this "a smashing spark" that kills and destroys all sin. God made "the sudden spark smash louder than lightning in the great night, and better than any spark. God made it with outlaw fire without rule and without reason."¹⁹

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton writes that although Eckhart had some limitations, he was entranced by the incisiveness of his sermons and his clear way of penetrating the core of the inner life. Merton appreciated Eckhart's ability to bring to light the reality of the awakened spark, and the birth of Christ in us. He esteemed Eckhart as a great man whose exceptional mind and spiritual experience could not be understood by his contemporaries. Those men who condemned him were more concerned with what his words meant to other men. They were not interested in discovering Eckhart's kind of religious experience which brought fruits of life and joy (CGB, pp. 54-55).

One of Merton's allusions to Eckhart in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is from Sermon #4 which is based on Luke 2:42. Jesus goes up to the temple in Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph. When they left, Jesus stayed behind without their knowledge. When they noticed that he was missing and could not find him among their acquaintances, relatives, and strangers, they retraced their steps until they found him. In his recollection of all the places and people that led him to his conversion to Catholicism, Merton mentioned the same analogy that Eckhart used about the divine birth: When a person is about to be struck by a thunderbolt, he turns unconsciously toward it. When a tree is about to be struck, all the leaves turn toward the blow. And one in whom the divine birth is to take place turns without realizing it,

completely toward it (CGB, p. 187). This means that when the human spirit is ready to receive Him, God enters without hesitation or waiting. No creature in this world can prevent him from experiencing this birth. In fact, they will lead him to become aware of this birth. Merton understood that all his travels in Europe and all his encounters with different peoples directed him to that important event of Christ being born in his heart. When this happened God became all for him. Eckhart says that in order to experience this noble birth, one must go back to the starting point, the core out of which one comes (Blakney, pp. 118-124).

In many of his writings, Merton emphasized the importance of discovering one's inner self. It is that self which for him is no longer clothed with an ego.²⁰ He taught that when one discovers this self, he also discovers within him the light and wisdom of his Creator. He believed that the fruit of education in both the monastery and the university is "the activation of that inmost center, that *scintilla animae*, that 'apex' or 'spark' which is freedom beyond freedom, identity beyond essence, a self beyond all ego, a being beyond the created realm, and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation" (LL, p. 9). To become aware of his spark within us is to recognize the presence of the Absolute in oneself and also in everything (LL, p. 10). Merton goes further. He says that the "spark" which is his true self is the flash of the Absolute recognizing itself in him. The "spark" is an event, an explosion which takes place when all opposites clash within oneself (LL, p. 10). This "spark" can never be manipulated or controlled (LL, p. 10). He remarked that in his life he remembers many incidents, happenings, conversations and encounters outside the classroom which gave him direction (LL, p. 13). He thought of Mark Van Doren saying that if he had a vocation to the monastic life, it would not be possible for him to decide against entering the monastery (LL, p. 14). He also recalled his meeting with D.T. Suzuki in New York. While Merton reverently drank his tea, Suzuki drank his with the wakefulness of a child, but at the same time, he gave the impression that the tea ceremony was not important. Merton concluded that every act however small can teach us everything as long as we see who it is that is acting. Awareness, consciousness, recognition are necessary to ignite this "spark".

To what extent is this "spark" that Merton speaks of related to what Meister Eckhart teaches? For Eckhart, the "spark of the soul"

19. Thomas Merton, *Working Notebook #21*, April-June 1966. TMSC.

20. Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live", in *Love and Living*. (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), p. 8. Hereafter referred to in the text as LL.

is a "power of the soul"; a "piece of the soul"; the "image of the divine impressed upon the soul"; a "divine light"; a "beam of light"; a "light of the spirit"; but having said that, he adds that the "spark of the soul" is "neither this nor that."²¹ C. F. Kelley, whose writings on Eckhart Merton appreciated greatly, considers the "spark" as "the eternal word which is innermost present in the ground of the soul."²² It is the "Indwelling Word, born in, speaking to, or glowing in the ground, the very isness of the intellect. From the consideration of the intellectual soul, it is the principle of all its operations. In the ground of the soul, identity with the divine spark is effected" (Kelley, pp. 139-144).

Meister Eckhart characterized the "spark of the soul" in the following terms: It is wholly spiritual since it flows from the spirit and resides in the spirit. It is in this power of the soul that the Eternal Father ceaselessly begets his eternal Son. He adds that "it is free of all names, bare of all forms, and is empty and free, as one and simple as God is empty and free, and as God is one and simple."²³ Ancelet-Hustace, who also wrote about Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics, writes that the "spark of the soul" is God's imprint of Himself in the soul, where He recognizes Himself, and which is capable of receiving Him. Note how similar this is to Merton's expression that the "spark" is "the flash of the Absolute recognising itself in me."²⁴

THE "SPARK OF THE SOUL" IN OTHER RELIGIONS

Merton discovered in Zen Buddhism the same inner quiet and awareness of the Absolute that he found in the writings of Meister Eckhart. Lentfoehr believes that D.T. Suzuki's works, his friendship with Merton, and their collaboration in publishing their dialogue on the Desert Fathers influenced Merton immensely (WS, p. 55).

21. Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language*. (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 127.

22. C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*. (NY: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 135. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Kelley*.

23. Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. Translation and Introduction by Edmund College and Bernard McGinn. (NY: Paulist Press, 1981), pp. 177-180.

24. Jeanne Ancelet-Hustace, *Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics*. (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), p. 66.

In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton expressed his understanding of Zen as "consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a transcultural, transreligious, and transformed consciousness."²⁵ The enlightenment of Zen is a breakthrough that goes beyond cultural and social structures, and even beyond religious rites and belief. In Zen Merton saw the same "emptiness," "dark night," "perfect freedom," "no-mind," "poverty" which Meister Eckhart spoke of. Merton's clear comprehension of this reality led him to reevaluate his previous argument with Suzuki in which he chose Cassian's "purity of heart" as a Christian expression of Zen consciousness. Merton admitted that this choice was "an unfortunate example" (ZBA, p. 9). He thought that the terms of Cassian, Evagrius Ponticus, and the Desert Fathers used to speak of "emptiness" was not quite parallel to what Zen experience was. He belatedly agreed with Suzuki that Meister Eckhart gives a fuller and truer expression of Zen in Christian experience.

In Eckhart's Sermon #28, based on Matthew 5:3, ("Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God"), he says that "a man should be so poor that he is not and has not a place for God to act in. To reserve a place would be to maintain distinctions" (*Blakeney*, p. 231).

Merton quoted Eckhart's explanation of what he meant by this intimate poverty: a man should be so empty of everything, even of his ideas of god and all his works, so that if God wants to act in the soul, He Himself must be the place in which He acts (ZBA, p. 10). Merton thought that this reflected Eckhart's Zen-like equation of God as infinite abyss and ground, with the true being of the self grounded in Him. Eckhart believed that when there is no self left as a place in which God acts, we recover our "true self"—the parallel to Zen's "no-self". Merton reflected that the oneness which the soul experiences with God in perfect poverty is "God's inexhaustible creative delight" (ZBA, p. 11). He illustrates this by using Eckhart's analogy which he considered incomparable.

In this likeness or identity God takes much delight that he pours his whole nature and being into it. His pleasure is so great, to take a simile, as that of a horse, let loose over a green heath, where the ground is level and smooth, to gallop as a horse will, as fast as he can over the greensward—for this

25. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. (NY: New Directions, 1968), p. 4. Hereafter referred to in the text as ZBA.

is a horse's pleasure and nature. It is so with God. It is his pleasure and rapture to discover identity, for he is this identity itself (ZBA, p. 11).

Merton believed that we would discover our "true self" if we could learn to identify the unity of our being with God (ZBA, p. 12).

Merton thought that the evocative expressions Meister Eckhart used in the vernacular was obviously disturbing to those who did not understand him. Yet those words awakened his audience to a higher level of experience. Merton realized that Meister Eckhart was pointing to something that was beyond structures and beyond the limits of any system. He was expressing the great creative renewal of mystical consciousness that was spreading through the Rhineland and the Low countries during Eckhart's time. Merton considered Eckhart to be very much like the Zen masters who used paradoxical expressions to make others aware of the reality that they experienced. Merton concluded, "Whatever Zen may be, however you define it, it is somehow there in Eckhart" (ZBA, p. 13).

To study Zen is to penetrate the outer shell and to taste the inner kernel which cannot be defined, but which one can realize in oneself. Similarly, Eckhart taught that if one wants to discover nature's nakedness, one must destroy its symbols to get close to the essence. He says, "When you come to the One that gathers all things up into itself, there you must stay" (ZBA, p. 14).

In his introduction to John Wu's *The Golden Age of Zen*, Merton clarifies his and Suzuki's comparison of Eckhart with the Zen masters. He writes that Zen grasps directly the unity of what is seen and unseen. It communicates "an awareness that is potentially already there but is not conscious of itself, an awareness of the ontological ground of our being here and now, right in the midst of the world."²⁶ Zen is "the ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its 'suchness' and 'thusness'" (GAZ, p. 15). Merton concluded that Zen enlightenment consists in the awareness of full spiritual reality, and realizing the all limited or particularized realities.²⁷ "Zen's insight is not our awareness, but

26. Thomas Merton, "A Christian Looks at Zen" in John Wu's *The Golden Age of Zen*. (Taipei: The National War College, 1967) p. 11. Hereafter referred to in the text as GAZ.

27. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*. (NY: The Noonday Press, 1987, © 1967), p. 14. Hereafter referred to in the text as MZM.

Being's awareness of itself in us. It is the recognition of my oneness with all that is" (MZM, p. 17). It is clear that Merton equates Eckhart's "spark of the soul" with Zen enlightenment or satori.

Cables to the Ace, Merton's complex poem, embodies much of Merton's experiences. Entry #37 captures his awareness of the Absolute. He writes of the coincidence of momentary form and eternal nothingness, of perfection and emptiness working together. Form for him is "the flash of nothingness" which comes and goes when one allows things to happen.²⁸

In entry #84, he returns to the same apophatic theme of void, emptiness, and total poverty from which emerges everything. He then uses his favorite expression of the virgin point:

"But for each of us there is a point of nothingness in the midst of being: the incomparable point, not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it, you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there" (CA, p. 58).

The title Merton chose for this entry is *Gelassenheit*. This key term in Meister Eckhart's writings has been translated as "serenity", "letting be", "abandonment" or "releasement."²⁹ Its significance lies in a person's disregard for the utility of objects and events and his acceptance of them for what they are. From this attitude springs equanimity, infinite resignation and serenity. He who learns how to let be, who leaves all things to themselves, restores all things to their primitive freedom (*Schurmann*, p. 16). Merton quotes Eckhart again at the end of *Cables to the Ace*. "The true word of eternity is spoken only in the spirit of that man who is himself a wilderness" (CA, p. 59). Merton omitted the last part of the quotation—"alienated from self and multiplicity." This quotation is within the context of Eckhart's sermon on the birth of God in man. Eckhart speaks of rest being found in desolation, and of God speaking to the heart in the desert.

In Merton's unpublished manuscript of *The Inner Experience*, he takes up Meister Eckhart's "spark of the soul" theme again. Eckhart's Sermon #7 deals with the story of the young man Jesus raised from the dead. In souls that are intent on external things, divine life is dead. Yet the heavenly Father can speak through them through Jesus and bring them to life. Merton strongly emphasized that

28. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace*. (NY: New Directions, 1968), p. 27. Hereafter referred to in the text as CA.

29. Reiner Schurmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. xii. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Schurmann*.

the "spark of the soul" is the living and dynamic point of contact with God. It is in this agent that God dwells and gives unity to all beings."³⁰

The full force and brilliance of the spark theme burst forth in Merton's tape on *The Mystical Life*. In his talk to the monks on Tape #8 A, he speaks of the heart which is alive with love. Expounding on the meaning of the text "I have loved because the Lord will hear," he exclaims that when love has reached a point of fullness in the heart of a mature and fully integrated person, that person can no longer live without love. He becomes aware that all creation is with him in this knowledge. In fact, when one becomes a lover of God, when his heart becomes alive with love, then all things are linked with God in this love.

Merton relates Eckhart's idea of the "spark of the soul" to the Hasidic theme of the sparks and the Shekinah. Hasidism, a mystical religious movement that attracted East European Jews during the mid-18th century, teaches that holy sparks dwell in all beings and in all things. Every person must learn how to approach them, how to deal with them, how to lift them and release them, how to reconnect them to their original root, which is God.³¹

The Shekinah, on the other hand, is God's presence and indwelling in the world. In Exodus, this presence became a pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. For the Jews, the Shekinah is constantly present with the just man. It hovers especially on the man who loves. If a person does what he must at this moment with all the strength and holy intent in his heart, the union between time and eternity takes place (*Buber*, p. 4).

Merton says that when a man begins to pray, "Lord, open Thou my lips," the Shekinah embraces him and enables him to pray. Sometimes when the divine spark of the Shekinah flares up in a man's soul, it speaks through the man's mouth. Merton then asks, "how does one dance with the Shekinah?" If all is charged with the presence of God, what one has to do is to dance in the Shekinah, and to let it dance in him. In other words, Merton's counsel is for every person to be in God's presence, and to let God's presence work in him or her.

The reality of the "spark" so captivates Merton that he fully conveys his excitement and joy in it. He comments that in children it

30. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*. TMSC. Third Draft, p. 82; Fourth Draft, p. 83.

31. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, The Early Masters*. (NY: Schocken Books, 1947), p. 3 Hereafter referred to in the text as *Buber*. See also Buber's *Hasidim and Modern Man*, (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), pp. 187-189.

is easy to see how sparks of divine creativity, holiness, love, and life are present in them. Life is a spark of God's creative power. He cites two references in the Book of Proverbs to illustrate his point. The first refers to the wise man who must be engaged in the outside world. His wisdom enables him to be committed to a living communion and reciprocity with everything. The other refers to the righteous man who falls seven times, and who rises after each fall. Sparks are also raised when a man overcomes his mistake and rises from his fall. These sparks unite a person to God.

Merton stressed the importance of this doctrine. Nothing should be taken for granted, according to him. Everything that a person sees or hears may contain sparks that are yearning to be united to their source. Each spark, he says, desires to become one with and cleave to its Light, like love to Love, and splendor to Splendor. The sparks of love that are in creatures are seeking the spark of love that is in each heart. The sparks of splendor in creatures are seeking the sparks of splendor in each individual.

Merton remarked that Eckhart also expresses the same idea, though worded in a different way: Seek God in such a way so as never to find Him, for if a person says he has found Him, he finds that God is no longer there. Merton taught that the perfection of love is in the peace of letting be, of letting God hide if He wants to, and respecting His way of working in a person's life. It is equally important to respect the sparks in other creatures. To acquire this sense of love, according to Merton, is to truly make peace in the world.

A related theme that Merton injected in this talk is that of the "circumcised heart," which he derived from Sufism. This heart is no longer attached to any idols because it is filled with the love of God. It is like the spark theme.

"A grain of the light of his love has fallen into my heart, and I see no longer anything but my Lord." This quotation from al-Hallaj expresses the same splendor and love that Merton spoke of.

Merton gave this talk to the monks at the beginning of 1968. He predicted that 1968 would be "one heck of a year," a rough one according to people who knew what would happen in the cities. Expecting violence to take place, Merton expressed the need for much peace making in people's hearts. He ended his lively and inspiring talk with this encouragement: "Well, let's pray that in the new year we may raise a lot of sparks."³²

32. Thomas Merton, *The Mystical Life*, Tape 8A. TMSC.

These words were prophetic. The Benedictine Prior from the Philippines recalled that while standing outside Merton's room, he became aware of a strange odor of burning, and at the same time, he saw sparks shooting from the large switchbox of the electric fan which fell on Merton (*NCFM*, pp. 82-84). Prophetic, too, is Eckhart's analogy which Merton used in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. "When a person is about to be struck by a thunderbolt, he unconsciously turns toward the blow. And one in whom the divine birth is to take place turns, without realizing, completely toward it."

Even as his death was accompanied by electrical sparks, through his life and writings, sparks of the divine still touch us.