

THE HIDDEN PARADISE: THOMAS MERTON AND THE WISDOM OF GENESIS

by **Brent Short**

Caught up in the images of the creation scenario in the Genesis account, we are moved over into a different sense of time and place, a subversive and resonating truth is brought to bear. We find ourselves in the presence of the creative spirit astir, moving across the face of the dark deep — a place devoid of spirit, life, light-animating, reforming, breathing. A cosmic liturgy is set in motion. Genesis outlines for us a fundamental distinction between death as living death and life itself: life as a harmonious existential art, not a death-in-life. As such, anyone who has struggled with the distinction it makes will have occasion to come back to these same primitive metaphors which defy any ultimate linguistic or artistic definition. What exactly happened in the garden after this terrific act of creation?

A man is presented with a woman as a way of addressing his loneliness. Warned about a flatterer, in their purity, they began to dread all their God knew. In a clearing, a golden serpent — writhing in its precious glittering — speaks of a self-defining authority, setting forth a seductive proposition. Adam and Eve can become the final arbiters of good and evil if they just disobey, if they concede to their wanting everything. They become aware of their own division. Seeing, touching, tasting the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, they feel the stirrings of a cool breeze entering the garden. The first man and woman try to hide their own awareness. The serpent is subjected to its own work of dust and device. The first man and woman are banished, covering their faces where darkness and light meet in that terrible mix of envy and shame. Full of their death agony, full of their life agony, they glance back toward the flaming sword of truth and desire turning in every direction, protecting the One Tree which stands in its unity at the center of the garden, with its saving powers — its boughs spreading out nowhere and everywhere.

Genesis is obviously mythic in content, but is there such a thing as myth that is literally true? The symbolism is primal, strange, enigmatic and beguiling. It's the poetry of the origin myth, signifying a common mother and father, and a painful period of separation. It's the picture of the human family in harmonious communion with their Creator and one another, but there is a spirit of non-being at work in eden. The "Progress" which Adam and Eve introduce into the garden is born of fear and distrust, and paradise is ruined. In an amazingly brief amount of time and space, a basic dynamic of existence and society is laid out in sparse archaic detail.

How relevant to our lives can these characterizations be outside the caricatures we see in modern day advertising? Often, the figures of Adam and Eve are seen as quaint marketing gimmicks used in much the same way as Santa Claus. Creationism, the pious scientific theory which has arisen from the Genesis story, is stripped of the archetypal meaning and purpose which might impact our understanding of ourselves in any real significant way, especially when it's preached for the sole purpose of setting up a sacred/secular dichotomy which emphasizes the "inferiority" of opposing scientific theories. In discussions of the metaphorical imagery in the creation scenario and the temptation story in Genesis, there



Brent Short lives in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and works as an Information Specialist at the Earle Palmer Brown Advertising Agency in Bethesda, Maryland. He is the author of "Thomas Merton on Genesis: A Way of Seeing," *Spiritual Life* (1989). His poetry has appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Eads Bridge Literary Review* and *Spoon River Quarterly*.

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seems to be a thin line between caricature and its life-liberating truth for one who dares to interpret it.

Thomas Merton examined the problem of Genesis with extremely creative orientation. He not only drew from the Bible itself as a theologian of paradise, but in the priestly and scholarly tradition of the Catholic Church, he brought a lifetime of literary study to bear on the subject. Immersed in the traditional interpretations of Genesis by the Church Fathers, he had the same analogical approach to the biblical text: an interpretation of a passage of scripture or poetry which finds beyond the literal, allegorical and moral senses a fourth and ultimate spiritual or mystical sense.

The tradition of the Fathers was divided into two camps according to Merton: one camp saw Adam as the contemplative head of humanity, a mystic as such. The other camp saw Adam as a more action-oriented orderer of a garden paradise in Eden. As a poet and interpretive thinker himself, Merton was capable of sifting through the two versions of Adam as handed down by the Fathers, coming up with a synthesis which recognized both aspects of Adam's being. Laid out in full detail in his book *The New Man*, borrowing from the Fathers and the dynamics of the Greek tale of Prometheus, Merton was to come to a masterful understanding of the Genesis story which remained an underpinning throughout his writings. He approached Genesis like someone deciphering a mystery which was revealing itself in every angle of its figurative images, penetrating layer after layer of existence.

Full of his characteristic honesty, he can be found trying to put the very discussion of creativity and theology into proper perspective by pointing toward a glib interpretation of the subject in this passage:

We must begin by facing the ambivalence which makes so much of our talk about creativity absurd because it is fundamentally insincere. Why insincere? Because it is so glib, so all-embracing. The popular use of the word creativity is so facile that one feels immediately that it is a pure evasion. It is a trick to avoid thought, and to avoid real communication. When everything is *creative*, nothing is creative . . . In a word, being creative seems to mean little more than rushing forward with breakneck impetuosity into the conventional, the vulgar, or the absurd.¹

This combination of literary sophistication and the monastic appreciation of solitude, silence and the "useless" gave his thought on any subject a unique flair. In a sense, Merton lived out his aesthetic, his view of beauty, with more immediacy and intensity than those outside a monastic setting. Living as a hermit in the woods outside of Gethsemani in the later part of his life, his interest in photography is described in *Woods, Shore, Desert*:

The camera in his hands almost immediately became an instrument of contemplation . . . His concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood or whatever crossed his path . . . seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it in his emulsions.²

Consequently, Merton's immediate relationship with his surroundings in the form of nature itself, lent itself to a deep and abiding humility: an appreciation for the mystery springing up from an ordering of its silences. Merton's understanding of mythopoetic language and the use of figurative symbols did not detract from his belief in the divine authenticity of the Genesis account. He spelled out part of his understanding of how the Genesis account came into being.

The fact that the Biblical writers were inspired did not deliver them from the common necessity which compels writers to clothe their ideas in words taken from the current vocabulary of their culture and of their time. When God inspired the author of Genesis with the true account of the creation of the world, the writer might, by some miracle, have set the whole thing down in the vocabulary of a twentieth-century textbook of paleontology. But that would have made Genesis quite inaccessible to anyone except a twentieth-century student of paleontology. So instead the creation narrative was set down in the form of a poem which made free use of the cosmic symbolism that was common to all primitive mankind. (*LE*, p. 322)

Merton saw creation singing in the Psalms which lay at the heart of monastic worship. In the midst of this celebration of creator, creation and creatures, Merton faced the paradoxes and the desperate dilemmas of human nature in this quotation, somewhat overly pious and not characteristic of his later writing:

Thus the beautiful living things which were all about us on this earth and which were windows of heaven to every man, became infected with original sin. The world fell with man, and longs, with man for regeneration. The symbolic universe, which had now become a labyrinth of myths and magic rites, the dwelling place for a million hostile spirits, ceased altogether to speak to most men of God and told them only of themselves. The symbols which would have raised man above himself to God became myths, and as such they were simply projections of man's own biological drives. His deepest appetites, now full of shame, became his darkest fears.

(*LE*, p. 334)

Merton's Adam, who was placed in the midst of the garden in the center of an untainted symbolic and imaginative celebration, was not only a thinker but a seer who peered into the deep things of God, giving utterance to what he saw and experienced. The sacred character of the world needed a witness, an interpreter. It's precisely this frank approach to God — the original self-realization of Adam — the Fathers typified by using the Greek word *parrhesia*, which implied the honor of speaking one's mind openly before the civil assemblies of a Greek city state. There was no vitiated root of communication. The cornerstone of Merton's Eden vision was the law of being that Adam's life obeyed, expressing itself in spiritual liberty.

For Merton, Adam's vision of truth was a form of conversing with God, a created ability to prophesy, "To seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new" (*LE*, p. 373). This ability to see, to prophesy, was not discovered in "hypnotic elation" but in the "light of everyday existence." Poetry and prophecy were deeply and unalterably connected in Merton's eyes. This crucial connection which energized his entire approach to the Bible was underscored in a review of Edwin Muir's poetry, in which Merton insists that Muir is "one of those who intuitively realizes that the giving of names is a primordial metaphysical act of human intelligence — the Edenic office of the poet who follows Adam and reverifies the names given to the creatures by his first father" (*LE*, p. 29). All valid poetry which is fully engaging and generates its own imaginative life, was for Merton "a kind of recovery of paradise."

The spiritual gifts which had been given to Adam could only be possessed as long as they were received as gifts. His science reflected the physics of contemplation. In what Merton interpreted as a blind Promethean attempt at control, attempting to steal fire from God to usurp the creator's glory, Adam mistook the creator's prohibition as a restriction of rather than an enhancement of his own freedom. Attempting to be god-like, Adam discovered that God's gifts could not be won by conquest. In Adam's bid to know more than God, to experience reality in a way God hadn't (to know and actually taste evil), Adam found being the god-like arbiter of good and evil to be "disastrously less" than the knowledge of the "one" he possessed in his frank approach to God. Genesis presents two pictures of Adam: "in" God, and "outside" God.

Despite the terrible awe contained in the description of the cherub with the flaming sword barring the entrance back to Eden, Merton saw Adam's Promethean attitude, not "the revenge of an irate God," as the cause of Adam's separation from a life no longer centered in trust. Adam lost not only his "full citizenship" — his freedom over sin — but he was "unable to remain centered in himself, he fell beneath himself into the multiplicity and confusion of exterior things."³ The Church Fathers saw all disordered passions coming together in one great convergence upon the self in the form of concupiscence: selfish love. The Scholastic philosophers saw this strong desire to possess all things at the center of the earthly city.

In Greek literature, the Promethean tale — a valuable retelling of the story of human alienation — ended with Prometheus in isolation, chained to the cliffs while vultures (earth's fellow creatures) fed on his innards. The fire Prometheus attempted to steal was the fire of his own spiritual freedom which he already possessed. Merton was careful to separate the Greek playwrights who fashioned their god as an implacable father from those who held an interpretation closer to that of

Christian tradition — just, but less vengeful. Prometheus’s suffering for the crime of existence itself need not be hopelessly embittering. Following the highest order of tragedy, he saw Prometheus’s suffering as a hard-earned source of knowledge.

In describing the Usurper’s promise of godlikeness, the writer of Genesis makes it clear that Adam’s and Eve’s own senses — sight, touch, taste — are all full of self-contradictory hungers. With the promise of an ultimate knowledge of good and evil literally within grasp, Adam and Eve, a society in microcosm, are blinded by the illusion fostered by their own pride. Created out of the perfect abyss of freedom, Adam and Eve find themselves unable to face each other, naked behind a lack of true discourse which signifies who they really are and what their real relationship to the world is. They find themselves unable to name or face their own competitive blame-shifting, partially covering up to hide, partially naked and vulnerable: complexly human. Here Merton describes an “anti-creativity” where the highest aspirations of humanity remain dangerously unexpressed in the nuclear age, the need for truly creative expression twisted into a preemptive vying for retaliation.

The most obvious characteristic of our age is its destructiveness. This can hardly be doubted. We have developed an enormous capacity to build and change our world, but far more enormous are our capacities for destruction. It is significant that the age of atomic war is the one in which man has become preoccupied with what he calls *creativity*, and preoccupied with it to the point of obsession. The problem of creativity, when approached from the semantic viewpoint, reveals itself as a problem of guilt. (*LE*, p. 353)

In typological thinking, what one human being experiences, every human comes to know. Seeking a self-defining authority, Adam and Eve are responsible for introducing antagonism into the created order, ultimately rebelling against that order. In *The New Man* — using Paul’s description of the power of death and guilt being played out — Merton saw fit to address life’s inner agonies, full of spiritual crises, part of an unseen battle between death’s contradictions and life’s wholeness. Adam’s spiritual makeup, scientific wisdom and technology, and his garden’s purpose — all come under Merton’s paradise rubric. In his hands, one feels more connected to the typological figures Adam and Eve were meant to be, psychologically and spiritually representative of humanity itself.

We see the cross is the center of the new creation: the tree of life, instead of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He who has approached the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has tasted the intoxicating fruit of his own special excellence but he dies the death of frustration. He becomes the prisoner of his own gifts and he sticks to his own excellence like fly- paper. There is no joy for him because he is alienated from life, love, and communion in creativity by his own demonic self-assertion, which automatically involves a rejection of suffering, of dependence, of charity, and of obedience. (*LE*, p. 370)

As Merton moved further and further out in his interests and studies, his circle of understanding soon included the contemplative literature and poetry of the Sufis; the religion and thought of the Far East; the spirituality and history of Native America. Several female mystics (such as Julian of Norwich) were voices which informed his writings, providing an amazing background from which to draw insight. His whole concept of the spirit behind the biblical dialectic began to incorporate the Eastern wisdom as represented in the *koan*, that device used by a spiritual master to stop analytical thinking in its tracks.

The world’s wisdom literature in which Merton was immersed began to play a larger and larger part in his emotional and imaginative life. A reflection of the beautiful counterbalanced paradise construct — Eve complementing Adam, masculine and feminine, the creature complementing and praising its creator — the spontaneous paradoxical nature of a figure he returned to in his dreams was recorded in one of his journals:

Last night I had a haunting dream of a Chinese princess which stayed with me all day. (*Proverb* again.) This lovely and familiar and archetypical person. (No object yet how close and real, and how elusive.) She comes to me in various mysterious ways in my dreams. This time she was with her

brothers, and I felt overwhelmingly the freshness, the youth, the wonder, the truth of her; her complete reality, more real than any other, yet unobtainable. Yet I deeply felt the sense of her understanding, knowing and loving me, in my depths — not merely in my individuality and everyday self, yet not as if this self were utterly irrelevant to her. (Not rejected, not accepted either.)⁴

Merton understood the Genesis text to be questioning the reader, placing them in the midst of a dialectical engagement, not the didactic discourse that we're so often led to believe. Subsequent to Adam's original beatific inspiration, an ongoing dialogue is reinitiated, where contact with being creates new being. A dialogue which reintroduces the intersection of freedom which Adam's disobedience violated: "Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" By way of his false "divinity," Adam is divided, separated from God, but God is not separated from Adam: an existential reality which sounds contradictory, but which is, in fact, perfectly viable and verifiable in experiential terms.

In an attempt to ascertain all that is apparent in Genesis, we've repeatedly passed over its contemplative content and misconstrued its significance. The inexorable pattern of human problems typified by the fall defies the cartoonlike treatment fostered by commercial advertisers. The literalistic "sloganeering" of creationists and inerrantists is really foreign to its sense of revelation. Genesis presents a prophetic paradigm guarded by a flaming sword which in the words of Genesis itself, "turns in every direction." Genesis guides our way back to that part of Adam and Eve in ourselves which remains in its original beatific attitude, conversing in truth with God in the paradise of creation.

Merton found himself attracted to the Genesis theme because it offered a greater sense of interiority for the monk in the form of figures who represented a harmony which is inseparable from that of original innocence and spiritual humility. An ascetic ideal which stands in contrast to the prevailing attitude of twentieth century superiority which is too all-knowingly indifferent to recognize the crucial relevancy of its primitive symbolism. Merton allows us to see through his eyes, the interaction which is described in the Garden of Eden imagery. In archetypal fashion, the dynamic of human reality is re-enacted for us. The reflective truth which is described in the relationship between Adam and Eve is an ever-deepening awareness of life as a gift of being and not punishment, reflected back in a tapestry of human love and redemptive mystery:

This indeed is the forbidden tree: this tree of self that grows in the middle of Paradise but that we ourselves are not supposed to see or notice. All the other trees are there . . . of them we can be aware But if we become aware of ourselves, then we take the fruit that was forbidden us: we become "as gods knowing good and evil" for we find division within ourselves and are cut off from external reality at the same time.⁵

NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 355. Hereafter in the text as *LE*.
2. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. xi.
3. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), p. 114.
4. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 101.
5. James Finley: *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1978), p. 104.