

LIVING BEINGS CALL US TO REFLECTIVE LIVING: Mary Austin, Thomas Merton, & Contemporary Nature Writers

by **Monica Weis, S.S.J.**

Western civilization is in the throes of being reborn. Dualistic thinking, rooted in Greek philosophy and flowering in the Enlightenment's view of the world as a machine, is being seriously questioned. Descartes' and Newton's mechanistic view is giving way to an organic, holistic, and ecological view of reality. New discoveries in physics and a recovered mysticism describe a universe that is a dynamic web of relationships. What was once "counter cultural" is becoming the rising new culture.¹

We see this shift in thinking on many fronts: health care now looks seriously at holistic treatment and the healing power of a stress-free environment; social justice action groups speak boldly for redistribution of natural resources among rich and poor; feminist theology and psychology support the full realization of the gifts of both women and men; anti-nuclear and environmental groups call us to right relationships not just with other humans, but with all species, and indeed, with the planet itself. This new thinking bears little resemblance to George Bush's new world order based on militarism and power. Don't be fooled by Washington rhetoric. Rather, the paradigm shift I am referring to is a transformation of consciousness itself, a new understanding of the cosmos and our place in it. Philosophical underpinnings for this

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1. Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), p. 46.

new thinking have been provided by Thomas Berry in his seminal work, *The Dream of the Earth*.² Berry argues that we can identify three basic laws that govern all reality: *differentiation* by which each being contributes its unique gift toward the working of the whole; *interiority* by which each being develops a sacred inner dimension; and *communion* or *community* by which each being participates in an interdependent web of relationships.

I propose that two authors — Mary Austin and Thomas Merton — reveal in their lives and their writing these three principles of being. I propose that both writers — one, born at the end of the Civil War, the other during World War I — independently, and without benefit of philosophical treatises on the new cosmology and creation spirituality, came to an understanding of the uniqueness, sacredness, and interdependence of each created being. For each writer — Austin and Merton — this view of an ecosystem was a growing realization. Even though they did not know each other, nor have we any evidence that Merton was aware of Austin's writing, there are notable similarities between the two. Both Mary Austin and Thomas Merton lost a parent early in life. Both became teachers, prolific writers, and had significant early publications that determined their writing careers. Both mingled with various literary figures (Austin helped found the Carmel writer's colony with Jack London and Ambrose Bierce; Merton interacted with mentor Mark Van Doren and numerous literary correspondents). Both sought solitude in the desert (Austin in the literal desert of the Southwest; Merton in his hermitage at Gethsemani). And both writers espoused social causes. Austin supported early feminist positions on voting and work, advocated the preservation of Spanish arts, and argued for fair land and water rights for Native and Mexican Americans. She also wrote a controversial novel about sexual politics in World War I. Merton, as we know, authored the *Cold War Letters*, decried the dehumanization caused by technology, deplored the evils of racism, and probed the connections between western and eastern religious thought.

I mention these similarities because Merton and Austin are quite different voices in the “huge chorus of living beings.” In some ways, I am being rather bold discussing a famous Roman Catholic Trappist monk and a relatively unknown woman writer who espoused no religious tradition and who abandoned her husband and retarded daughter to respond to her inner impulse to write. One life appears holy, sacred; the other secular. And yet in the spirit of the new paradigm shift of embracing contraries, I wish to argue that both writers had a vision of the unity and interdependence of all creation. Both writers overcame the dualistic thinking inherited through western culture to become prophetic voices calling us to more reflective living. I would like to illustrate briefly ways in which they share a vision of a world in which each being is unique, holy, and in communion.

In an early chapter of *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin poetically describes the interdependence of scavenger animals, noting especially how the coyote, buzzard, vulture, raven, and crow contribute to a balanced ecosystem. In contrast, “man,” writes Austin

is a great blunderer going about in the woods, and there is no other except the bear makes so much noise. Being so well warned beforehand, it is a very stupid animal, or a very bold one, that cannot keep safely hid. The cunningest hunter is hunted in turn, and what he leaves of his kill is meat for some other. That is the economy of nature, but with it all there is not sufficient account taken of the works of man. There is no scavenger that eats tin cans and no wild thing leaves a like disfigurement on the forest floor.³

2. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (New York: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

3. Mary Hunter Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 22. Originally published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1903. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Land*.

Austin's scorn for human arrogance which refuses to acknowledge its place in the food chain or views nature as a commodity to satisfy our selfish desires is clear. Austin's view of our interdependence, learned from long hours of solitude, affirms that human beings are not apart from nature at the top of some hierarchical scale. Rather, we are part of the ecosystem and, if receptive to the lessons offered by nature, we can discover our appropriate relationship with the earth. The opening chapter of *The Land of Little Rain* illustrates her receptivity to such lessons. She writes:

For all the desert takes of a man [sic] it gives compensations, deep breaths, deep sleep, and the communion of the stars. It comes upon one with new force in the pauses of the night that the Chaldeans were a desert-bred people. It is hard to escape the sense of mastery as the stars move in the wide clear heavens to risings and settings unobscured. They look large and near and palpitant; as if they moved on some stately service not needful to declare. Wheeling to their stations in the sky, they make the poor world-fret of no account. Of no account you who lie out there watching, nor the lean coyote that stands off in the scrub from you and howls and howls. (Land, p. 8)

This is certainly a different perspective of human beings than our usual egocentric posture, believing that the world revolves around our needs and responds to our initiative. Later in the book, Austin meditates on storms. "They have habits to be learned," she writes,

appointed paths, seasons, and warnings, and they leave you in no doubt about their performances . . . The first effect of cloud study is a sense of presence and intention in storm processes. Weather does not happen. It is the visible manifestation of the Spirit moving itself in the void. It gathers itself together under the heavens; rains, snows, yearns mightily in wind, smiles. (Land, p. 94).

But, of course, all humans do not share this vision. Those in the institutions of weather recording receive Austin's biting wit. The "Weather Bureau," she quips, "situated advantageously for that very business, taps the record on his instruments and going out on the streets denies his God, not having gathered the sense of what he has seen" (Land, p. 94).

Perhaps the most concentrated description of Austin's vision is found in her tribute to Seyavi, the Basket Maker self." In a brief seven pages, Austin immortalizes and celebrates a Piute widow who through patient suffering and observations has learned the rhythm of the land. In a charming and deceptively simple narrative, Austin describes Seyavi who, fleeing tribal raiders, raised and supported her son by weaving baskets. What makes Seyavi special to Austin and pertinent to our discussion is the wisdom of the basket maker. Seyavi learned the value of life. Living near the bare core of things, Seyavi knows that willow reeds for her baskets must be picked only at the "golden" times of the year. The designs she weaves into her baskets — the "plumed crests of . . . quails" — reflect her experiences and her art. All is one. The baskets, motivated not by human arrogance but by love, are, says Austin, a "touch beyond cleverness. The weaver and the warp lived next to the earth and were saturated with the same elements . . . Whenever Seyavi cut willows for baskets . . . the soul of the weather went into the wood." And before Seyavi began weaving, "she danced and dressed her hair" and sang of the "white flower of twining." Now old and blind, Seyavi retires to the campoodie, a kind of monastic hermitage, huddled under her blanket for privacy, insuring solitude to "digest her life" (Land, p. 67).

Thomas Merton, for all his education, cosmopolitan contacts, and challenging insights, shares with Mary Austin this same fundamental vision of life. Particularly during the years 1959 to 1965, I see in Merton's writings frequent and articulate references to the uniqueness of each created being, its inherent sacredness, and interdependence with all that is. Does Merton, as does Austin, sense that often we humans are out of tune with nature? Yes. There are many references throughout his works where Merton castigates the frailty, inconsistency, and arrogance of human decision-making. In *Day of a Stranger* (written in May 1965 for publication in South America), Merton reiterates these themes. Sketching himself as a bystander observing this

strange species that not only makes and discards the tin cans Austin so abhorred, but is caught up in a smothering complex of weaponry, Merton describes his day in the hermitage. In the first draft of this essay, according to Robert Daggy's introduction, Merton angrily contrasts his choice of a life of solitude with the "destructive unbalance of nature, poisoned and unsettled by bombs, by fallout, by exploitation: the land ruined, the waters contaminated, the soil charged with chemicals, ravaged with machinery . . ."4 As marginalized stranger, *extrano* in Spanish, Merton can see human wealth, weaponry, exploitation of people and resources for what they really are: expressions of human arrogance, anthropocentrism, a stance of egocentrism.

Sadly, our arrogance is not confined to the industrial-technological complex. It invades our whole culture, extending even to the ceremonies intended to celebrate the Ultimate Holy in our midst. In a characteristically wry comment in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (notice the word bystander or *extrano* again), Merton mutters about the "pontifical maneuverings" and hierarchical activities of the Easter morning Mass that stifled his desire to sing alleluia. "The church," he writes,

was stifling with solemn, feudal, and unbreathable fictions. This taste for plush, for ornamentation, for display strikes me as secular, no matter how much it is supposed to be "for the glory of God." The spring outside seemed much more sacred. Easter afternoon I went to the lake and sat in silence looking at the green buds, the wind skimming the utterly silent surface of the water, a muskrat slowly paddling on the other side. Peace and meaning. Sweet spring air. One could breathe. The alleluias came back by themselves.⁵

I believe this passage reflects more than a bit of grouching about a service that did not suit Merton's mood. I believe it reflects his deepening realization that earth and heaven are not separate entities, and that our actions should flow from and express the dynamic balance and interconnectedness of life.

Like Mary Austin, Merton believed in the lessons to be learned from the woods. In *Day of a Stranger*, deliberately ignoring the military plane loaded with bombs overhead, he says:

I live in the woods as a reminder that I am free not to be a number. There is, in fact, a choice . . . I walk in the woods out of necessity . . . I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them : we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of "place" a new configuration. (Day, p. 33)

Such an experience of differentiation and community intensifies Merton's understanding of who he is and how he is part of a great cosmic rhythm. But Merton extends this sense of connectedness beyond trees and birds to include the various writers whose books are with him in the hermitage. Greek and Latin writers; South American poets and French existentialists; women philosophers and novelists; Eastern mystics — all form a "living balance of spirits" he says, a "mental ecology" that enables him to proclaim: "What I do is live. How I pray is breathe" (Day, p. 41). Without having read Austin or met Seyavi, Merton has confronted the same essential truth of creation: that we are not apart from or above nature, but interdependent with it.

Merton's ecocentric vision is perhaps most frequently and clearly articulated in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Throughout this non-chronological collection of reflections and insights, Merton refers to the beauty and peacefulness of the natural setting of his hermitage, but

4. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; edited with an introduction by Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 17. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Day*.

5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), p. 295. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Conjectures*.

one entry particularly strikes me as illustrative of his developing philosophy of ecocentrism — and curiously it forms a companion piece to the grumbling passage cited earlier. In Part Five of *Conjectures* entitled, “The Madman Runs to the East,” Merton describes the sunrise as an “enormous yolk of energy” spreading over the sky, followed by the feeding “ceremonies of the birds” and the silence of mid-morning (*Conjectures*, pp. 294–295). In that spring quiet his focused attempt to pray the psalms shifts from the printed page of the Biblical text to the psalmody of the sky, trees, hills, grass, and all things. “How absolutely central,” writes Merton, “is the truth that we are first of all *part of nature*, though we are a very special part, that which is conscious of God.” Giving praise to God is not, for Merton, something different, special, or spiritual; rather such acts are the “simple, normal, obvious functions” of humans which we most often realize “alone, under the sky.” Here follows a telling distinction that Mary Austin — had she been a contemporary of Merton’s would endorse: it is not Christianity but our “own technocratic and self-centered ‘worldliness’ ” that “separates [us] from the reality of creation, and enables [us] to act out [our] fantasies as a little autonomous god, seeing and judging everything in relation to [ourselves].” Merton know that, alas, it is all too easy for us to revert back to egocentric thinking. While there are multiple levels to be probed in this passage, I would suggest that such scattered passages taken from the notebooks written between 1956 and 1965 (actually 1963 according to Basil Pennington⁶), are not isolated passing insights, but evidence of a deepening understanding of his experience. For me, it is significant that Merton articulated these new understandings to like-minded correspondents.

In an unpublished letter to Rachel Carson, dated 12 January 1963 and bearing Merton’s handwritten annotation to include it in the appendix to the *Cold War Letters*, he thanks Carson for her fine book, *Silent Spring*.⁷ (Rachel Carson you will remember was the marine biologist who in 1962 documented the damage to our environment from DDT and other pesticides.) After complimenting Carson on the evidence for her “diagnosis of the ills of our civilization,” Merton goes on to suggest that our society is suffering from a “dreadful hatred of life” that is “buried under our pitiful and superficial optimism about ourselves and our affluent society.” This attitude leads to the “awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values . . . and dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself.” Religious thinkers, Merton goes on to say, have always understood that God’s love is “manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the wonderful interrelationship between them.” Our blindness to this unity, however, is responsible for the kind of logic that leads us to nuclear war. If we don’t see ourselves as interdependent with the Japanese beetle — an analogy Merton uses in the Carson letter — if we allow ourselves to be convinced that it is a “dire threat,” then, of course, extermination is the only answer. By implication, Merton is suggesting that if we see the Soviets as the enemy — or more recently, he might have said, Saddam Hussein — then, without consideration of the danger to humans living now, the next generation, or the environment — indeed the life of the planet itself — we devise plans to exterminate the beetle, and arguments to justify our actions. Our “vocation,” Merton writes to Rachel Carson, “is to be in this cosmic creation so to speak as the eye in the body . . . that is to say man is at once a part of nature, and he transcends it. In maintaining this delicate balance, he must make use of nature wisely, and understand his position, ultimately relating both himself and visible nature to the invisible . . . to the source and exemplar of all being and all life.”

6. M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O., *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

7. Thomas Merton, Letter to Rachel Carson, 12 January 1963 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Louisville, Kentucky).

Merton is voicing a central theme of today's supposedly new thinking. For him, an anthropocentric or egocentric position is no longer tenable. No longer can we humans see ourselves and our selfish desires as the center of living and the sole criterion for decision making. Our vocation is not to dominate the earth. Our vocation is to discover community with it. Understanding our true position as one living species on this living planet is, as he says in *Conjectures*, an act of humility — *humus*, earth, a recognition of ourselves as made of the very stuff of the planet. Merton's awareness of the uniqueness, sacredness, and interdependence of each living being makes him one more prophetic voice calling us to reflective, responsible living. His voice joins those of St. Brigid and the fourth century Celtic communities who celebrated the spirits of the forest; the fifth century Benedictines who taught us about seeds and working with the rhythms of the land; the medieval mystics like Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen who wrote of the "juiciness" of our nurturing God who is both father and mother; with Francis of Assisi who celebrated all creation in his famous Canticle; and Teilhard de Chardin who shocked us into realizing that we are part of the original burst of energy of God's love still unfolding these fifteen billion years later.

Merton joins also with Mary Austin, Rachel Carson and contemporary nature writers such as Loren Eiseley, Gretel Ehrlich, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez and Wendell Berry. This huge chorus of beings call us to transform our thinking and living from an egocentric to an ecocentric stance, and to make decisions about our planet based on nature not as commodity, but as community, a community of which we are but one part. Such radical transformation would allow us to pray with Thomas Merton: "It was a good morning. A return in spirit to the first morning of the world."