Henry David Thoreau and Thomas Merton: The Transformation of Individual Experience into Universal Myth

by **Ted Henken**

> There is no such thing as pure *objective* observation. Your observation, to be interesting, i.e. to be significant, must be *subjective*.[1]

Henry David Thoreau, born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817, by his estimate, "just in the nick of time," is known the world over for his masterpiece, *Walden*, a personal account of his own life while he lived on the shores of Walden pond. Though it is still widely read and taught today, *Walden* occupies a bit of an ambivalent place in the canon of American literature. This ambivalence arises from the fact that this book is usually understood not as autobiography, as one might expect, but as a more complex presentation of Thoreau's natural, social, and political philosophy. If read as autobiography, though, *Walden* is a personal account of Thoreau's life, an account that becomes a more universal myth when responded to by other American autobiographers.

As Thoreau stands in the American mind today as a most important voice of the 19th century and, arguably, as the representative conscience of that century, Thomas Merton, a writer, social critic, and Trappist monk, born in 1915, stands in a similar position for the 20th century. Though born in France, I think he showed first and very effectively in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, that he had been converted not only to Catholicism but also (in the best Thoreauvian sense of the word) to a particularly American sensibility. Realizing this connection between Thoreau and Merton, and that, in writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton is responding to Thoreau's *Walden*, I want to show that both men attempt, in their autobiographies, to go beyond the mere facts of their lives and create a more universal myth. It is also important to recognize that any autobiography, any story of a life, is to some extent a creation, and that the value and validity of such a work does not come from its strict adherence to fact. Ultimately, it is these writers' departure from pure fact that give their works life and make them art.

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The epigraph above embodies the hidden goal that both Thoreau and Merton sought in writing about their very "deliberate" and solitary lives. But, before we think that their deliberate attempt to live in solitude and celebrate solitude in their writings rejects the larger world, we must remember that they both recognized the imperative of sharing the vision of their solitude with the world outside. Thoreau seems to speak for both Merton and himself when he tells us on the opening page of

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Walden that he requires from all writers "a simple and sincere account of their own lives."[2] With this recognition of a responsibility to the larger world, it is interesting that neither Thoreau's *Walden* nor Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* are, in the strict sense of the words, simple or sincere.

At first glance the simplicity of these writers' tasks seems evident. All they must do is tell the story of their lives; write down what happened. Through further study, though, one becomes aware that there is much more going on in these "accounts" than what Merton calls "straight biography."[3] Thoreau admits and even celebrates this fact in the epigraph where he stresses that it is actually the subjectivity of individual experience that makes it significant.[4] Any account of history, then, cannot be totally objective. Though Merton tries to elude this idea of a fictional construction by referring to his book as "straight biography," he is aware of its subjectivity when he tells its publisher, "[*The Seven Storey Mountain* is] not pure autobiography . . . I see a cross between Dante's *Purgatory*, and Kafka, and a medieval miracle play."[5] The story these men tell of their lives is just that, a story. However "simple and sincere" or "straight" these men may want to convince us they are, neither writer has the goal of objectivity.

Merton, from the very beginning of his book begins to construct the seven stories of his mountain so he can take us with him on his journey. Thoreau, for his part, bluntly says that he is condensing his two year, two month stay at Walden Pond into one year to make it fit into the circular pattern of the seasons. These men are artists, not historians. Their simplicity and sincerity lie not in the dry facts of their lives, but in each one's individual interpretation of those facts. Thoreau tells us in his journal that he is not interested in even the most unusual fact in itself, but says that "[a fact is important] only as it may have lain in the experience of a human being."[6] Though Merton chooses a vertical construct with the seven stories of his redemption, and Thoreau a circular one with the four seasons of his awakening (both chosen for very definite reasons), what is important is not that these writers are sincere to the facts of their lives but sincere to their vision of these facts; to what they see.

In order to investigate the full complexity of what each writer "sees" and how that vision is worked out in his story, it is useful to realize the perspective from which each is writing. This is useful and important because it is the particular perspective of the autobiographer that determines the life of his or her story. The position that Thoreau is writing from is made clear at the end of the book's first paragraph, where he tells us, "at present I am a sojourner in a civilized life again."[7] Merton, in utter contrast tells us at the beginning of his story that the "long journey" of his life "is now ended."[8] Thoreau stands at the end of his retreat into the woods re-entering society and in a sense taking the woods with him into the world. Merton, on the other hand, stands at the beginning of his retreat "into the woods," leaving society and, in a parallel way, bringing the world with him into the monastery.

We shouldn't let this contrast blind us to the fact that both men "see" and speak about their lives in terms of a geographical journey. Merton builds a myth using Dante's mountain of Purgatory, and Thoreau builds a myth using Walden Pond. Merton and Thoreau do have different experiences of their different worlds, but there is a parallel construction of myth alive in their stories. For them, myth functions as a narrative story that defines the meaning of life both for themselves and, through their autobiographies, for the reader. As mentioned above, the importance of myth lies not in its validity but in its ability to provide meaning and purpose to one's existence.[9] Finally, these writers' mythic constructions come together because they both write from a particular position attempting to give meaning and purpose to each one's "errand into the wilderness."

In looking further into Thoreau's motivations at the time he began his "errand," we find that his desire to be a sojourner, quoted above, stands in contrast to his desires before establishing residency at Walden Pond. Writing in his journal the winter before going to Walden, he sounds much like Merton retreating from the world, "I want to go soon and live away by the pond where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds . . . I don't want to feel as if my life were a sojourn any longer . . . it is time now to begin to live."[10] It is fascinating that these men's conceptions of what it means to "live," stands in such contrast to what society sees

as "living." Society seems to tell us that we must be active and deeply involved in the world to live, but these men only begin to live when they retreat from the "mass of men." They both decided at a young age (Merton at 26, Thoreau at 28) to end their journey in the world and begin to truly live.

The similarity between Merton's climb for redemption and Thoreau's drive for awakening lived out in their respective retreats is extended when we look at each man's particular language in describing and mythologizing the life of solitude and inwardness. Robert D. Richardson in his book *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* makes the insightful point that in the "inner landscape" of every educated American there is the ideal of Henry David Thoreau and his deliberate and solitary experiment on the shores of Walden Pond.[11] In the face of this fact lies the reality that this time in Thoreau's life was his most active and social. Thoreau even tells us in the pages of *Walden* that he had more visitors then than during any other period in his life. Yet, his language and the utter honesty and audacity of his experiment still thrive in the American consciousness. Thoreau, probably more than any other American writer, has the unique distinction of simultaneously being the most honest about the self-creation of his myth, and having the most lasting and universal myth in the minds of Americans.

There also exists in the life of Merton, as portrayed in *Seven Storey Mountain*, a fundamental, yet desirable, divergence between the reality of his life and the myth of his story. Not that he had a malicious intent to present a false image of his life to the world, on the contrary he presented his most "sincere" image. But, it is still an image. We must remember that Thoreau celebrates the subjectivity of observation and experience forcing any significant piece of writing to be subjective. Merton assumes this view of *Seven Storey Mountain* many years after its publication. Responding to a request in 1967 for a short biographical sketch to publish with his works, he gave a very satirical self-description including this comment about *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "Autobiography 1948 created a general **hallucination** followed by too many pious books, "[12] (my emphasis). From this quote it is easy to see that Merton, though he could not admit to myth-making at the time he wrote his autobiography, eventually came to accept his own subjectivity and even to regret it to an extent.

Thoreau is not as shy and doesn't wait as long to show his subjectivity. On the same page that he tells us of his having left the pond to become a sojourner again, he tells us in the most simple yet memorable words that,

> When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only.[13]

As he admitted in *Walden*, and as subsequent research has shown, Thoreau "lived alone," yet had "solid seasons" with many people. He was "in the woods, a mile from any neighbor," but traveled into Concord a few times each week (a mile was not far, even in the 19th century) and even took a few extended trips outside the town and state. He even bought an intact frame for the house that he "built himself," and worked "by the labor of his hands" only a small fraction of the year. I point out all these facts not to invalidate Thoreau's life in the woods (all these facts are admitted and even meticulously detailed in *Walden*), but to highlight the subjective interpretation that he himself celebrated.

We see Merton's subjectivity just as easily and in an astonishingly similar language when, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he describes his reaction to reading about the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists), before entering the monastery.

> They worked with their hands silently ploughing and harrowing the earth . . . to feed themselves . . . They built their own houses and made, with their own hands,

> their own furniture and their own coarse clothing, and everything around them was simple and primitive.[14]

In order to illustrate the power and truth of the Trappist life, Merton calls up almost exactly the same imagery that Thoreau uses to celebrate Walden. We see images of labor, self-sufficiency, simplicity and general asceticism. And, though much of what he said of Trappist life was at that time very true, the reality was that things were just beginning to change for the Trappists, and Merton if anything, helped to speed up those changes. By the very writing and publication (under his secular name) of a book intended for the general Catholic audience, Merton was breaking from usual Trappist practice. The idealized image presented above of the normal Trappist (someone Merton has supposedly become) is ironically contradicted by Merton, the writer (someone he has supposedly left behind).

The connection between subjectivity and myth may seem contradictory to some readers. Subjectivity, which is understood as an individual interpretation of experience and myth, which is understood as a universal interpretation of experience seem opposed to one another.[15] But, when one considers these writers' ambition of truly transforming and regenerating the world in which they live, it is evident that their subjective (individual) observations have the goal of becoming "significant" or universal to the world around them. Their subjective experience is intended to become a universal myth and this is to be achieved through the power of their own imaginations.

Through their regeneration stories, Merton and Thoreau transform their solitary lives into a universal myth, and at the same time, use this myth to reject the faithlessness of the world. Their myth takes on a lasting reality when they move beyond simply the romantic celebration of "the woods," and take on the larger society, thoroughly denouncing it and its definition of a good life. Thoreau, though he is continually accused of having his head in the clouds, and, as even Whitman said, of "lacking a love for the common people," had an acute awareness of the condition of humanity in his own time. He knows that what he envisions for humanity will be hard, if not impossible for most people to accept. This knowledge runs throughout *Walden*, from the first page where Thoreau says, "I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him who it fits,"[16] to the last with, "I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this."[17] His main goal, though, is not to write an "ode to dejection," but to wake up the "mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation."[18]

While Merton is also attempting to "wake his neighbors up," he is able to describe his connection with common people in ways that Thoreau couldn't. He is able to do this because he sees himself as having "grown up in his stupid and godless society according to the standards of a civilization of hyenas."[19] Moreover, he goes on to describe himself as the best example of the evil inherent in a faithless world.

> I became the complete twentieth-century man. I now belonged to the world in which I lived. I became a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs.[20]

He draws a line between the values of society and what he sees as the ultimate values of society. Finally, the fact of his true citizenship in this evil world is a living example of the power that his created myth must have in order to provide meaning and redemption for himself and his readers.

In his concluding chapter, Thoreau also draws a distinct line between the values of the world and the values of conscience lived out through the solitary life. He says that a truly "sane" person would be found in opposition to the "most sacred laws of society."[21] He knows that the laws of society are not necessarily, and usually not ever, ultimate. Only through obedience to the laws of one's own being can one avoid the "quiet desperation" of the world and still have the strength to be reborn to a realization of the essential laws of nature.

These laws and the idea of their "natural" place in humanity is essential to each man's regenerative myth. In Thoreau's call for "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"[22] his purpose is not to deny the validity of pleasure *per se*, but to declare that the highest pleasure is found within ourselves. He goes on to illustrate the Romantic idea that humanity is "naturally" good and pure and that it has only been corrupted by the "odd-fellow society." In order to purge society's influence on the individual, he suggests that we embrace our natural state; that we be reborn. He underlines this with the argument that if we truly desire good for the larger world; if we truly desire to return humanity "by truly Indian, botanic, or **natural** means," then we must, "first be as simple and as well as **Nature** ourselves,"[23] (my emphasis).

Though it may contradict the traditional Catholic doctrine of original sin, the Romantic idea of humanity's good and pure nature is essential to Merton's conception of his own life. When he entered the monastery he was not embracing a new and inhuman ideal, but simply and extraordinarily rediscovering his own true nature. The idea of a separation between the true godly nature of the individual and the violence and faithlessness in society is presented as the first belief in his world-view.

> Free by **nature**, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the **image of the world** into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; **born to love Him**, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers (my emphasis). [24]

At the end of his autobiography, Merton reiterates this view of human nature when he suggests how we are to heal ourselves from the violence and faithlessness of the world. Sounding remarkably like Thoreau, he says that we must recover our true nature as it is God's nature. In order to heal ourselves we must learn that "at the very core" we are like God in our freedom.[25]

Thoreau says we must use this freedom to "wedge downward through opinion, prejudice, tradition, and delusion . . . till we come to a hard bottom;"[26] to what Merton calls the core. It is at this "*point d'appui*" that both Merton and Thoreau place the foundation of their mythical construct; their story. This "hard bottom" of natural goodness and Godliness is the basis for Merton's seven stories without which his mountain would crumble. Merton tells us, "I had fallen through the surface of old England into . . . hell."[27] But, on the very next page he offers us the basis for his own redemption. He calls up the image of Dante's "seven-circled mountain of Purgatory," and, being in Hell, tells us that he has begun "climbing from circle to circle."[28]

Early in his book Thoreau also, after describing the pond's practical advantages (*i.e.* the ice trade and the railroad), begins to set in place its mythical advantages, *i.e.* its advantages in using it as the essence of his world-view. He says, "Walden Pond . . . offers advantages which it would not be good policy to divulge; it is a good post and a good foundation."[29] Thoreau is much more aware or at least more ready to admit that he is turning his subjective observation into a universal mythic world-view in the writing of his autobiography. He tells his readers bluntly, "I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol."[30] Though he, throughout the book, gives meticulous details especially on the dimensions of the pond, his myth only begins in a factual experience of nature. Thoreau admits to his readers that his imagination links the facts of nature to a universal myth and transforms the former into the latter. We are told, "the imagination, give it the least license, dives deeper and soars higher than Nature goes."[31]

Merton's personal experience of conversion and redemption is transformed into a more universal story by his use of the mythical construct of the seven stories of the mountain of Purgatory. His own experience of conversion is transformed into a much wider religious experience when he reiterates the symbol of the mountain in the mystical flourish at the end of his book. Written as a statement from God (set in italics), Merton emphasizes his image of the mountain when he writes, "*you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the* **high places** *of my joy*"[32] (my emphasis). Thoreau also extends his

myth when he uses his imagination to link his own idea of Walden to the oldest and most universal myths around the world. His imagination allows him and his readers to believe that "the pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges."[33] Both writers, then, as Richardson says of Thoreau, are "not trying to discuss modern myth, but to make it,"[34] and make it by connecting it to tradition.

If these writers are each making a new myth and not simply "discussing" the various religious and spiritual traditions around them, what do they offer the reader either at the peak of the mountain or at the depths of the pond? More specifically, what is it about each one's myth that provides meaning and purpose? And finally, how do these particular myths come together to connect Merton and Thoreau as myth makers?

As mentioned above, these writers construct their myths from their particular positions in life (Merton has just entered the monastery and Thoreau has left the woods). In addition to this divergence in perspective, the vocabularies they use in writing about their respective myths are also different. Although the essence of what they "see" is very similar, the difference in their use of language arises from a larger difference in perspective. Merton's world-view is essentially religious, at times even exclusively Catholic. Though regretting this position later in his life, he says firmly in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "There [is] only on Faith, one Church."[35] Thoreau's world-view, though label-resisting, is pantheistic and he tells us appropriately in his journal, "I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher."[36]

The best evidence of their difference in language is found when each writer describes what he sees as the core of one's nature. Merton puts forth the idea of the "breath of grace," while Thoreau introduces the idea of "vital heat." Looking at the context in which these phrases were placed in their respective books, the perspective of each writer becomes evident. When Merton places the idea of the "breath of grace" at the peak of his mountain, making it the essence of his myth, he also frames the idea in religious language. This is very appropriate as his entire myth is born out of the goal of religious, and especially Christian Catholic, redemption. Thoreau, being the pantheist, also uses language that is appropriate to his perspective. The idea of "vital heat" is introduced early in *Walden* as an attempt to locate humanity's true needs in relation to nature. Since his myth has been built from a mystical awakening to the natural world, the idea of a "vital heat" that connects this world to the individual emphasizes his myth.

Although Merton's idea of the "breath of grace" and Thoreau's idea of "vital heat" do show that they use different languages in describing their regeneration, these ideas are also ironically the best evidence of the connection between Merton and Thoreau as myth makers. This is evident when we notice that the religious redemption and the pantheistic awakening that follow from these respective ideas are essentially different expressions of the same idea. Thoreau supports this connection when he writes, "I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature."37 In order to discover the true virtuous nature of humanity (to achieve regeneration), the individual must either climb the mountain or dive into the pond. This original nature must be recovered, but since it is already within our breasts this recovery cannot be a search "out there" for something new. It can only be an act of preservation of what is "in here."

Both Merton and Thoreau want their readers to realize that their true nature is already alive within them, they just have to discover it. But, once they discover it they must work to preserve it. They understand that when individuals lose touch with their true virtue, society's laws begin to govern their lives. And, when this virtue is ignored and perverted by society, the **breath** and **heat** which give it life are depleted. Merton, speaking in his language and from his particular myth, wants individuals to "put up a struggle to keep the **breath of grace** alive in their souls"[38] (my emphasis). Thoreau, speaking in his particular vernacular, sees the virtuous individual in much the same way: one who struggles "to preserve [the] higher and poetic faculties,"[39] one who struggles "to retain the **vital heat**"[40] (my emphasis).

Since this heat and breath are already within us the only way to gain, or more accurately regain, virtue is through simplicity - through denial. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton gives us a wonderful image which helps us see beyond our usual aversion to denial. When he entered the monastery and saw the

gates close behind him he described himself as now being, "enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom."[41] Goethe, a favorite writer of Thoreau's and someone who Merton read at least tangentially, has a similar conception of denial.

> **To live within limits**, to want one thing, or a very few things, very much and love them dearly, cling to them, . . . become one with them — that is what makes the poet, the artist, the human being.[42] (my emphasis)

For him the task of denial was something that was not reserved for the poet and artist, but the calling of every individual human being. Like Merton, who saw his own denial as the way to true freedom and virtue, Goethe sees denial as a means to a truly happy life with love and oneness; not as an end in itself.

For Merton and Thoreau such denial allows them to preserve their breath and heat so they can redeem and awaken their true virtue. This idea of virtue through denial is illustrated in each writer's belief in the need for voluntary poverty. Thoreau praises a simple life primarily because it allows him "to get his living honestly, with freedom left for proper pursuits."[43] For Thoreau, proper pursuits are those universal goals found in his vast international and timeless reading which he has linked to his own international and timeless experience at Walden Pond. He believes that "voluntary poverty" is the only vantage point from which one can see that "most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are . . . positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind."[44]

But, his and Merton's conception of voluntary poverty has power in transforming the way one sees the world. Merton agrees with Thoreau's statement that a simple life allows one to "get . . . free from all the habits and luxuries that people in the world think they need for their comfort and amusement." But, he also says that simplicity transforms one's vision by putting one's will in order and one's soul "in harmony with itself and with God." [45] Thoreau agrees, saying that the deliberate, solitary, and simple life transforms mere individual experience into mythic universal experience.

> In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness.[46]

Returning to my original statement that these men recognized the imperative of sharing their vision by giving an account of their lives to their "kindred [in] a distant land,"[47] it is important that, in this sharing there is also a desire to bring others into the light of redemption and awakening. Though it is more obvious in Merton's Catholic particularism, both writers purposefully went beyond the obligation of communication in order to truly evangelize their readers. And, though the rhetoric of a solitary life lived apart from the "mass of men," is very strong in both autobiographies, they always stayed in contact with the larger world. It is interesting that both men began to feel restless after a number of years away from the world. They felt that they "had more lives to live,"[48] and needed to preserve a connection to the world, if not always in body; in mind and word.

Merton recognizes his own need to connect with the world in *The Seven Storey Mountain* when he relates the teachings of Saint Thomas, "there are three vocations: the active life, the contemplative life and a third which is a mixture of both, and this is superior to the other two."[49] The individual subjective experience that Merton has had is not enough. He equates the breath of grace within him to "a love that must **communicate** what it knows of God to **others**."[50] From Merton's perspective he has ended his journey in the world and embarked on a new one. But, as he finds out while in the monastery, he has brought the world with him and realizes, reluctantly, that his vocation is to "remember all those souls in the world. . . . [I] did not come here alone."[51]

Thoreau, being a "sojourner" in the world again, has the responsibility and the almost evangelical desire, as Merton says, "to pass the fruits of [his] contemplation on to others."[52] He admits that the purpose of

his writing is not personal, but essentially social and universal; "if only to wake my neighbors up."[53] The mythic and romantic quality of his story is a choice.

> If there are any who think that I am vainglorious, that I set myself up above others and crow over their low estate, let me tell them that I could tell a pitiful story respecting myself as well as them . . . I could encourage them with a sufficient list of failures, and could flow as humbly as the very gutters.[54]

He is telling a story when he writes *Walden*; a story that represents himself, and, at the same time, the outside world. He is very aware that he is not deep in the rain-forests of Ecuador, separated, cut-off from the world, but he does not desire to be. He, like Merton and Saint Thomas, chooses the third and higher vocation to a life of contemplation and action. He says this early in *Walden*, "it would be some advantage to live a **primitive and frontier life**, though in the midst of an **outward civilization**"[55] (my emphasis).

In dedicating themselves to this third vocation, Merton and Thoreau find that it is a higher calling only because it is a harder calling. There always exists in them a healthy ambivalence to the idea of their own vocation, and the fact that they never reconcile this ambivalence contributes greatly to their genius. Merton describes the struggle between Fr. Louis Merton, the monk, and Thomas Merton, the writer. He says, "there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister." He rejects this other side to himself wanting to be cut off, separate, and alone. He says this shadow "is supposed to be dead."[56] But, he begins to accept that his vocation will not allow him to separate contemplation from action, or deny one and accept the other. He knows that, "my double, my shadow, my enemy, Thomas Merton, the old man of the sea, has things in his favor."[57]

This split is recognized, accepted and even celebrated by Thoreau in Walden with the appropriate use of natural metaphors. Speaking of his bean-field, an image of his own life, he says,

> Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between the wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field.[58]

Thoreau also describes this balance between the wild and the civilized by using the "shadow" metaphor that Merton uses above, and he even extrapolates a bit to emphasize the fictional quality of the story of his life,

> However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but **taking note** of it; . . . When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of **fiction**, a work of the imagination only.[59]

Thoreau knows that "the outward and inward of life correspond,"[60] and what Richardson says of his is equally as important for Merton,

> Thoreau never "solved" the contradiction between the urge to a contemplative spiritual life and the impulse to an active physical existence; indeed part of his greatness comes from his constant effort to do justice to both impulses.[61]

It is this tension between the inner and the outer, the writer and the liver, the individual and society, and finally, the ideal and the real, that gives these Merton and Thoreau's lives a mythic quality. In using their imagination to transform their inner individual experiences into universal myth, they recognize the importance of both ends of this struggle. They know that their myths survive only in keeping alive a dialogue between the inner ideal and the outer reality. Finally, they know that only through such a dialogue can their personal ideal effect and even transform the universal reality.

Thoreau sees this dialogue taking place between the natural world and the individual. He understands that through the experience of nature one can come to know and begin to preserve the "vital heat" within oneself. He says in his journal,

> whether he wakes or sleeps, whether he runs or walks, whether he uses a microscope or a telescope, or his naked eye, a man never discovers anything . . . but himself.[62]

Merton takes this a little further in his *Asian Journal*, emphasizing that the "breath of grace" is already within us and that it is this breath that connects us with others; the individual with society; and the ideal with the real,

> the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion . . . Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.[63]

Footnotes:

1. Richardson, Robert D. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind,* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986. p. 310.
2. Krutch, Joseph Wood, ed. *Walden and Other Writings by Henry David Thoreau*, Bantam Books, New York, 1989. p. 107.
3. Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton,* Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1986. p. 227.
4. Richardson, p. 310.
5. Mott, p. 226.
6. Richardson, p. 309.
7. Krutch, p. 107.
8. Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, San Diego, 1976. p. 4.
9. Roberts, Keith. *Religion in Sociological Perspective,* Basic Books, New York, 1989, p. 342.
10. Richardson, p. 112-113.
11. Ibid. p. 153.
12. Mott, p. 492.
13. Krutch, p. 107.
14. Roberts, p. 342.
15. Merton, p. 316.
16. Krutch, p. 107.
17. Ibid. p. 350.
18. Ibid. p. 111.
19. Merton, p. 51.
20. Ibid. p. 85.
21. Krutch, p. 343.
22. Ibid. p. 173.
23. Ibid. p. 163-164.
24. Merton, p. 3.
25. Ibid. p. 372.
26. Krutch, p. I78.
27. Merton, p. 121.
28. Ibid. p. 122.
29. Krutch, p. 120.
30. Ibid. p. 316.
31. Ibid. p. 317.
32. Merton, p. 422.

33. Krutch, p. 325.
34. Richardson, p. 172.
35. Merton, p. 58.
36. Richardson, p. 285.
37. Ibid. p. 159.
38. Merton, p. 229.
39. Krutch, p. 264.
40. Ibid. p. 121.
41. Merton, p. 372.
42. Richardson, p. xi.
43. Krutch, p. 126.
44. Ibid. p. 115.
45. Merton, p. 305.
46. Krutch, p. 343.
47. Ibid. p. 107.
48. Ibid. p. 343.
49. Merton, p. 414.
50. Ibid. p. 415.
51. Ibid. p. 383.
52. Ibid. p. 419.
53. Richardson, p. 186.
54. Ibid. p. 256-257.
55. Krutch, p. 113.
56. Merton, p. 410.
57. Ibid. p. 412.
58. Krutch, p. 221-222.
59. Ibid. p. 205.
60. Ibid. p. 187.
61. Richardson, p. 171.
62. Ibid. p. 382.
63. Mott, p. 545.