

THOMAS MERTON: THE DESERT CALL

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I

In 1971, three years after Thomas Merton's death, *New Mexico Magazine* published an article by James P. Shannon called "Thomas Merton's New Mexico." Shannon began:

Solitude is a necessary condition for contemplation, the more so in an age that values stereophonic sound and news bulletins more highly than meditation or recollection. The *turistas* of Manhattan, Miami or Las Vegas seldom worry that solitude and contemplation are currently in short supply. It is, in fact, a rare man in any age who prefers the hermitage and the night sky to the forum and the lights. An age is blessed that has one such, rich with more than one. An age just ended was doubly blessed in being the era of the several lives of Thomas Merton.

Merton's call to solitude was a running motif in these lives, though Shannon quite correctly points out that "no single motif could describe the richness and resonance that was this lovely man."¹

II

Let us turn to some of the motifs in Merton's life mentioned by James P. Shannon. In 1968, Merton completed one of his last two poetic collections. Published the same year, he called it *Cables to the Ace, or Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding*. It has been suggested that "the Ace" to whom these cables (which Merton originally called "edifying") is addressed is, in fact, Christ. *Cables* is a different — and none too easy for the reader—expression of Merton's continuing search for himself. George Kilcourse has noted that Merton's search was "focused through the effort of aligning Christ, self-identity, and the autobiographical process within a single lens. Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?' (Mk. 8:29) perdures as Thomas Merton's ultimate question."² Equally perdurable within this context was Merton's quest for solitude. He used, as so many writers have, the metaphor of "journey" in his life and his quest. In his late writings, "nowhere" becomes one of his words for the place he was trying to reach. Merton's use of "nowhere" has always called to my mind, for some reason, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, perhaps because Butler reversed "nowhere" as the name for the quasi-utopia which his hero Higgs reaches on his journey. Though similarities exist between Butler and Merton—both have images of toiling up mountains (Butler's subtitle was *Over the Range*), both protested against social and religious hypocrisy, both wrote against societal illusions and myths, both fulminated against the dangers of technological advance and machine take-over—there are also significant differences in their "nowheres." Merton's nowhere is a place of solitude. Higgs complains of the "horrors of solitude" before he reaches Erewhon. And Christ is not at the center of Erewhon as Christ is at the center of Merton's nowhere.³ In "Cable 38," Merton wrote:

Follow the ways of no man, not even your own. The way that is most yours is no way. For where are

1. James P. Shannon, "Thomas Merton's New Mexico." *New Mexico Magazine* 49: 5-6 (May-June 1971), p. 19. Hereafter referred to in the text as Shannon."

2. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

3. See Samuel Butler, *Erewhon, or Over the Range* (London: Trübner & Company, 1872).

you? Unborn! Your way therefore is unborn. Yet you travel. You do not become unborn by stopping a journey you have begun: and you cannot be nowhere by issuing a decree: "I am now nowhere!"⁴

But, in typical fashion, Merton himself continually tried to decree where nowhere was. His trips to New Mexico (May 16-19 and September 11-15) were prompted, in part at least, to scout out a place where he might live in greater solitude. They were a search for the mystical "nowhere." In May he first visited the Trappistine community of Our Lady of the Redwoods at Whitethorn, California, and then continued on to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert at Abiquiu, New Mexico. He prepared his journal of this trip for publication, calling it *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968* (it was not published until the Museum of New Mexico Press issued it in 1982). Back home at Gethsemani, Merton noted: "I dream every night of the west." On May 30, he recorded: "The country which is nowhere is the real home: it seems that the Pacific Shore at Needle Rock is more nowhere than this [Gethsemani], and Bear Harbor is more nowhere still."⁵

The mountain may be the most pervasive image in Merton's journey metaphors, but the desert—mysterious, deceptively barren, frequently foreboding—was a special and holy place for him. The desert theme resonates through his life and work—from images in his poetry to those in his journals. There was, of course, his book *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960) in which he "rendered" several of the stories of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century. This project was important to his own "traveling" and had far reaching effects. During it he came into contact with D.T. Suzuki. The exchange with Suzuki about these "desert renderings" led him on to interest in similar sayings from other traditions besides the Christian on—Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, Tibetan Lamaism, and Javanese expressions. He continued to "render" sayings, often quoting Zen koans, Taoist proverbs, and recasting Sufi stories. It has been suggested that Merton's approach to spiritual direction lay within the tradition of the simple sayings of the Desert fathers.⁶

Merton's trip to Christ in the Desert, besides conjuring up obvious and traditional images of the Christian going into the desert, resonates with his entire search for "nowhere" and underscores the centrality of Christ in that search. He was asked by Dom Aelred Wall, then superior at Christ in the Desert, to write something about the monastery that they might use in a brochure. On June 4, less than two weeks after his return to Kentucky, he mailed Dom Aelred his essay which he called "Christ in the Desert." In it he said: "The Biblical basis for the monastic life is rather the theology of the call into the wilderness, the desert wandering of Exodus, the temptation of Christ in the desert after the proclamation of his coming, by John, in the desert."⁷ In an earlier essay, a reflection on Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* which Merton called "Rain and the Rhinoceros," he wove together the various strands of the desert, our being unborn, our imitation of Christ, the necessity for solitude in every person's life. He said;

Now since all things have their season, there is a time to be unborn. We must begin, indeed, in the social womb. There is a time for warmth in the collective myth. But there is also a time to be unborn. He who is spiritually "born" as a mature identity is liberated from the enclosing womb of myth and prejudice.⁸

Merton continued:

The contemplative life, which must not be construed as an escape from time and matter, from social responsibility and from the life of sense, but rather, as an advance into solitude and the desert, a

4. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace, or Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstand* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 27.

5. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Short, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968* (Santa Fe, Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 42. Here after referred in the text as *Woods*.

6. See Michael Downey, "the Third Collection of Merton Letters," *The Merton Seasonal* 15:2 (Spring 1991), pp. 23-25.

7. Thomas Merton, "Christ in the Desert." In *Christ in the Desert* (Abiquiu, New Mexico: Monastery of Christ in the Desert, 1969), unpagged.

8. Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros." In *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 17. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Rain."

confrontation with poverty and the void, a renunciation of the self, in the presence of death, and nothingness, in order to overcome the ignorance and error that spring from the fear of “being nothing.” The man who dares to be alone can come to see that the “emptiness” and “uselessness” which the collective mind fears and condemns are necessary conditions for the encounter with truth (*Raids*, pp. 17-18).

In the desert of “loneliness and emptiness” we may find ourselves. There, we may be able to dispel and overcome the three illusions which Christ met in his temptations in the desert—the illusions of security, reputation, and power.

III

The desert is a powerful image for Merton, but it was in many ways more a metaphorical framework than an expression of desire for the physicality of the desert. He points to the paradox that today’s “desert” may be anywhere, even in the inner city. We may find solitude in “the asphalt jungle.” Solitude is necessary for us all, whether we are on the desert or in the city, in the workplace or in the monastery. Solitude equips us to resist the temptations of illusion and myth. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, he wrote:

Society depends for its existence on the inviolable personal solitude of its members. Society, to merit the name, must be made up not of numbers, or mechanical units, but of persons. To be a person implies responsibility and freedom, and both of these imply a certain interior solitude, a sense of personal integrity, a sense of one’s own reality and of one’s ability to give oneself to society—or to refuse that gift.⁹

In his landmark essay, *Day of a Stranger*, written in May 1965 in response to a request from an Argentinian editor to describe a typical day in his life, he wrote these lines:

I do not intend to belong to the world of squares that is constituted by the abdication of choice, or by the fraudulent choice (the mass-roar in the public square; or the assent to the televised grimace.)

I do not intend to be citizen number 152037. I do not consent to be poet number 2291. I do not recognize myself as the classified antisocial and subversive element that I probably am in the file of a department in a department. Perhaps I have been ingested by an IBM machine in Washington, but they cannot digest me. I am indigestible: a priest who cannot be swallowed, a monk notoriously discussed as one of the problems of the contemporary Church by earnest seminarists, wearing bright spectacles in Rome.

I have not chosen to be acceptable. I have not chosen to be unacceptable. I have nothing personal to do with any of the present indigestion of officials, of critics, of clerics, of housewives, of amateur sociologists. It is *their* indigestion. I offer them no advice.¹⁰

Such refusal to be numbered becomes the mark of the “stranger.” He or she is a stranger because the world regards them as a stranger to what it deems important, worthwhile, useful. Merton knew that his essay would first appear in Spanish translation with the title, “Dia de un extrano.” The Spanish word “extrano” conveys even more of the feeling of being marginal, of being extraneous, of not quite belonging to the “collective” world. It is on the fringes in solitude that we ultimately imitate that greatest of strangers, Jesus Christ. Remember that Christ himself (as Merton points out in his essay “The Time of the End is the Time of No Room,” a time when Merton says “There is no room for solitude”) — Christ himself was born when there was no room. His birth, by which He came into the world so that we may be born, was relegated to the “nowhere” of a stable. Why?

9. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), p. 13.

10. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; ed. with an introd. by Robert E. Dagg (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 20. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Day*.

Caesar had declared that all the world was to be numbered. The massing of the “whole world” in centers of registration so the people could be taxed, so they could serve Caesar in his armies and elsewhere, made it necessary for Christ to be born somewhere other than the inn. Christ was not a number. He was not mass man. He could not be born in the crowd at the inn. For Merton, the acceptance of this numbering by the people of God was apocalyptic. It points to the end, and it points to the time in which we live when we are, as Merton says:

massed together, marshalled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race and with ourselves, nauseated with life.¹¹

Even the monastery was not exempt from the pressures and influences of the “collective” world. Even it was infected with the idea of “usefulness.” Merton watched nervously as Gethsemani mechanized and as the Trappist cheese and fruitcake industries grew. In *Day of a Stranger*, he noted:

The monastic life is a hot medium. Hot with words like “must,” “ought” and “should.” Communities are devoted to high definition projects: “making it all clear!” The clearer it gets the clearer it has to be made. It branches out. You have to keep clearing the branches. The more branches you cut back the more branches grow. For one you cut you get three more. On the end of each branch is a big bushy question mark. Each is very anxious to know whether all the others have received the latest messages. Has someone else received a message that he has not received? Will they be willing to pass it on to him? Will he understand it when it is passed on? Will he have to argue about it? . . . Maybe to cool it you have to be a hermit. But then they will keep thinking that *you* have a special message. When they find out you haven’t . . . Well, that’s their worry, not mine (*Day*, pp. 37, 39)

He could be caustic, though often funny, about the monastery’s business. Such comments did not always make him exactly popular with his brothers. In the mid-1960s, for example, he tacked a poem to the monastic bulletin board. It was a take-off on Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees” and he signed it “Joyce Killer-Diller. It was called “Chee\$e,” the “s” written as a dollar sign. It went:

I think that we should never freeze
Such lively assets as our cheese.

The sucker’s hungry mouth is pressed
Against the cheese’s caraway breast

A cheese, whose scent like sweet perfume,
Pervades the house through every room.

A cheese that may at Christmas wear
A suit of cellophane underwear,

Upon whose bosom is a label
Whose habitat — The Tower of Babel.

Poems are nought but warmed up breeze,
Dollars are made by Trappist cheese.¹²

11. Thomas Merton, “The Time of the End is the Time of No Room.” In *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 65-73.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 799-800.

Part of the role of the person who lives in solitude is to remind others of the illusions and mixed messages of the world. Solitude, for Merton, is not complete withdrawal from all contact with the world. One may live on the margins, one may be a “stranger,” one may refuse to be numbered, categorized, pigeonholed, but solitude — the important solitude — is not a matter of physical place. Important solitude is “deep and peaceful interior solitude.”¹² Solitude is not separation (*New*, p. 56). To think that solitude places a person apart from or above other persons is a spurious idea. No, “the solitary cannot survive unless he is capable of loving everyone, without concern for the fact that he is likely to be regarded by all of them as a traitor” (“Rain,” p. 22). It does not matter if the collective world regards the solitary with suspicion. In fact, the solitary must be prepared for that, must be prepared to be thought strange, to be thought useless. And he or she cannot be bothered about it. As Merton said: “That’s their worry, not mine.” It may help if the solitary has a sense of humor. In a lesser known essay, “A Signed Confession of Crimes against the State,” Merton emphasized, with tongue in cheek, his own uselessness, camouflaging it as an admission of things society finds criminally useless:

I confess that I am under a pine tree doing absolutely nothing. I have done nothing for one hour and firmly intend to continue to do nothing for an indefinite period. I have taken my shoes off. I confess that I have been listening to a mockingbird. Yes, I admit that it is a mockingbird I confess it. I confess it. The birds are singing, and I confess it.¹⁴

In another essay, this one written for a Chilean poet, “Answers for Hernan Lavin Cerda,” Merton responded to seven questions asked him by Lavin Cerda. The seventh question was: “What do you think of the ‘hombre inutil’ ignored by our society. Merton answered:

Obviously one of the forms taken by protest against the idol of “efficiency” will be the formal refusal to be “useful” But this authentic “uselessness” will also manifest itself in a gratuitous and spontaneous creativity, which will justify it over against the enforced and rigid cult of cause and effect If there is a choice to be made between the “useful” and the “useless,” the “contented” and the “irate,” the “adapted” and the “unadapted,” I will give the benefit of the doubt in every case to the latter.¹⁵

There is responsibility in being “useless” as the collective society defines utility. Merton experienced a “vision” or “epiphany” in 1958 at the corner of Fourth and Walnut (now Fourth and Muhammad Ali) in Louisville. Often quoted, it was his expression of a sudden realization of oneness with the human race. In a flash, he grasped that the solitary, the hermit, cannot be separate from other people. There is in Merton’s conception of solitude a distinct sense of solidarity with all people. He said in describing the vision:

This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatism of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them—and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not “they” but my own self.

He concludes this section with a twist by saying: “There are no strangers!”¹⁶

13. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 83.

14. Thomas Merton, “A Signed Confession of Crimes Against the State.” In *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 68-69.

15. Thomas Merton, “Answers for Hernan Lavin Cerda: On War, Technology and the Intellectual.” Ed. by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. In *The Merton Annual 2* (New York: AMS press, 1989), p. 12.

16. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden city, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), pp. 141-142.

IV

The idea that solitude does not preclude involvement with people, that the solitary does not totally eschew the problems of the world, is an idea that was not always understood. We want our solitaries, somehow, to be solitary in our usual sense of the word. Many people, as Naomi Burton Stone has pointed out, wanted Merton to remain in his cell, live on his bread and water, and never be heard from again. It has also been pointed out that Merton wrote a great deal about solitude and the hermit life, fantasized about going here and there to be more solitary, built “hermitages in the air” as it were, but that he never really lived as a hermit, even in his three years (from 1965 to 1968) in what he called his “hermitage.” As early as 1956, Merton’s commitment to conventional solitude was questioned. He attended a two-week conference at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, on the applications of psychiatry in the religious life. His abbot, Dom James Fox, asked Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, the psychiatrist who was conducting the conference, to observe Merton. Zilboorg, after some observation and conversation, confronted Merton and told him that his desire to be a hermit was pathological—that what Merton really wanted was a hermitage on Times Square with a big sign saying “Hermitage”—that he wanted to be able to run out and mingle with people and then run back in, saying to himself “I’m a hermit! I’m a hermit! I’m a hermit!” The incident was a traumatic experience for Merton, one which shook him deeply. Yet Zilboorg’s observations, though quickly given, were not entirely amiss.

Another Shannon, noted Merton scholar Msgr. William H. Shannon, recently compared Merton to Greta Garbo, the actress famous for “wanting to be alone.” (As an aside, Garbo was one of Merton’s favorite actresses when he went to movies back in the 1930s before he entered the monastery—not his very favorite: those were cool blondes like Madeleine Carroll and Sylvia Sydney.) I found the comparison inept at first, but on reflection it seems more apt. On very different levels, the desire to be alone in our century is underscored by these disparate figures. The desire to leave the hurly-burly, to get out of the rat race—which seems, at least in part, to have impelled Garbo’s reclusiveness—may not mean we forsake the company of others completely. Garbo, in fact, sought seclusion in the midst of a big, teeming city—just as Merton said so many of us might have to do in order to find any sort of solitude. While it is hard to imagine Merton leaving his Times Square hermitage to shop at Bloomingdale’s or to buy pastries on 56th Street as Garbo left her East Side apartment to do, it is not hard to imagine Merton running out to a Stop and Shop to pick up a six pack of beer. When Garbo leaned back on her pillows in *Grand Hotel*, surfeited with world-weariness, and uttered that famous line “I want to be alone,” she gave symbolic voice to that twentieth-century impulse which Thomas Merton explicates for us.

Merton’s conception that one can live in solitude and yet be socially responsible and be “part” of other people is not an easy one. Zilboorg was not alone in finding something odd about Merton’s own behavior as a solitary. Merton was a social creature, but during most of his monastic career, he was not involved in the usual social situations. Actually it is not until the mid 1960s that Merton became more social, became in fact something of a party person. Yet this was the period when he was supposedly living in solitude as a hermit. Perhaps the increased social activity was what made the solitude work. In showing us his own lapses from exterior solitude, maybe Merton lets us see that “nowhere” must really be within us. In 1966, for instance, he said of drinking beer: “It has been a long time since I just sat and drank beer. Years in fact.”¹⁷ Joan Baez recorded that she went to Gethsemani in 1966 to meet a “holy man” and instead met Merton who didn’t exactly fulfill her fantasies of such a person. Instead of sitting at the feet of a guru, she was hustled off to a fast food outlet. She said:

The first thing he wanted to do was get off the property and buy some junk food for lunch. Of course, I thought, he must be sick to death of gluten and sandwiches and beet juice. At a local fast food joint he bought two cheeseburgers, a chocolate milkshake, and a large order of fries . . . The three of us [she was accompanied by her friend Ira], sort of like Piglet, Owl, and Pooh, went out into the middle of a field and had a picnic. Ira was Owl, and I was Piglet. Merton looked considerably like Pooh.¹⁸

17. Thomas Merton, “Midsummer Diary, 1966.” Typescript (1966), Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.
18. Joan Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With: A Memoir* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), p. 131.

Others have noted that Merton liked to get away and frequently wanted something stronger than a milkshake. Laughlin, publisher of *New Directions* which published all of Merton's poetry, often visited Merton at Gethsemani. He has said: "The abbot let me hire a car and drive Merton around . . . Once we got a mile or so down the road, he'd bolt into the woods and into his overalls. We'd stop at four or five bars in an afternoon."¹⁹

W. H. "Ping" Ferry, himself no stranger to Christ in the Desert, has said that he asked Merton before his first visit to Gethsemani if he could bring anything, and Merton responded: "How about some beer?" Ferry has remarked: "Funny, but somehow I hadn't associated beer and monks!"²⁰ Merton's conviviality was often noted, especially his wry sense of humor. Fr. Denis Hines wrote that Merton was particularly funny, even sarcastic about the monastic life, during their talks at Christ in the Desert in 1968 (*Woods*, p. 56). He could poke fun at himself, especially at departures from what others might think a hermit should be. He scribbled a poem, discovered only a year ago, in Frank O'Callaghan's copy of Dylan Thomas' *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. He wrote it for Frank and Tommie O'Callaghan's children, who called him "Uncle Tom," and who had been expressing concern that he had to live all by himself in the woods without having any fun. He called the scribbled poem "Old Uncle Tom."

Old Uncle Tom
He lives in the woods
Pining away
Without adequate foods.

He is all alone
And unconfirmed
Thin as a bone
And living on bacon.

Old uncle Tom
Thinking and thinking
Lives in the woods
Occasionally drinking.

But when I recall the truth to mind
I figure he's drinking.
All the time.

Poor old uncle Tom.²¹

In 1968, "poor old uncle Tom" felt that the situation at Gethsemani was becoming untenable for him. Much of it was indeed his own fault: he didn't have to invite so many visitors, he didn't have to load himself with writing projects, he didn't have to host picnics in the woods, he didn't have to roady off to bars and McDonald's. But it was true there were other inroads on his solitude which he didn't create. Gethsemani was no longer isolated. Access to the hermitage and to him was easy. He told Dom Aelred: "Somehow the more crowded situation here does bear down on one." Greater exterior solitude was seeming more and more attractive to him—at least in his mind. In 1968, two factors—the results of recent developments—made Merton's looking for a more isolated spot possible. First, the new legislation of the Cistercian Order after the Second Vatican Council made it possible for a monk to live at some distance from his monastery and still be attached to that monastery.

19. James Laughlin, "Profiles." In *The New Yorker* (23 March 1992), p. 55.

20. Wilbur Hugh Ferry, "Action at the Center: An Interview with W. H. ("Ping") Ferry." Conducted and ed. by Gregory J. Ryan. In *The Merton Annual* 4 (New York: AMS Press, 1991), p. 206.

21. Thomas Merton, "Old Uncle Tom," *kentucky poetry review* 28:1 (Spring 1992), p. 92.

Merton could be a “monk of Gethsemani” almost any place in the world. Second, Dom James Fox retired as Abbot, Merton’s immediate superior. The new abbot, Dom Flavian Burns (who had been a novice under Merton), felt it was up to Merton where he went, where he traveled, where he might locate as a hermit.

And, thus, the first scouting trip took place in May. He liked New Mexico. He liked the desert and told Dom Aelred: “I think often of the silence of your canyon, and those bright stars!” He wrote to Don Devereux in mid-June: “The country there [New Mexico], the monastery, the Indian background, the people, everything means a great deal to me and I do want to get back.” He considered the church at Christ in the Desert “the most beautiful example of religious architecture in the country.”²² One of the things Merton most enjoyed in New Mexico was the chance to use his camera to photograph the things he saw. It has been pointed out that Merton used the camera as a contemplative instrument. Brother Patrick Hart has written:

While walking in the woods, Merton photographed the images of his contemplation as he saw them, as they really were, in no way manipulated to create an artificial effect. He photographed whatever crossed his path: a dead tree root, the texture of weather-beaten clapboards on an abandoned barn, a rusted distillery, or the play of light and shadow on dry leaves in the woods. His contemplative and incarnational vision of reality was quite simply “things as they are.” As such, they spoke eloquently to him of their Creator. The camera was for Merton a potential catalyst for contemplation.²³

James P. Shannon noted of the photographs taken in New Mexico:

[They] show that Merton was more taken by the microcosm of a flower, water, rocks or gnarled wood than with the macrocosm of canyons, mountains or sunsets. In his pictures as in his poems, he favored the sharp focus of detail and precision over the wide-angle lens of generality (Shannon, p. 23).

Merton did like New Mexico and the desert, but one senses equivocation in him, a desire not to commit himself until after his Asian trip. As I’ve pointed out elsewhere. Merton could be most enthusiastic about a project while it was going on and call it his favorite, about people while they were with him or writing to him, or, in 1968, about a place while he was actually there. He could cool quickly, becoming just as enthusiastic about the next project or visitor or place. Some places, I feel, were too isolated for hermit Merton. One sees this particularly in his comments about Alaska. And he wrote that bears “would be a problem” in Alaska. But in New Mexico there were snakes. Merton had never liked snakes and, though he writes of the rattlesnakes in New Mexico with respect, one senses that they made him nervous. But the bottom line—the reason I feel Merton would never have come to New Mexico to live for any extended period of time—is that he liked trees.

In *Woods, Shore, Desert*, the great redwoods of the northern California coast attracted him. He had always loved the woods at Gethsemani. And he loved the mighty rains of Kentucky. Merton’s “nowhere,” Merton’s “desert,” in fact Merton’s home, was in the lush green woods of the knobs of Kentucky. When he insisted on the way to Asia that everyone should be told that he remained and always would “a monk of Gethsemani,” I think he meant just that. Merton’s search for a greater “nowhere” than where he was didn’t yield the results for which he hoped. In a poignant line, he wrote from Asia to his friend John Howard Griffin days before his death: “I have not found what I was looking for!” Outside Bangkok, on December 10, 1968, Thomas Merton found that final “nowhere.” One is reminded of the concluding lines of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* in which God speaks to Merton about the end of his life, lines which seem hauntingly prophetic:

In that day you shall possess the solitude you have so long desired. And your solitude shall bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth. Do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be You will not know until you are in it That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.²⁴

22. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: the Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), p. 113.

23. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., “On the Photography of Thomas Merton.” In *The Photography of Thomas Merton* (Louisville: Louisville School of Art, 1978), unpaginated.

24. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 423.