

# LIGHTS ACROSS THE RIDGE:

## Thomas Merton & Henry David Thoreau

by **John Albert, O.C.S.O.**

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### Introduction

In a journal entry dated December 6, 1950, later included in *The Sign of Jonas*, young Father Louis Merton, O.C.S.O. (1915-1968) wrote of reading "beautiful pages on morning and being awake" in *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau (1817-1865). Merton copied out this line, giving it his own emphasis: "I went to the woods because I wished to live *deliberately*, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived." Thoreau -- comments Merton -- adds "mystery" here: "Nor did I wish to practice resignation unless it was necessary." Merton supposed Thoreau to mean he did not intend to be resigned to anything like a compromise with life.<sup>1</sup>

On July 16, 1965, Thomas Merton formally began life as a hermit, his cinder-block cabin on a wooded hillside opposite the monastery having become as significant for him as the slat-board

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\* Preliminary Note: This essay is the result of the editorial work and encouragement of five persons to whom I extend my thanks. Sister Mary Alice Lawhead, O.S.B., of St. Meinrad College, Indiana, served so graciously as research assistant and second reader for my thesis written in 1970 on Thoreau's theory of dissent. She continues to enliven my Merton-Thoreau studies. Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., and Dr. Robert E. Daggy read the account of my stay in Merton's hermitage in its earlier form. Both men have been supportive of my Merton efforts in our meetings and in their continued correspondence. Drs. Dewey and Victor Kramer are responsible for the "literary map" that showed in an analytical way what I had done intuitively, as well as for numerous corrections and suggestions that have strengthened the structure and form of this work. Finally, I thank my abbot, Armand Veilleux, O.C.S.O., and my community for allowing me to acquire the Merton and Thoreau source material used in this study. Brother Mark Dohle, O.C.S.O., in particular contributed a much-needed perspective during the long weeks of redacting and typing this manuscript: his kindness and his humor kept me moving.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 316. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

and plaster hut on Walden Pond had been for Henry David Thoreau. "I am accused of living in the woods like Thoreau instead of living in the desert like St. John the Baptist," Merton wrote in *Day of a Stranger*. "All I can answer is that I am not living 'like anybody.' Or 'unlike anybody.' We all live somehow or other, and that's that. It is a compelling necessity for me to be free to embrace the necessity of my own nature. . . . I live in the woods as a reminder that I am free not to be a number. There is, in fact, a choice."<sup>2</sup>

In the following essay, I propose to present an account of my stay in Merton's hermitage in early 1984 during my first (and at the time of this writing only) journey from my monastery since my entrance into Trappist life in 1974. Here, I give not only details of my days and nights spent there, and descriptions of Merton's hermitage itself, but also develop the connection between Merton and Thoreau through an exploration of Merton's hermitage, not only as the material place of significance it surely is for all persons privileged to stay there, but as "metaphysical space" and "sacred place" -- that is, as region of the mind, heart and spirit wherein Merton, Thoreau and I finally met.

I will allow Thoreau and Merton to emerge through the narrative of my text in a manner that shows their dynamic personal development and the changing configuration of their thought and feelings. Diverse as their thinking was, both pondered the same fundamental questions: What is it that forms the bond of the human family? What are the native rights of the person over against his or her moral obligations and civil duties? What is the place of the human creature in Nature?

Merton and Thoreau lived in eras of tremendous discontinuous change and hammered out on the anvils of their consciences a practical moral philosophy of dissent from all social and spiritual rigidity in favor of the history, needs and struggle of each human person. Thoreau in his own time and Merton in ours have both been described as creatures of a froward and intractable nature when measured against the standards of their neighbors. Both chose to live differently and paid the price of their convictions. They abhorred political and theological intolerance (no matter how intolerant of others they at times may have been) and constantly sought to clarify the distinction between unity and uniformity; moral responsibility and social conformity; personal definition and corporate identity.

Unique as their personal stances were Thoreau and Merton did not speak out in isolation: they knew they were living links in a tradition and they did all in their power to preserve it. For a proper understanding of their thoughts on dissent, we must look to the theoretical underpinnings of concepts and ideas which found expression in their writings. Intellectual influences on Thoreau and Merton were extremely wide and varied and in this essay I examine the tenets of classical philosophers and modern European social analysts who shaped our understanding of conscience, natural law and the social contract and to those dissenters who inherited and reshaped these theories into a specific American radicalism. Abolitionism and the civil rights movement informed the opinions of Thoreau and Merton and both in turn influenced their times. Joined with these Western forces is the influence of the Orient, and I therefore present glimpses of Thoreau and Merton in relation to the wisdom of the East as well.

The contents of this essay have been given their particular form based on two sets of literary figures which are distributed through the ten sections, each of which is integrated with the others in a movement of ideas and images. From natural geography the "journey," the "finding," and the "return" are borrowed, and to these figures accommodated meanings are added. Thus, there is a rhythm in parts 1., Seeking the "Sacred Place," and 10., "The Return," when I write of my intellectual search and the desires of my heart. Parts 2., A Dwelling on

2. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; edited with an introduction by Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), pp. 31, 33. Hereafter referred to in the text as *DS*.

"Kindred Spirits," and 9., "Disarming the Heart," also balance: I describe finding the place of solitude and peace and the movement from alienation to world community. Parts 3., The "Abode of Conscience" and 4., Action According to a "Higher Law" also go together and treat of inner space -- the human conscience and action according to principle -- human integrity. These theoretical sections are connected with parts 7., Preserving the "Tradition of Dissent," and 8., The Nature of "American Radicalism," which demonstrate the origin and development of our nation's radical political tradition and how this tradition is one of direct social action.

Parts 5., "Voices and Lights" in the Night, and 6., Facing "East," also balance and are the centerpiece structurally and in content. Here the images borrowed from geography are retained but shift to give way to symbols borrowed from astronomy and developing technology. We see the natural lights of sun, moon and stars; the lights of candle, wood-burning stove and oil lamp; the lights of the electric utilities nearby in the hermitage, and far away in the distant farm houses across the dark Kentucky valleys, plus the flashing lights of planes passing in the night. If we hear voices of Nature and imagination, we also see some of the "intellectual lights" of our Western tradition and the "enlightened" masters of the East. And, hopefully, we also see new lights of insight into the meaning of who we are. Ultimately, light serves as metaphor for Merton and Thoreau, shining brilliantly through life and beyond death.

A further concentration on these natural and allegorical images reveals a pattern. This opening up of the narrative, and parts 1. and 2., represent dawn and daytime. Parts 3. and 4., evening. In parts 5. and 6., night -- the descent into self -- and new morning meet. In parts 7. and 8., new day -- representing also new life -- arises and gives way to night in part 9. In part 10. the narrative closes, yet it is open-ended: we remain in night, with the new day in expectation. This imagery can be extended to include the nature of our own times, poised as we all are in hope for a better world brought about by our hard work in cooperation with the grace of the Risen Christ.

As it has evolved, this essay demonstrates the literary method employed by Henry Thoreau and Thomas Merton. For them short notes quickly scribbled on scraps of paper or in a pocket notebook (spontaneous recording) are extended into fuller, reworked passages in a permanent journal (reflective rewriting). Paragraphs can be expanded and restructured into complete essays which combine original material with material from further reading on a pertinent subject. Personal details may be edited out in favor of a greater "objectivity;" facts are added for clarity and color. Often such reworked and expanded material formed the basis for lectures. Finally, completed essays were enlarged into books -- including the journal *genre* -- or as one of a series of collected essays in book form. For both Thoreau and Merton, the journal form itself became supremely important. Toward the end of his life, Thoreau's journal was his primary work. Toward the end of *his* life, Thomas Merton established a literary trust to assure the publication of his writings, including journal accounts.

Returning to favorite Thoreau and Merton texts, I have found refreshment of spirit and new insights in familiar territory. Staying in Merton's hermitage was both a confirmation of my appreciation for him, and an occasion of challenge. In my account I have moved from notes jotted and rewritten there into a full essay incorporating theoretical material researched and written many years ago. Thoreau and Merton have informed my conscience these many years. As I marched against the Vietnam War on November 15, 1969 and April 24, 1971 in Washington, D. C., and against racism in Forsyth County, Georgia, on January 24, 1987, I carried in my pocket writings by both men. This essay is presented as an expression of gratitude by a second-generation Merton student who came of college age in the 1960s. For young people coming to awareness in the 1980s, I hope it is an invitation to look to their past as well as toward their future.

### 1. Seeking the "Sacred Place"

I pass, wet-footed, through meadows made into marsh by rains lasting since early morning. From the circle of knobs thick with cedar pines and sycamores configurations of steam shimmer in the intensifying sunlight. A white tuft cloud plume hovers above trees that conceal Thomas Merton's hermitage, dove above nest of peace, image of my aspirations for this stay. I ascend the packed dirt path along the hedge row my mind a minstrel singing memories of first visit here, twelve years ago, with seminary friends and John Howard Griffin. But heart serves a wiser guide, creates gaps in reactions, backtracks joyous emotions, stalks present feelings. I am alone now. I walk the perimeter of the hermitage building, getting my bearings, appreciating the grace of being allowed to be here again. I sit on the concrete porch a long while.

Religious persons from primitive times to the present have connected the spiritual journey in the interior of their hearts with the outward journey to "holy places." Sinai, Mecca, the Garden of Lumbini are revered by Jews, Moslems, and Buddhists. The land where Jesus lived and died, places particularly associated with Mary, the homes of specially loved saints immediately come to our minds as Christians. Sacred places, yes, and famous. Others -- less well-known -- are cherished by us all. As external signs of interior values, sacred places -- big and small -- have unending depths of meaning for us.

In Japan, the training of the young Zen monks begins with a journey, the *angya* (literally: "going on foot"), the external pilgrimage that symbolizes his inner spiritual search. The bamboo bonnet; the silk-covered box on his back holding a robe, a book or two, a writing pad and brush; his rice-paper umbrella; the wooden clog-sandals -- all are still to be seen in this age of planes and trains as the novice visits shrines and monasteries throughout the land, seeking the master who hopefully will bring him to enlightenment.

In Russian Orthodoxy, the spiritual pilgrimage has been beautifully portrayed in the book entitled *The Way of the Pilgrim*. We feel that we are travelling with the pilgrim, not only as he makes his way from village to village, but reciting with him ever deeper in our own depths the ancient Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

In the Western tradition of Benedictine monasticism, the vow of stability to a monk's monastery replaced the spiritual journey. St. Benedict (living in an unstable society and all too aware of the dangers of wander-

lust), wrote about bad monks -- the *gyrovagues* (Greek: *gyros* = circle + Latin: *vagari* = to wander) -- who roamed from place to place, a rule unto themselves, a menace to others. Modern Trappist life, a branch of Benedictine monasticism, still maintains this tradition of stability. Normally a man will visit other monasteries and spiritual centers in search of the appropriate place for him before he enters a community. After he enters, he accepts the realities of separation from loved ones, the regularity and austerity of staying in his monastery year after year.

For Thomas Merton, the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky became the holy place of his inner pilgrimage when he entered the Trappist community on December 10, 1941, at the age of twenty-six. Born in France; reared partly in England and partly in America; a traveler throughout Europe; a student at Columbia; a professor at St. Bonaventure's; a pilgrim to the shrine of Our Lady of Cobre in Cuba -- Merton had sought himself and God in many places. At Gethsemani, he confronted both and, for the next twenty-seven years, labored in that understanding. In his monastery and particularly in the Abbey church, young Merton found his external sanctuary, his "sacred place." But as he progressed as a monk, Merton desired and sought ever greater solitude and release from the restrictions of institutional religious life. In one of his later essays, "Is 'The World' a Problem?" Merton wrote: "... due to a book I wrote thirty years ago [*The Seven Storey Mountain*], I have become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative -- the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open to the Apocalypse. This personal stereotype is probably my own fault, and it is something I have to try to demolish on occasion."<sup>3</sup>

Having grown to a greater inner freedom as a monk, it was here in his hermitage that Merton found his deepest physical and spiritual center. "I exist under trees. I walk in the woods out of necessity," he wrote in *Day of a Stranger*. "I am both a prisoner and an escaped prisoner. I cannot tell you why, born in France, my journey ended here in Kentucky. I have considered going further, but it is not practical. It makes no difference. Do I have a 'day?' Do I spend my 'day' in a 'place?' I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. . . . I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of 'place' a new configuration" (*DS*, p. 33).

3. "Is 'The World' a Problem?" *Katallagete* 5:1 (Spring 1974), p. 28.

No monk is really under a prison sentence. While his "incarceration" is positive and self-imposed, the monk nonetheless inclines his heart to the admonition of Sacred Scripture, remembering those in prison (of whatever sort of confinement that might be) as though in prison with them, keeping in thought and prayer all ill-treated persons as if he were to share their fate (Hebrews 13:3). From his hermitage, as he descended deeper into the mystery of his own contemplative vocation, Merton became ever more sensitive to the plight of all human persons in our post-technological age and he looked to other religious traditions -- Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, the Cargo Cults of New Guinea, the Ghost Dance of the American Indians -- to help him articulate his own struggle as a brother in the human family.

Merton's great need to communicate with others -- coupled with his growing celebrity -- were undercurrents that made his hermitage existence less and less possible. Merton had made a few trips within the United States after his entrance into Gethsemani Abbey: with his abbot to explore property for a foundation in Ohio; to Saint John's Abbey in Minnesota for a psychiatry workshop; to New York City to meet with Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki. Following the election of a new abbot in 1968, Merton was given permission to travel to Washington, D. C.; to explore hermitage sites in New Mexico, California and Alaska. Still a monk of Gethsemani, he had hoped to find his desired solitude in a more remote place while maintaining contact with friends through his Abbey in Kentucky. As one of the most informed and acknowledged Catholic authorities on the contemplative experience -- East and West -- Merton was invited to attend the international Benedictine-sponsored monastic symposium in Bangkok, Thailand in 1968.

Thus, for Merton, the spiritual journey of the heart and the outward journey to holy places became a reality once again. For him it was the fulfillment of a dream: to meet real Oriental masters in their own monasteries, to dialogue with them about Krishna, Buddha and Christ, to learn as much as he could from them as their own spiritual traditions eroded in the onslaught of post-modernism.

Shortly after giving his talk at the Bangkok conference he was attending, Merton was killed by accidental electrocution and/or heart failure. The date was the same as his entrance into Gethsemani: December 10th. His spiritual journey closed in a cyclic pattern. He had arrived at last at his true and final home. He was now complete.

Merton's 1960s hermitage meetings with honored guests -- famous and unknown -- were of vast importance to him. Merton was a renegade

who fought for the woods as his refuge: first, walks beyond the retention wall were permitted; then came periods of watch in the hill-top fire tower; later, the hermitage could be used for specific intervals; and here, Merton was "at home" at last, his forays into the woods as unknown land ("raids on the unspeakable," he called them) having ended. Even though Merton --during the last year of his life -- considered more isolated sites (even as far away as Hawaii, Scotland and Nicaragua), in his final journey, this his hermitage at Gethsemani in the woods of Kentucky was a tether to his past. I enter it now and bolt the door.

## 2. A Dwelling of "Kindred Spirits"

Henry Thoreau once said there is no sight so beautiful as mud on a man's boots. I spend time de-beautifying my boots, making them less Thoreauvian. The wonderful sensation of donning warmed socks! My boots cook well on the wood-burning stove. Wet corduroys and blue zippered-jacket dry in the bedroom. I put on new grey trousers. Checking the leather pouches carried criss-cross around my shoulders, I find all needed items have been removed. On the desk: Thoreau's *A Yankee in Canada* and other writings; *Zen Dust* by Isshu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki; Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakable* and *Day of a Stranger*; my compact black leather *New American Bible* and red leather-bound *Grail Psalter*. Everything is in order.

I spend time paging through thirty-two different Merton books (from *The Seven Storey Mountain* to *Cables to the Ace*); twenty-five monographs; and the loose sheets of paper which fill the corner shelf-cabinet. I am here now. Still the guns of Fort Knox boom. I feel the sorrow of Merton's not being here. This place of peace is his.

Though I lived just eighteen miles from here as a seminary student at Saint Mary's College from 1966 to 1969, I never tried to meet Merton. I felt he would want to be left alone. Already, I guess, I sensed my own contemplative vocation and valued Merton's solitude. I read his books in those days, hard-back first editions of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Waters of Siloe*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *The Sign of Jonas*. I saw Merton here at Gethsemani in a hallway once during one of our seminary bus trips, slipping into a guesthouse room, almost undetected. He paused to look at me. Perhaps at that time I knew myself too little really to say anything to him, but a personal connection had been made. There were other -- indirect -- connections.

Teaching at Saint Mary's was Father Daniel Walsh. It was to Dan, then a layman teaching the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas at Columbia, that young Thomas Merton first seriously confided his desire to become a Roman Catholic. Gradually Merton would learn from Dan about the Trappists and Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Years later, Merton brought Dan to Kentucky as philosophy instructor at the Trappist Abbey and the local Catholic colleges. Under Merton's influence, Dan Walsh eventually embraced the priesthood while I was at Saint Mary's. In class Dan would read Merton's letters as they arrived from Asia, and one day in December of 1968 he tearfully broke the news to us that Merton had just died. And it was Dan who first pointed out to me Merton's grave at Gethsemani.

Later, from 1969 to 1973, as a seminary student attending Saint Meinrad College and School of Theology not far from Gethsemani in Indiana, I read Merton's later books. Writing my bachelor's thesis in philosophy on Thoreau's "theory of dissent," and struggling with social issues of that time, I read: *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Faith and Violence, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, Cables to the Ace, The Geography of Lograire* and John Howard Griffin's *A Hidden Wholeness* and Edward Rice's *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*.

There were further visits here to Gethsemani, and it was John Howard Griffin -- working on the official biography of Merton at the time -- who first welcomed friends and me here to the hermitage in January of 1972. Gradually, as my own contemplative vocation emerged, Merton was with me, with *Mystics and Zen Masters, Raids on the Unspeakable, Contemplation in a World of Action* and *Day of a Stranger*. And Merton's portrayals of Our Lady of the Holy Ghost Abbey, Conyers, Georgia in *The Waters of Siloe* and *Gethsemani Magnificat* figured in my vocational discernment.

At Conyers, I found many other connections with Merton. Holy Spirit -- as her first daughterhouse -- enjoys a living spiritual heritage with Gethsemani. Many of our "founders" were already seniors when young Thomas Merton entered the Trappists, one Conyers monk welcoming him first as retreatant and finally "for life;" all somehow adding to the spirit that made the monastery so attractive to him. They would watch the short monk in tennis shoes on his way to the room where he labored at the archives and his books. Merton can be seen in the photographs of 1944, embracing his brothers departing for the foundation in Georgia. Other members of our community met Merton along their way, one as a young man with whom Merton spoke in a Cuban marketplace (and later wrote about in *The Seven*



Storey Mountain); another as a junior monk under Merton's guidance in his formative years before coming to Georgia. The impact of Merton is still felt in our lives.



"Great persons are not soon learned," wrote Thoreau in his journal on Friday, 25 March 1842, "not even their outlines, but they change like the mountains and the horizon as we ride along."<sup>4</sup> In a letter to a friend written that same month and year, Thoreau said: "For we are not what we are, nor do we treat or esteem each other for such, but for what we are capable of being."<sup>5</sup>

Some of Thomas Merton's 1968 journal fragments -- read by him into a dictaphone machine -- were published after his death as *Woods, Shore, Desert*. On the cover of this book naturalist Annie Dillard is quoted as saying: "This is a welcome addition to the Merton canon. It's one of the world's truly interesting journals . . . it shows Merton in his best and truest role as a writer."<sup>6</sup> Whatever the full context of her remarks, Annie Dillard's statement about Merton's best and truest role is debatable. I wonder if people who are not monks or nuns can appreciate Merton as he was best and truest: as monk. Or, perhaps, Annie Dillard is correct, and Merton was more writer than monk. Or equally both? But our best and truest role is to be who we are. Merton was -- without doubt -- Merton!

In *Nature, Grace and Religious Development*, a book which Merton may have read, Barry McLaughlin makes this assessment which is to the point: "the conflict is heightened by the individual's realization that in attaining professional competence he cuts himself off to a certain extent from the religious organization, achieving prestige in an outside group that knows nothing of his other role. At the same time his professional achievements often cannot be accurately evaluated by superiors and other members of his religious community."<sup>7</sup> Merton, for his part, writes in *Woods, Shore, Desert*: "A happening. Presence and witness but also speaking of the unfamiliar . . . speaking of something new to which you might not

4. Henry David Thoreau, *Journal: Volume I: 1837-1844*, edited by Elizabeth Hall Witherell et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 390. Hereafter referred to in the text as *J*.

5. *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, edited by Walter Harding and Carl Bode (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), p. 62. Thoreau's letter to Mrs. Lucy Brown was written at Concord on 2 March 1842.

6. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1983). Hereafter referred to in the text as *WSD*.

7. Barry McLaughlin, *Nature, Grace and Religious Development* (New York: Paulist Press, 1964), p. 60.

yet have access. An experiment in openness. Problems. Too much conformity to roles. Is it just a matter of brushing up the roles and adjusting the roles? A role is not necessarily a vocation. One can be alienated by role filling" (*WSD*, p. 5).

In every highly developed and dehumanizing society, monks and hermits have joined outlaws and fugitives on the fringe -- all equally rebellious though perhaps for quite distinct reasons. Robbers-become-monks, and the sometimes shady movements back and forth between the sub-cultures (recall the legendary friendship of Robin Hood and Friar Tuck), are all part of monastic lore.<sup>8</sup> Though it had been a consistently examined problem throughout his writings, Merton focused on human alienation and the vocation of the monk (as poet) in a particularly marked manner in his efforts as a hermit-author. Merton gathered around him a host of spiritual witnesses who shadow through and shine in these later writings. He felt they shared with him a common participation in loss and yearning, sorrow and human aspiration. They reminded him to be not too quick to throw off the negative impulses he discovered within himself, for whatever reason.

How could Merton not be attracted to Thoreau, who once wrote: "If you have nothing to say let me have your silence, for that is good and fertile."<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The "Abode of Conscience"

Henry David Thoreau's refusal to pay the poll tax in protest against our country's war with Mexico (and his subsequent night in jail as a result); his protest against Massachusetts slave laws and assistance to black fugitives; his defense of Captain John Brown; even his two-year stint at Walden Pond are now part of our common history. Even Thoreau himself is now

8. I have given extensive treatment to the theme of Merton as "outlaw" in "Ace of Spades -- Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan," *American Benedictine Review* 37:1 (March 1986), pp. 67-95 and 37:2 (June 1986), pp. 143-159. For a presentation of the ancient monastic spirituality of "prisoner for Christ" with references to Merton, see "In the Heart of Christ: The Monk, The Outcast, The Prisoner," *Hospitality* 5:2 (February 1986), pp. 4-7 and 5:3 (March-April 1986), pp. 8, 12. See also "The Monastery: Freedom in the Love of God," *Hospitality* 5:9 (November 1986), pp. 7-9.

9. This quotation is from Thoreau's previously unpublished pre-1845 manuscript *Reform and the Reformers* included in the Princeton Edition; see *Reform Papers*, edited by Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 190. Hereafter referred to in the text as *RP*. I have drawn the connection between Merton and Thoreau in four previously published essays: "Inauguration of Prayer House," *Theology Activities Organization Newsletter*, Saint Meinrad School of Theology (Fall 1971), p. 2; "The Contemplative Witness of Henry David Thoreau," *Monastic Exchange* 8:3 (Fall 1976), pp. 7-14; "Mind Guards against the White Knight: Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan," *Merton Seasonal* 9:3 (Autumn 1984), pp. 4-10; and "Thomas Merton's Journey Home," *Georgia Bulletin* 22:43 (6 December 1984), p. 5.

regarded by many as an authentic guardian and transmitter of the true "American Spirit." Why?

In the opening pages of his essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau answers this question: "The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right."<sup>10</sup> But here Thoreau is not speaking of mere personal opinion in disregard of the thinking of others. What he is doing is setting forth his first principle for action: obedience to the dictates of his conscience.

Conscience -- from the Latin *conscientia* and the Greek *synidesis* -- is the practical judgment of reason upon an individual act as good and to be performed, or as evil to be avoided. The term is applied to: 1) the intellect as the faculty of forming judgments about right and wrong individual acts; 2) the process of reasoning that the intellect goes through to reach such a judgment; 3) the judgment itself which is the conclusion of this reasoning process. Conscience is not a particular doing of something, but rather a mode of being which protects the integrity of the human person and safeguards the unity of our existence. For the ancient Stoics (Thoreau first studied them during his years at Harvard), conscience was the root of the independence of the human person.

The development of conscience comes about under the influence of morally significant impressions drawn from our human environment together with our own life-experience. It begins with the adoption of external patterns of moral and civil conduct from others (legal conscience) and progresses to the point where an independent position is adopted as a personal response to these adopted codes. Conscience brings to our mind the objective moral norm in its relation to a decision to be made in a particular situation. Since the judgment of conscience is the judgment of the intellect -- and the intellect can err, either by adopting false premises or by drawing an illogical conclusion -- conscience can be correct or erroneous. Conscience can be erroneous in not conforming to objective or universal good or evil -- judging a thing to be good that is objectively evil, or a thing to be evil that is objectively good. The human will seeks only the good (what is perceived as right and correct and profitable), and for this reason a certain conscience may make an erroneous judgment, but a certain conscience is never false.

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10. *Reform Papers*, p. 65. Thoreau's prolonged meditation on his July 1846 arrest was delivered as a lecture on 26 January 1848. First published as *Resistance to Civil Government* by Elizabeth Peabody in *Aesthetic Papers* on 14 May 1849, Thoreau's most famous essay has circulated in our time under the title I have given.

The moral value of an act is measured exclusively according to the judgment of conscience arrived at after due consideration of all involved circumstances. In a situation where a concrete decision must be made, conscience cannot be dispensed with or replaced by opinions or direction from an external course. In other words, ultimately we stand alone. The judgment of conscience is the definitive norm for our individual decision, but it does not thereby become a general norm for people faced with similar decisions. Both Merton and Thoreau were quick to declare that they proposed their own life-choices to no one else as a moral imperative.<sup>11</sup> Thoreau's doctrine of social reform was best summed up in Chapter Two of *Walden*, "Where I Lived, And What I Lived For": "In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live . . . simplify, simplify."<sup>12</sup>

Thoreau demanded for all men and women the freedom to follow unique life styles, lives shaped by their own free choices. Thoreau recognized the mystery of "otherness" in human life. His wisdom was to allow himself and others to be themselves, but he required "the best self" from all. "A man must serve another and a better use than any he can consciously render," he wrote in *Reform and Reformers* (RP, p. 190). Though he could say: "For an impenetrable shield, stand inside yourself,"<sup>13</sup> Thoreau was by no means a recluse, certainly no hater of humankind. He did not advise total withdrawal from society, but rather lifting it up by means of self-discipline and a life lived in harmony with Nature. In August 1850, he wrote to a friend: "Our thoughts are the epochs in our lives: all else is but a journal of the winds that blew while we were here."<sup>14</sup> Henry David Thoreau was a man of thought, and a thoughtful man. His life is a testimony to the capabilities of the human person, the intellectual and spiritual powers given to us by God to realize our own self-worth, and to help others to do

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11. My sources for this treatment of the complex subject of the human conscience are: Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice* (St. Louis: C. V. Mosley Company, 1967), p. 35; Rudolf Hofman, "Conscience," *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (1968), 1:411-414; John L. McKenzie, S.J., "Conscience," *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965), p. 147. Through Merton I was led to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). See Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 64-70, 242-248, for his final writings on conscience.

12. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, edited by J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 91. Hereafter referred to in the text as *W*.

13. This quote is from Thoreau's 1840 essay "The Service," *Reform Papers*, p. 7. For Thoreau's developing ideas concerning inner strength, see Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 54-57, 104-106.

14. Letter to Harrison Gray Otis Blake written at Concord 9 August 1950. In *Correspondence*, p. 265. Thoreau is reporting on his trip to Fire Island where he had gone in July to recover the remains of Margaret Fuller, victim of a sea disaster.

the same.

In comparing the basic asceticism in *Walden* with that of Saint John of the Cross -- in a journal entry dated 8 December 1950 (again, included in *The Sign of Jonas*) -- Thomas Merton saw agreement on the fundamental idea, not "of course on the means or technique" except to some extent. Merton's lines which immediately follow show us his inner identification with Thoreau. Those words are: "Ascesis of solitude. Simplification of life. The separation of reality from illusion" (*SJ*), pp. 16-17).

In his "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" (a much-reworked redaction was published in *Disputed Questions* in 1960), Merton connected with Thoreau once again. "... though I am treating of the traditional concept of the *monachos*, or solitary," commented Merton, "I am deliberately discarding everything that can conjure up the artificial image of the monk in a cowl, dwelling in a medieval cloister." Merton continued: "In this way I intend obviously, not to disparage or to reject the monastic institution, but to set aside all its accidentals and externals, so that they will not interfere with my view of what seems to me to be deepest and most essential." "But by that same token," Merton added, "the 'solitary' of these pages is never necessarily a 'monk' (juridically) at all. He may well be a layman, and of the sort most remote from cloistered life, like Thoreau or Emily Dickinson."<sup>15</sup>

Later, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), Merton praised Thoreau's "idleness" as "an incomparable gift" and its fruits as "blessings that America has never really learned to appreciate." Merton concluded: "... Thoreau proffered his gift nevertheless, though it was not asked for, and he knew it would be neglected. Then he went his way, without following the advice of his neighbors. He took the fork in the road."<sup>16</sup>

By the time he had come to write "Rain and the Rhinoceros" (which was included in *Raids on the Unspeakable* in 1966), Merton's identification with Thoreau was fixed. Here Merton says: "Thoreau sat in *his* cabin and criticized the railways. I sit in mine and wonder about a world that has, well, progressed." "I must read *Walden* again," Merton continues, "and see if Thoreau already guessed that he was part of what he thought he could escape. But it is not a matter of 'escaping.' It is not even a matter of protesting very audibly." Merton then resigned himself to the obvious fact: "Technology is here, even in the cabin. True, the utility lines are not here yet, and so G. E. is not here yet either. When the utilities and G. E. enter my

15. *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), Merton's note, p. 177.

16. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 227.

cabin arm in arm it will be nobody's fault but my own. I admit it. I am not kidding anybody, even myself. I will suffer their bluff and patronizing complacencies in silence. I will let them think they know what I am doing here."<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Action According to a "Higher Law"

Thomas Merton struggled with the problem of human knowledge of "good" and "evil" and he aligned himself with Henry David Thoreau in an attempt to understand "civil law" and "civil rights." In his essay "Events and Pseudo-Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman" (published in *Faith and Violence* in 1968),<sup>18</sup> Merton wrote that the contemplative will concern himself with the same problems as other people, "but he will try to get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems -- not by analysis but by simplicity." This, of course, as Merton admitted, "is no easy task."

In the *Politics*, Aristotle long ago declared: "Man is by nature a political animal." Characteristic of our human nature, we crave companionship, and are not capable ourselves of supplying even our own most basic needs. Our ability to speak -- whether with words or signs -- indicates that we are meant to communicate with each other, and progress is the mark of our human cooperation toward the further development of human goals and the fulfillment of our aspirations as persons. In the essay, cited above, Merton declared: ". . . I cannot claim that I have discovered anything worth saying. Yet since I have been asked to say something, I will at least hazard a few conjectures" (*FV*, pp. 146-147). Thomas Merton and Henry Thoreau fought to preserve the integrity of the human conscience, not as isolated individuals, but as persons struggling to be responsible to the societies in which they lived. Having already examined conscience as the base of their respective spiritualities, let us look for what might be some "metaphysical roots" of the political actions of Merton and Thoreau. To do this we will consider the nature of the social bond and the nature of civil law in relationship to "Natural Law."

For Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) -- since God is the Author of human life -- all political power comes from Him. But, for Thomas, the

17. *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 12-13. Hereafter referred to in the text as *R*.

18. *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 146-147. Hereafter referred to in the text as *FV*.

constitutional form of this political power -- or "authority" -- resides in the people and is determined by them: e.g. monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and so on. The exercise or actual enjoyment of political authority, in the United States of America, for instance, is conferred or withdrawn by us, the American people. We transmit to our "governors" the authority with which they govern us.

Upholders of the "divine right of kings" contended that the sovereign received his or her power directly from God, and that the people were in no way the cause of this power. They held that the people were morally bound in all instances to obey the king or queen as ordained minister of God. In opposition to this theory of divine right, political theorists upheld, in the Age of Enlightenment, the notion of the "sovereignty of the people," contending that political power was given to the people directly by God without recourse to the monarch.

According to the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who published his masterwork *Leviathan* in 1651, human persons are necessarily engaged in an incessant struggle for power over others, and every person naturally shuns what is deemed evil. Ultimately, each person must choose to be ruled (and sovereignty must be unified and absolute) or to be free (and with liberty comes anarchy). For Hobbes, the only means by which persons could avoid immediate destruction and provide for themselves a fitting life style was to recognize and accept the sovereignty of a power greater than themselves: in the surrender of personal rights they found security and comfort.

In building his political philosophy, John Locke (1632-1704) started with the concept of a state of nature in which persons live as equal but separate units forming an enduring union or society. Each unit (person) recognizes limitations of his or her own will, "especially the two limitations of a right of property, vested in his [or her] fellow-units, and of a right of punishment of transgressors of natural law, vested in each and all." Locke claimed this right of property because each person has property in his or her person, and therefore in his or her labor and the things into which that person injects labor. In the state of nature in which persons are judges in their own cases, imperfections ensure: partial judgments; inadequate force for the execution of judgments; variety in judgments passed by different persons in similar cases. Therefore, remedies are needed: a judicature to administer law impartially; an executive to enforce decisions of the judicature; and a legislature to lay down a uniform rule of judgment. Locke believed that the people become a corporate body through their own

association (social contract) and may appoint a trustee government with which it makes no contract, which it may dismiss for breach of trust on its own interpretation of the nature of that trust.

Thus, for Locke, each person is morally bound to cooperate for a common good. In *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690) Locke declared that a person can justly kill a thief who threatens only property, even without endangering the owner's life. Locke systematically segregated sacred things from secular things, allowing freedom of conscience in religion after carefully barring it from interference in secular society. Locke made conscience a safeguard for property by defining it as an interior articulation of externally posited rules rather than of personal conviction. Locke ushered in a new social order in which persons communicated on the basis of posited rights, having exchanged certain rights enjoyed in nature (e.g. the punishment of criminals) for security guaranteed in the social order (i.e. the right to maintain private property).

French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) agreed with Thomas Hobbes that sovereignty must be absolute, but he rejected the Englishman's "either/ or" conclusion. Rousseau solved the dilemma between freedom and government by resolving that human persons can be both ruled and free if they rule themselves. Thus, for Rousseau, a person is free if that person rules himself or herself; a people can be free if it retains sovereignty over itself and enacts its own laws which it is obliged to obey. Unlike John Locke, Rousseau contended that final sovereignty is found not in the individual or even in a body of individuals. The sovereignty of which he speaks is a single "moral person," and the final form this sovereignty takes is the "general will" of that moral person. Rousseau regarded each person as surrendering himself or herself to no other person, but alienating all individual rights to the whole community. But he was by no means an environmental determinist; he argued for ethical truth known through human intuition and maintained a belief in a God who stood above all pain, pleasure and material self-interest.

Though differing from Merton and Thoreau in status and experience, Rousseau, of the European political philosophers -- with his Swiss "rusticity," utopian village near Neuchatel, and his love of solitude -- is closest to them as kindred spirit. He was an idealist who evolved in response to the demands of practical realism. Though probably never influencing the development of their thought directly, he has had tremendous impact on the social climate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Further comment on him helps our understanding of Merton and Thoreau.



In *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (begun in 1749) and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), Rousseau wrote that the arts of civilized societies served only "to cast garlands of flowers over the chains men bore." The sciences did not save but brought moral ruin. Progress was an illusion: what appeared to be advance was retrogression. Modern civilization left people neither happier nor more virtuous. Happiness belonged to the human person's life in a state of nature. Virtue was possible in a simple society, where men and women and children lived austere and frugal lives. Greater sophistication brought with it greater corruption, and greater abundance brought greater laxity. In the mountain village near Neuchatel, Rousseau found "real democracy" -- a simple form of culture in a small state where persons lived as equals in a face-to-face society, knowing everyone else yet being self-sufficient. Here he found no need for reformers; democracy already existed: the problem was to keep it. Progressive, liberal ideas -- such as centralization, national parliament, merger of independent groups, and universal suffrage -- were seen by Rousseau as not only unnecessary, but as actual threats to the existing order. At this point he saw conservatism as the defense of freedom. He thought of the "state of nature" as one of innocence. In it, the human person was distinguished from the beasts by the faculty of self-improvement and by his or her only moral quality: compassion or sympathy. In the state of nature the human person lived in self-harmony. It was when he or she became sociable -- for help against natural disasters or in hunting -- that a person became wicked. These bondings and associations sharpened feelings of sympathy, which increased care and the sense of obligation.

Cultivation of the earth and enclosure of land gave rise to the idea of private property, and this gave rise to greed. People became aware of inequality of possessions, talents, skills, fortunes and destinies in life. Wealth brought slavery; power brought conflict; society brought war. Laws were enacted to combat disorder and restore tranquility. Violence threatened the lives of the poor. The rich became doubly endangered: violence threatened not only their lives but their property. The laws of civil society gave the poor new fetters and the rich new powers. All of this destroyed natural liberty forever; fixed the law of property and inequality for all time; transformed shrewd usurpation into settled right; and -- to benefit a few ambitious persons -- subjected all humankind thenceforth to labor, servitude and wretchedness.

By the time Rousseau came to write *The Social Contract* in 1762, he realized the effect of the establishment of political societies was more than

the institutionalization and increase of inequalities. His reading of Hobbes and Locke helped him come to see that everything in the real world of his time was radically connected with politics, and that whatever was done about it, no nation would be other than what the nature of its government made it, a proposition not unlike that of St. Thomas Aquinas. Rousseau struggled throughout his remaining years to reconcile his inner conflicts. He was reprimanded for his love of solitude by his sometime friend Denis Diderot with the words: "Only the bad man lives alone." But Rousseau -- for all his troubles -- maintained his probity to the end. He concluded *The Confessions* (1770): "I have told the truth. If anyone knows anything contrary to what I have here recorded, though he prove it a thousand times, his knowledge is a lie and an imposture; and if he refuses to investigate and inquire into it during my lifetime he is no lover of justice or of truth."

There is -- as Thoreau and Merton knew well -- a close and integral connection between the contracts of society with its government and what is known as "Natural Law," whether in the formulations of Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau or other social theorists. Having looked at the abstract notions of the past that inevitably formed the political heritage bequeathed to Merton and Thoreau, let us look at some contemporary notions of "Higher Law" and "Civil Law" at this point in our reflection on the lives of the Concord and Gethsemani hermits.

As human persons, we seek concrete norms which will serve us in our effort at self-realization and self-fulfillment. We have the ability -- by the use of our reason reflecting on our nature -- to distinguish moral good from moral evil. Our intelligence points to the existence of a natural law, prior to all posited human legislation. This capacity for moral knowledge holds us responsible for our actions. Natural law comprises the realm of moral obligation which can be determined as a standard for moral behavior and enforced as civil law. The basis of it in the human person, and the knowability of it, give natural law its universal validity and make it the criterion of all legislation, both religious (e.g. *The Code of Canon Law* of the Roman Catholic Church) and civil (e.g. *The Constitution* of the United States of America).

Civil law -- based on reason -- for the common good is promulgated by the person or persons charged with the care of the community. Law as ordinance is a mandate imposing civil and moral obligations. A law is always from public authority, and lasts until it is repealed, as opposed to a personal order which ceases at the death of either party. To be reasonable, a law must be consistent with itself and with other laws, without conflicting

obligations being imposed on those under its authority. A law must be just -- respecting existing rights guaranteed by higher laws -- and burdens (responsibilities for its enforcement) must be distributed equally. A law -- to be just -- must be enforceable for all and all must be able to enact it, and the common good must be maintained as the desired end without needless restrictions of liberty.

Keeping in mind the lifestyles Thoreau and Merton had chosen, and a full awareness of the religious freedom we enjoy in the United States, we can see that natural law and civil law guarantee and preserve the rights of each one of us due us as human persons. We are equally entitled to live happily, to pursue a desired end in life, to exercise our rights in freedom. However, the reality of "rights" coincides with the reality of "duties." Each one of us has a moral and civil obligation to preserve the rights of others as human persons. The human person always retains his or her rights, even though these may not be exercised -- either through voluntary choice (as in the case of Thoreau's refusal to vote and Merton's choice of monastic restrictions) or denial of the exercise of personal freedom (as in the case of the civil rights struggle wherein Merton linked Thoreau with Martin Luther King, Jr.). Even though we may not exercise all our rights, we as human persons are bound at all times to fulfill our duties.

Moral law (natural law and the ethical teachings of religion) direct us as free beings to act towards our ends -- our goals, our common good -- by imposing obligations on our free will. These obligations or duties or "oughtness" are called "moral necessity." Moral laws can be broken by us who are bound to them, but moral necessity means that they "ought not" be broken.

Laws of society must be obeyed. There exists the necessity of maintaining civil order so that the rights and the peace and security of the state can be preserved. But the freedom to criticize, to persuade, to protest, and to assemble peaceably are essential to effective government and are rights of the individual person (and groups of persons within society) which must be safeguarded. And, finally, it is only when we have obeyed the laws of society scrupulously that we are in a position to judge which particular laws are good and just, which unjust and iniquitous. Only then can we -- if necessary according to our understanding of moral law -- disobey civil laws in well-defined circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

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19. This synthesis of social theories is based on numerous sources. See: Earnest Barker (ed.), *Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume and Rousseau* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. viii, xii-xiii,

In "Events and Pseudo-Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman," Merton wrote that the monastic life does not necessarily imply a total refusal to have anything to do with the world. Such a refusal would, in any case, be illusory. It would deceive no one but the monk himself. It is not possible, contended Merton, for anyone however isolated from the world, to say: "I will no longer concern myself with the affairs of the world." We cannot help being implicated; we can be guilty by default. But the monastic and contemplative life does certainly imply a very special perspective, a viewpoint which others do not share, the viewpoint of one who is not directly engaged in the struggles and controversies of the world.

Merton continued:

Now it seems to me that if a monk is permitted to be detached from these struggles over particular interests, it is only in order that he may give more thought to the interests of all, to the whole question of the reconciliation of all men with one another in Christ. One is permitted, it seems to me, to stand back from parochial and partisan concerns, if one can thereby hope to get a better view of the whole problem and mystery of man.

(FV, pp. 146-147)

In "Rain and the Rhinoceros," Merton wrote that the solitary, far from enclosing himself in himself, becomes every man. "Thus the solitary," continues Merton, "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" (R, pp. 18, 22).

xix-xx, xxx, xxxiv; Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, pp. 106-107, 276-277, 279, 284-285; Johannes Grundel, "Natural Law," *Sacramentum Mundi*, 4: 157-163; Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), Appendix: "On the Meaning of Civil Disobedience"; F. J. Thonnard, *A Short History of Philosophy*; translated by Edward A. Maziarz (New York: Desclée Company, 1956), p. 245.

Concerning Thomas Hobbes, see: *Leviathan*; ed. with an introd. by C. B. MacPherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 39-40; Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 23, 109, 145.

For primary sources on John Locke, see: *The Second Treatise of Government*; ed. with an introd. by Thomas P. Peardon (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1952); *Two Tracts on Government*; ed. by Philip Abrams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). See also: John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and Barker, *Social Contract*, pp. xix-xx; Lynd, *Intellectual Origins*, pp. 23, 43, 79.

Sources for the life and doctrine of Jean-Jacques Rousseau are: *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*; translated with an introd. by J. M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 13; *The Social Contract*; translated and introduced by Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 16-21, 24; and Barker, *Social Contract*, pp. xiii, xxx, xxxiv; Lynd, *Intellectual Origins*, pp. 33-34. See also: *On the Social Contract, with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy*; ed. by Roger D. Masters; translated by Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); Alfred Cobba, *Rousseau and the Modern State* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1961); Mario Einaudi, *The Early Rousseau* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967); John. Hall, *Rousseau: An Introduction to His Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1973); and Paul Merrill Spurlin, *Rousseau in America -- 1760-1809* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1969).

For an appreciation of Rousseau the solitary in connection with Merton and Thoreau, see: *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*; translated with preface, notes and an interpretative essay by Charles E. Butterworth (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1982. For the text of our American law, see: *The Constitution of the United States with Case Summaries*; ed. by Edward Conrad Smith (New York: Harper Perennial Library, 1972). On the evolution of Thoreau's and Merton's political philosophy, see my essays cited in notes 8 and 9 above.

## 5. "Voices and Lights" in the Night

In a journal entry dated 19 February 1855, Thoreau wrote: "If you wish to know how I think, you must endeavor to put yourself in my place. If you wish me to speak as if I were you, that is another affair."<sup>20</sup> I have explored the far-stretched parameters of Thoreau's mind and the geography of his Concord pond -- all in imagination! And I have endeavored to put myself in Merton's place too, first across the vast ranges of his writings, now through my actual presence here in his Kentucky hermitage. Rarified thinkers as they were, and men ever struggling to know and obey the higher law of their conscience, both Merton and Thoreau had their bodies grounded in the earth.

Here in the front room the axe, peuter candlestick and oil lamp -- all could have come from the Walden cabin -- remind me of the days Thoreau and Merton needed them as implements of existence, symbols of their survival in the wilderness. This cinder-block house teaches me how non-abstract Merton's hermitage years were. Merton -- like Thoreau -- knew that the person who keeps one foot in heaven and one foot on earth will be torn asunder. Thoreau and Merton were not angels but men who married Nature as their bride, and as gifted poets left us the legacy of their wonder.



The sun is passing, the wind is up. My ears ring with the whistle of the distant invisible train -- Thoreau's locomotive skirting Walden Pond? As he predicted they would in his musings on Thoreau in his Concord hut and the realities of his own situation in modern life, "progress" and G. E. have come to Merton's hermitage. Some conveniences came at Merton's own initiative, others later on. The Coleman stove for warmth and cooking oatmeal is gone. Now there is electric power and a Capital Rangette with two burners; a Munsey oven; a refrigerator; an Arvin plug-in heater. There is a full bathroom with sink, shower, toilet, mirror and heat to take away any worry about fending against the elements -- no snakes or "black widows" to fear here. There is also running water, cold and hot. And a chapel. Ancient Zen practice meets modern technology in Merton's bamboo and paper

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20. *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*; edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen; with a foreword by Walter Harding; in fourteen volumes bound as two: Volumes I-VII (1837-October 1855); Volumes VIII-XIV (November 1855-1861) (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), VIII: p. 197. Until the completion of the Princeton Edition this reprint of the 1906 edition of Thoreau's journals remains the standard source. For handier selected editions, see: *The Heart of Thoreau's Journal*; edited by Odell Shepard (New York: Dover Publications, 1961); and *H. D. Thoreau: A Writer's Journal*; selected and edited with an introd. by Laurence Stapleton (New York: Dover Publications, 1960).

umbrella; opening it ever-so-gently I find a tag:

Bangasa      Designed by John Reynolds      Made in Japan.

As a hermit, Merton was fond of his kinship with 6th century recluse Philoxenos of Syria, as he tells us in "Rain and the Rhinoceros." Philoxenos once wrote: ". . . it is not he who has many possessions that is rich, but he who has no needs." Merton comments: "Obviously, we shall always have some needs. But only he who has the simplest and most natural needs can be considered to be without needs, since the only needs he has are real ones, and the real ones are not hard to fulfill if one is a free man" (R, p. 23).

The images and appointments of the cabin reflect this spirit. In the front room, a carved crucifix near the door, a photograph of Merton by John Howard Griffin on the wall near a window, Merton's dormitory cell card: **N. LUDOVICUS 127**. Nearby, an icon of Our Lady and Child. Another icon (Annunciation) on the mantle of the fireplace and a macrame wall-hanging. I miss the Japanese scroll calendar pictured in *A Hidden Wholeness*.<sup>21</sup> The bookshelf and cabinet have been moved to make way for the wood-burning stove and heat-vent to the bedroom. The furniture is attractive, heavy, Shaker-like and functional (some made by artist-friend Victor Hammer): a slant-top desk; a long bench with lift-top now used for tools; a wide sitting-bench against the east window. In the kitchen a framed print dated in script, July 3, 1854, done through a medium, who told the printer to write: "Your Tree is the Tree of Life." Near the bedroom door a Papal Blessing parchment: "*Beatissimo Padre Eremita Thomas Merton . . . Ex Aedibus Vaticanus, die 3-XII-1966.*" In the bedroom, two chairs, a huge trunk (treasure chest type) with blankets, a wooden night stand, a closet with old-style Gothic vestments. On one wall a painting, floral. On the floor I find a framed Japanese Madonna and Child painted on silk. I put it on the night stand near the bed. On the north wall, near the window, an icon of the Dormition of Mary.



A miniature oil painting on wood, abstract but in icon style, which Merton used to keep on the fireplace mantel (you can see it also in the Griffin photographs),<sup>22</sup> now hangs near the chapel door. Holding it closer

21. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), pp. 77, 109.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 43. For other hermitage views besides those found in this book, see: Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; edited by Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) and Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, New York:

with my hands I see the stark forms are human figures, five, wide, tall, with tiny bead heads and slender feet. In the background, right, is a suggestion of a Byzantine church, with domes and cross. The colors may have been brighter once. Green, streaks of red, black and shades of yellow-gold. Church Fathers? Holy Doctors? How did Merton identify with these forms?



The valleys fill with mist, cloaking the silos of the distant farms, as night comes in. The Abbey bells announce Vespers. I recite *Psalm* 139: "O Lord, you have probed me and you know me . . ." I reminisce. I ponder. I reflect. I pray. I project toward the tomorrow of my decisions. I fast from familiar fellowship and take a meal of cheese and fruit and bread and tea. I sit with my thoughts and the firelight, the jewels that slowly sparkle from distant hills. The pop and hiss of the embers, the sound of my own breathing. The eerie bark of dog and sound of deer. An owl's hoot punctuates the night. All of us together in an envelope of silence.

I imagine Merton's voice as I read these lines from *Day of a Stranger*:

One might say I have decided to marry the silence of the forest. The sweet dark warmth of the whole world will have to be my wife. Out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers in their beds all over the world. So perhaps I have an obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness which is at the center of all other loves. I attempt to cultivate this plant without comment in the middle of the night and water it with psalms and prophecies in silence. It becomes the most rare of all the trees in the garden, at once the primordial tree, the *axis mundi*, the cosmic axle, and the Cross."

(D, p. 49)<sup>23</sup>

I feel the quick deepening within myself. The death of leaving the known, the loved, the symbolic, the holy in my own monastery and the Abbey here. The promise of resurrection is buried in new life experiences. Little deaths. Not so little deaths lived in our lives! Again, I hear Merton speaking in the night here in his hermitage: "A light appears, and in the light an icon. There is now in the large darkness a small room of radiance with psalms in it . . . In the formlessness of night and silence a word then pronounces itself: Mercy" (D, p. 43).

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Doubleday & Company, 1970), pp. 82-88. Rice's photographs show us the hermitage before the chapel and bathroom were added. For replicas of Thoreau's cabin and images associated with him, see: *The Annotated Walden*; edited with an introd. by Philip Van Doren Stern (New York: Bramhall House, 1970) and William Howarth, "Thoreau: Following the Tracks of a Different Man," *National Geographic* 159: 3 (March 1981), pp. 349-386.

23. Compare *Walden*, pp. 131-134.

I speak to myself. I try to fashion with words a communicable meaning: "Zero," "coming to myself," "nothing happening, just me." Merton drew the veil for others but spoke of his real self only indirectly, Christ in his heart his true religiosity. We come home to ourselves and the house is empty. We cannot convey this "nothing happening" feeling. It is positive and replete with life and purpose. It is pure being. It is repose. Our nest is nowhere and everywhere. We need not even be "Zero" for others. That takes care of itself if we are "Zero" with ourselves. No barriers in between. Openness. Fullness. Completeness.

The hoot owl clamored to be heard long ago. A glimpse of moonlight through the trees. "How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures" (*Psalms* 144: 9).

## 6. Facing "East"

I awake as the Lauds bell rings. I open the day still cast in darkness with *Psalms* 31: "... the joy of being forgiven." I recite the "Lord's Prayer." My mind roves ... I read *Song of Songs*, 6: 7; *Psalms* 16; *John* 1: 1-15. A theme of love and protection in the spiritual night. "Even in the night my heart exhorts me." I belong to the One who loves me more that I can love Him. In Him is my light and life in the darkness and death of weakness and sin.

Three deer cross the meadow. Vast bolts of unravelling grey-blue fog. Cloth of clouds embossed with green pine-tree pattern. The hoot owl has gone away. The trees advance one by one from their night-time hiding. Light plays on power lines, paints Fujis on the horizon.

Greeting the dawn with *pranayamas* from the porch. Attempting to see what Merton saw, looking for what he saw by first looking to the phenomenon of clouds and mist, of crows and jet planes, of lights across the ridge, the anagogy of movement of lights across the shore of *samsara* and *nirvana*.



"I cannot tell you what I am more than a ray of the summer's sun," wrote Thoreau in his Journal on 26 February 1841. "What I am, I am, and say not. Being is the great explainer" (*J*, p. 273).

Thoreau pioneered Western society's study of the East one hundred years before Merton began his explorations of Oriental cultures and religions. Like Merton's, Thoreau's was no mere academic interest. Thoreau, as



Merton after him, looked to the East not only outside of himself, but within. That integral harmony of being Merton described in his hermitage writings was depicted by Thoreau in his first published book -- *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (both travelogue and allegory as it is) -- through a quote from a "Hindoo sage." The rendering Thoreau gives is this: "As a dancer having exhibited herself to the spectator, desists from the dance, so does Nature desist, having manifested herself to soul -----, Nothing, in my opinion, is more gentle than Nature; once aware of having been seen, she does not again expose herself to the gaze of soul."<sup>24</sup>

In *Walden* -- his second and only other book published in his lifetime -- Thoreau looks at this integral harmony from the perspective of the divine. Here, quoting from a "Hindoo philosopher," Thoreau wrote: ". . . soul, from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be *Brahme*" (W, p. 96).

All of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Walden*, the accounts of his journeys, his critical essays and his voluminous journals, can be seen as Thoreau's attempt -- like that of Merton himself -- to rearticulate in his own experience the ancient wisdom of the East. Thoreau looked back at the past, and asked himself the question: "Who is writing better Vedas?" (J, p. 313).<sup>25</sup> How well Thoreau succeeded, each reader of *Walden* (for instance) must judge on Thoreau's own words. In his chapter on "Solitude," Thoreau wrote:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled . . . There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. (W, p. 129)<sup>26</sup>

24. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*; edited by Carl F. Hovde et alii (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 382-383.

25. This entry was dated Monday, 7 June 1841. On 23 March 1842, Thoreau wrote: "In my brain is the sanscrit which contains the history of primitive times. The Vedas and their Angas are not so ancient as my serene contemplations" (*ibid.*, p. 387).

26. In the "Monday" chapter of his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau had already written: ". . . for the senses that is furthest from us which addresses the greater depth within us. It teaches us again and again to trust the remotest and finest as the divinest instinct, and makes a dream our only real experience" (*loc. cit.*, pp. 174-175). See also my essay: "Two Studies in Chuang Tzu: Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde," *Merton Seasonal* 12: 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 5-14.



A rifle shot cracks the silence! A hunter in the woods?



Full breakfast of whole-wheat bread, cheese, my first hard-boiled egg since coming to Gethsemani, with a sprinkling of salt and pepper, a banana and instant coffee.



Overhead, an Army helicopter. I wave from the porch. Other human persons are inside, each waves back to me from his own secret solitude. Over in the distance a jet shoots straight upward, its streamer trailing down below the sun.



I sit and read *Zen Dust*, full as it is with *koans* and stories of the Buddhist patriarchs.

Zen Master Fa-Tsang (Hozo, 643-712) said: "Because sentient beings are deluded they think they should discard the illusory and enter the real. But once enlightenment is attained, the illusory is itself the real. There is no other real to enter." Fa-Tsang propounded the Zen doctrine of the mutual and unhindered interpenetration of all existence with each other (known as "Indra's Net") and set up in the center of a meditation hall a Buddha-image illumined by a torch, and so arranged ten mirrors around it that they were all facing one another. Each of the mirrors was then seen to reflect not only the central image but the reflection in each of the other mirrors and the reflection of the reflections *ad infinitum*.<sup>27</sup>

Who saw this? Does it relate to the Christian doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ? Where do you find Him? Who is the image? Who is the torch? Who the mirrors? As I stand on this porch of Merton's solitude perceiving the phenomena as phenomenal, am I connected to him or anyone else? When the monk prays alone where is he? The guns are still. It is too early for war games, but where are the soldiers? Perhaps it is their hour of prayer. On my *rakusu* (prayer robe) I wear a tiny silver cross, gift from a friend who is a military chaplain. The "unhindered mutual

27. Isshu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *Zen Dust: The History of the Koan and Koan Study in Rinzaï (Lin-chi) Zen* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), pp. 181, 183. Merton commented on this book in "The Zen Koan," included in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), pp. 235-254. Hereafter referred to in the text as *ZD*.

interpenetration" of all reality. I am united to my Community in Georgia though no one there knows precisely where I am at this moment, nor do I know where each of them is. "That they All may be One." Our prayer could be: "That we realize our Oneness."



Two wild dogs pass in front of the wooden cross and wagon wheel. I hear the logs crackle, the steam from the tea water like a steady motor, the scratch of my pen across the page. The Abbey bells ring, reminder to the hermit of his community, an invitation to unite heart with hearts, perhaps prayer with prayers. Ta-hui Tsung-kaio (1089-1163) was honored by Emperor Hsiao-tsung in 1158 who with his own hand wrote three characters describing Ta-hui's temple. Translated into English they say: "Hermitage of Marvelous Joy." This is my feeling in being here, the creatures passing, the solitude, the reading, the writing, the movement of the sun. In the year of his death Hui-neng (Eno, 638-713) gave a sermon to his disciples ending with this exquisite verse which epitomizes his teaching: "The soil of mind embraces every kind of seed; with the falling of the universal rain, one and all put forth sprouts. When the flower of sudden awakening bursts into bloom, the fruit of enlightenment ripens of itself" (*ZD*, pp. 165, 169).

Here the fruit of enlightenment is no enlightenment, or enlightenment in the true sense. Nothing is happening. Or, rather, everything is happening quietly of itself. No special sensations, no extraordinary phenomena, only waking and sleeping, reading a lot and eating a little, watching the sun and hearing the birds and the bells and the water pipes thumping. Am I here? Yes, just me. No Thoreau or Merton, no Suzuki or Hui-neng. Just copying words, putting blue on white.

Hung-chih Cheng-chueh (1091-1157), who taught in China during the founding and flowering of Citeaux in France, told his disciples: "If you have even a little Buddhist theory, then all kinds of concepts, illusions, and mixed-up thoughts will be produced in profusion. The koan is manifest right here before you. Penetrate it to the root; penetrate it to the source" (*ZD*, p. 172). This is the essence of all true growth, spiritual, psychological: emotional self-awareness, making the hidden known, the obscure clear, the easy difficult and the difficult easy through practice. This was the mind of the early Cistercians as well. This is our task, difficult and painful, freeing and joyful. Certainly, I feel, it was Merton's right effort here.

## 7. Preserving the "Tradition of Dissent"

In reflecting on non-violence in his essay "Non-Violence and the Christian Conscience," Thomas Merton wrote:

Those who have read a little on the subject may perhaps associate the origins of non violence with Tolstoy, Thoreau, the Quakers. All this is, to a Catholic, religiously odd. As for those who have never heard of Tolstoy, Thoreau and the Quakers, they know non-violence as something invented by Negroes (Gandhi was, of course, a "Negro"). They include it in the category of underworld activities which whites get into when they associate too intimately with Negroes. From there on, the shape the myth takes depends on your own regional outlook. If you are from the North, non-violence rates as something odd and irrational if not actually sinister, like smoking marihuana. If you are from the South, it is classed in the same sociological hell as all the other suspect activities in which Negroes and whites intermingle socially (exception made, of course, for lynching which is perfectly respectable, and in no way tainted with non-violence).

Here we come to the heart of the myth. While non-violence is regarded as somehow sinister, vicious and evil, violence has manifold acceptable forms in which it is not only tolerated but approved by American society. (FV, p. 34)<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Merton found in the person of Martin Luther King, Jr. a non-violent spirit as similar as the one he found in Henry David Thoreau. In *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (16 April 1963), King wrote:

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.

In this now famous letter, King also lamented that too many church people had become more cautious than courageous and remained silent "behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows,"<sup>29</sup> a terrible image, even today, when contrasted with the shattered stained-glass windows of

28. Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) became a subject of study for me, under Merton's influence, in association with Thoreau. Merton wrote in "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant": "It was through his acquaintance with writers like Tolstoy and Thoreau, and then his reading of the New Testament, that Gandhi rediscovered his own tradition and his Hindu dharma (religion, duty)." See *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 4. For Gandhi's doctrine, see: *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experience with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957); *Non Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* (New York: Schachin Books, 1961); and Haridas Muzumdar, *Gandhi Versus the Empire* (New York: Universal Publishing Co., 1932).

For the religious and political thought of Tolstoy (1828-1910), see: Leo Tolstoy, *On Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (New York: Bergman Publishers, 1967) and Ernest J. Simmons, *Introduction to Tolstoy's Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

29. *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library/ Signet Books, 1964), pp. 86, 90. King (1929-1968) was a student of both Gandhi and Thoreau. For the books published in his lifetime, see: *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958); *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963); *Conscience for Change: Massey Lectures, 7th Series* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967); and *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

the bombed Black Baptist church where four little girls were slain by racists as they worshipped. King did not waver from his non-violent stance. For him, love was the deliberately cultivated motive for all right action, and this he described in his Nobel Foundation Lecture (given 11 December 1964 at Oslo University), as the "supreme unifying principle of life . . . the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality."<sup>30</sup>

In "Religion and Race in the United States," Merton wrote that in the Negro Christian non-violent movement, under the leadership of Martin Luther King, the *kairos*, the "providential time," met with a courageous and enlightened response. For Merton, this movement was one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action that had been seen anywhere in the twentieth century. Merton concluded: "It is certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States" (*FV*, pp. 130-131).<sup>31</sup>

Merton was certainly accurate in his linking of King with Thoreau. King -- like Merton himself -- felt that he was in direct line as dissenter with Thoreau, and he attempted to bring Thoreau's doctrine into our century. By looking outside of themselves and their environment, both Merton and King were like Thoreau, who wrote in the chapter "Reading" in *Walden*: "I aspire to be acquainted with wiser men than this our Concord soil has produced, whose names are hardly known here" (*W*, pp. 107). In the concluding chapter of his account of his life in the woods, Thoreau gave the underlying intention of all his intellectual endeavors: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth" (*W*, p. 330).

Thomas Merton, as we know, was extremely proud of his American citizenship when he obtained it. His later struggles with our nation's policies toward armaments and the Vietnamese War were expressions of disillusionment and pained conscience. King rooted his practice of non-violent civil disobedience in the American Constitution and its subsequent Amendments, guaranteeing as they do fundamental civil rights. Both Merton and King found in Thoreau, not an anarchist, but an authentic American citizen. For a fuller understanding of their appreciation of Thoreau, and

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30. Nobel Foundation Lecture, Oslo University, 11 December 1964. See also: Martin Luther King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience" in *The Social Rebel in American Literature*; edited by Robert Woodward and James Clark (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968).

31. On 20 January 1968, Merton wrote to June Yungblut in Atlanta concerning a possible meeting at the Abbey of Gethsemani with King, Vincent Harding and others involved in the civil rights movement [Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 511]. For a critical response to media's distortion of King into an innocuous "dreamer," see: Vincent Harding, "Re-Calling the Inconvenient Hero: Reflections on the Last Years of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40: 4 (1986), pp. 53-68. For a discussion of King in relation to Thoreau, see: William Stuart Nelson, "Thoreau and the Current Non-Violent Struggle for Integration," *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, Bulletin No. 88 (Summer 1964).

our knowledge of him, we can look back beyond him to influences -- direct and indirect.

In "Life Without Principle," published in October 1863 seventeen months after his death, Thoreau wrote:

To speak impartially, the best men that I know are not serene, a world in themselves. For the most part, they dwell in forms, and flatter and study effect only more finely than the rest. We select granite for the underpinning of our houses and barns; we build fences of stone; but we do not ourselves rest on an underpinning of granitic truth, the lowest primitive rock. Our sills are rotten. What stuff is the man made of who is not coexistent in our thought with the purest and subtlest truth?"

(*RP*, p. 168).<sup>32</sup>

Henry Thoreau did not leave behind a formulated, systematized philosophy. He drew from many sources -- East and West -- and did not tie himself to any one particular school of thought, including the Christianity (or christianities) of Concord. As a "transcendentalist," as a "Utopian," Thoreau was a theorist, but he realized in his own life the duties incumbent upon him, and clearly fulfilled them as a man of concern for others. Thoreau's greatest witness -- perhaps -- lies in the manner in which he lived out age-old human convictions and human values. F. O. Matthiessen wrote of him: "What others were preaching he proved on his pulses, and when the implications of a doctrine were thus found to be true, he set himself to live them."<sup>33</sup>

In the fourth of seven versions of *Walden* drafted over a period of eight years, Thoreau wrote: "It was on the morning of the 4th of July 1845 that I put a few articles of furniture some of which I had made myself into a hayriggering which I had hired, drove down to the woods, put my things in their places, & commenced housekeeping" (*W*, p. 361). Thoreau intentionally began his stay at Walden Pond on 4 July 1845 -- he was not quite twenty-eight years old (he was born on 12 July) -- as a "personal declaration of independence." His arrest and overnight stay in Concord jail (on 23 or 24 July 1846) for non-payment of the poll tax was once again a conscientious act of principle based on his belief in higher laws concerning the human person.

As a young poet, Thoreau succinctly expressed the doctrine of personalism in the following poem:

32. From 1854 to 1860, Thoreau frequently delivered his essay as a lecture under such titles as "Getting a Living," "The Connection between Man's Employment and His Higher Life," and "What Shall It Profit?" (Textual Introduction, pp. 369ff).

33. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 80.

My life more civil is and free  
 Than any civil polity.  
 Ye princes keep your realms  
 And circumscribed power  
 Not wide as are my dreams  
 Nor rich as is this hour . . .

What can he give which I have not?  
 What can ye take which I have got?  
 Can ye defend the dangerless?  
 Can ye inherit nakedness?  
 To all three wants time's ear is deaf.

Penurious states lend no relief  
 Out of their pelf --  
 But a free soul -- thank God --  
 Can help itself . . .  
 The life that I aspire to live  
 No man proposeth me --  
 No trade upon the street  
 Wears its emblazonry.<sup>34</sup>

Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) once said of Thoreau: "This man is the independent of independents -- is, indeed, the sole signer of the Declaration, and a Revolution in himself -- a more than '76 -- having got beyond the signing to the doing of it fully."<sup>35</sup> As a practical social scientist, Thoreau worked not only with what *might* be the human condition but also with what actually obtained in reality. He recognized that he was not left to do merely what he wanted but rather was enabled by the demands of human society to do what he *ought*. Like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, Thoreau wrestled with the fundamentally vexing problems of human existence: freedom to live and liberty in action; the might of power and the right of truth; self-government and social restraints; conscience and civil law. For Thoreau -- as we have seen -- the ultimate criterion for action was doing at all times what in his conscience he felt to be right and he was willing to pay for his convictions with his life.

Thoreau's life, future and "sacred honor" were not risked for light or transient causes. Like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin before him, like all human beings, Thoreau was more disposed to suffer, while evils were sufferable, than to right himself by abolishing the forms of civil and church government to which he was accustomed. Thoreau was a prudent

34. Quoted in *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*; edited by F. B. Sanborn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), p. 235. See also Sanborn's *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917).

35. Quoted in *American Renaissance*, p. 79. For the "Orphic Sayings" and other selections from Alcott, see: Perry Miller (ed.), *The American Transcendentalists* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1957), pp. 85-92. Hereafter referred to in the text as AT.

man -- we can be sure -- and when he spoke out against the established order in lecture and essay, he was fighting, not only for his own but for the equality, inalienable rights, life, liberty and happiness of all persons.<sup>36</sup>



In his essay on the moral duty of resisting unjust government, Thoreau wrote:

Action from principle, -- the perception and the performance of right, -- changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with any thing which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; aye, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine. (RP, p. 72)

In linking himself with the *Declaration of Independence*, Thoreau not only forged a bond with Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, but significantly also identified himself with a tradition of British dissent inherited from James Burgh, Richard Price, Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine. An examination of this tradition of dissent can help us better appreciate Thoreau's impact on Merton, for these writers clearly laid the ground for America's unique philosophy of revolution<sup>37</sup>.

James Burgh's three-volume *Political Disquisitions* (1774) had an enormous influence on ordinary people besides its effect on other theorists and prominent people in English and American society. His earlier *Dignity of Human Nature* (1754) was still highly enough regarded eighty years later for Thoreau to borrow it from the Harvard Library.<sup>38</sup> Thoreau read Burgh's thesis that "self-evident truth" is not collected or deduced but intuitively perceived. For Burgh, this proposition held for all truth, moral truth being no less certain than mathematical truth.

In *Review of the Principal Question and Difficulties in Morals* (1758), Richard Price posed the problem of moral right and wrong, good and evil, and how they are perceived. With Burgh, Price concluded that there was an objectivity in truth based on inner intuition: the human person can intuitively tell that an action is good or evil in much the same sense that he or she can perceive that an object is a certain color or of sour or sweet taste. Price

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36. Obviously these are terms from the *Declaration of Independence*. In his essay on civil disobedience Thoreau revealed his universal concern: "... when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army [a reference to the Mexican War], and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army" (*Reform Papers*, p. 67).

37. Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*, p. 4. Hereafter referred to in the text as IO.

38. Thoreau entered Harvard in 1833 at age sixteen. He signed Burgh's book out in 1834.



wrote of moral truth as an inner light and an interior function of the human intellect. Applying his respect for the human person to politics, Price, in *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789), proposed a concept of world citizenship in which love of one's country does not imply superiority of one's own nation.

In 1765, Joseph Priestley published *Remarks on a Code of Education, Proposed by Dr. Brown* in answer to the Anglican minister's pamphlet concerning civil liberties. Brown believed that any natural desire which might be inconsistent with the "general Weal" is to be given up as a voluntary tax, paid in exchange for the "higher, more lasting" benefits of social life. Here he expressed the idea of natural rights as property which can be alienated in exchange for an equivalent return. For him, conscience should be guided by whatever religion the state prescribes. A free state was not a state in which manners and principles are propounded. Priestley went beyond the critiques of both Burgh and Brown, calling for a change in society by more freedom for the individual. Priestley insisted that human beings can and must free themselves from their oppressive circumstances: we cannot be freed by external powers. For him, every person retains and can never be deprived of natural rights, and every true government is founded upon the freedom of human persons from external restraints and all things imposed upon persons without their consent. Thus, in Priestley's words: "Political liberty . . . consists in the power the members of the state reserve to themselves, of arriving at the public offices, or, at least, of having votes in the nomination of those who will them." For him "civil liberty" was that power over their actions which members of a state reserve to themselves which their offices must not infringe (*IO*, pp. 24, 27-28, 48-54).

Thomas Paine (1737-1809) -- coming to America after thirty-seven years of life in England -- quickly became a significant exemplar of progressive, radical thought. In 1776 (about the same time that Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* was published in London), Paine's *Common Sense* appeared in Philadelphia. No appeal for independence had an influence remotely comparable to Paine's tract, and it quickly sold almost 150,000 copies. The immediate counter-attack of numerous Loyalists proved Paine's power. *Common Sense* blames government -- not property -- for world problems.

A government of our own is our natural right; and when a man seriously reflects on the precariousness of human affairs, he will become convinced, that it is infinitely wiser and safer to form a constitution of our own in a cool, deliberate manner, while we have it in our power, than to trust such an interesting event to time and chance . . . O ye that love mankind!

Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger and England hath given her warning to depart. O receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

Paine spoke of a "sense" in each human person which lies dormant and, unless excited to action, will descend with that person to the grave. He contended that government ought to bring forward this sense in regular operation to the capacity with which it appears in revolution. In his work *Agrarian Justice*, Paine claimed that poverty and property did not exist in the natural state in which God created man, signifying the end of the theory of "possessive individualism." Paine regarded government as the basis of society, but a revolution in the economic system is the necessary companion of revolution in the governmental system. Writing to Thomas Jefferson in 1788, Paine listed as "natural rights" only those most closely akin to conscience which the individual could exercise unaided: thinking, speaking, forming and giving opinions.

Paine's egalitarian thought found its fullest expression in *Rights of Man* (1791/ 1792), his response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. From 1750 through the French Revolution dissenters on both sides of the Atlantic poured forth pamphlets and books expounding a common doctrine of natural law, made by God, evident to each human person. American revolutionaries needed a moral philosophy to justify such seditious actions as the Boston Tea Party and turned to the European radical philosophers for help in the intellectual articulation of their principles and convictions. Not until the argument shifted substantially away from English rights and over to natural justice in the Colonies did Price and Priestley influence American minds. Thomas Paine brought to the Colonies the most forceful expression of radical political thought and carried back to France the new philosophy of revolution forged in the white heat of the American Revolution. Rooted as it is in European theories of dissent, the "American radical tradition" bears its own unique character based on efforts to make a life for all better than the existing one through high ideals put into daily practice.<sup>39</sup> Let us now look at how this American

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39. Quoted in *Great Issues in American History: A Documentary Record*; edited by Richard Hofstadter (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), pp. 53, 61. See also *Intellectual Origins*, pp. 25, 54, 76. For a good source on Thomas Paine, see: *Rights of Man*; edited with an introd. by Henry Collins (New York: Penguin Books, 1969). An intriguing connection is formed when we think of Paine's appearance in the radical art of Bob Dylan (1941- ) who so much influenced Merton in the 1960s. I have written about Dylan and the "Tom Paine Award," received shortly after the death of John F. Kennedy in 1963, in "Ace of Songs -- Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan," Part 1, p. 85.

radical tradition -- later exemplified by Henry Thoreau and Thomas Merton -- was preserved by Quakers and Abolitionists in the nineteenth century.

### 8. *The Nature of "American Radicalism"*

History tells us of the great influence of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin in the formation of an American political philosophy supportive of the revolutionary overthrow of England's control in the destiny of our nation; and in the articulation of an indigenous American "radicalism," the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution* becoming the textual sources and roots of our philosophy of dissent. The 1976 and 1987 second-century anniversaries celebrated by the United States -- no matter what form these festivities took -- demonstrated the power of the political theories inherent in these documents to endure.

There emerged, from the ideologies described above, a tradition of responding to social crisis through social change, the resolution of conflict through direct action in the social order based on whatever vision or idea of what constituted a "better way of life" might be held by dissenting citizens. In the nineteenth century, the Abolitionists picked up this tradition from Paine and Jefferson: that is, the contention that those freedoms associated with the mind are absolute and inalienable. Against schools, churches, and the United States government itself, the Abolitionists hurled the theory that free discussion (freedom of speech) was not something obtained from human convention and human concession, but a "birthright . . . as old as our being, and a part of the original man."

Revolutionaries of the Abolitionist Movement, unlike revolutionaries of 1776, confronted, not an arbitrary king and the laws of a foreign Parliament, but the laws of their own republican government. The reality of this conflict was compounded for Americans, paradoxically, because the organized power of the community -- the reigning government -- purported to be the least intrusive of any on earth: it was non-aristocratic and democratic. The presidency of Andrew Jackson, for example, claimed to champion the cause of the "common folk," who -- at least in theory -- were all able to fulfill their socio-political desires and personal talents (*IO*, p. 120; *AT*, p. 288).

The early American Quakers were effective agents in the transfer of radical political thought into direct radical social action in their own times. Just as the Dissenters' insistence on freedom of conscience was the back-

bone of eighteenth-century radicalism, the Quakers' life style extolled the ideas at the heart of radical abolitionism. In 1790, a group of Quakers submitted two petitions to the First Congress against slavery, arguing that the Constitution required the blessings of liberty to be administered "without distinction of color, to all descriptions of people" and for a restoration of liberty to those who, alone in a free land, "were degraded into perpetual bondage and groaning in servile subjection."

The Quaker concept of the "inner light" grafted neatly onto the Dissenters' belief in freedom of conscience and expounded the Abolitionist idea of individual perfectibility. By the 1830s, what might be called Philo-Quakerism pervaded the North, providing intellectual sustenance for the anti-slavery movement. The idea of inner light was closely connected with the idea of immediate emancipation, for immediate emancipation "seemed mainly to imply a direct, intuitive consciousness of the sinfulness of slavery, and a sincere personal commitment to work for its abolition." Quakerism provided American Abolitionists not only with a program for emancipation but with a systematic discussion of civil disobedience in the works of Jonathan Dymond. Dymond recommended a system of resistance clearly noticeable to the law makers and causing those in authority to become weary of enforcing an abhorrent and disregarded law. His argument for non-violent resistance laid the path for the radical activities of William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879).

In the Abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator* (1 January 1831), Garrison presented his case against slavery. His words are worth quoting:

I am aware, that many object to the severity of my language, but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; -- but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest -- I will not equivocate -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- and I will be heard. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.

Garrison declared that he would not obey laws requiring him to return fugitive slaves or in any way require his cooperation with an "unjust" system. He proposed that Abolitionists submit to taxation, which is involuntary, but should decline the voluntary acts of voting and holding public office. Garrison believed that the Abolitionist Movement, more than any other movement, entrusted the people with the management of their own

cause and invited Negroes, workingmen, women, and all foreign supporters to join in a world fellowship. In introducing the eighth volume of *The Liberator* in December of 1837, he announced his concern for peace with a "government of brute-force," as well as freeing slaves. In 1838, he joined in the formation of the New England Non-Resistance Society, which pledged itself to non-participation in all wars, to voluntary self-exclusion from all political offices which might oblige the office holder to use violence, and to abstention from voting to prevent misuse of power by elected officials (*IO*, pp. 103, 108-109, 139).<sup>40</sup> Garrison's strategy was expounded by Wendell Phillips (1811-1884) who spoke at the Concord Lyceum six times during Thoreau's years of active involvement as member and curator. In "Wendell Phillips Before Concord Lyceum" (dated 5 March 1845), Thoreau wrote of Phillips as a "clean," "erect," and "consistent" man not responsible for slavery, "the hypocrisy and superstition of the church, nor the timidity and selfishness of the state; nor for the indifference and willing ignorance of any" (*RP*, pp. 59-60; 303-307).

Despite its localized New England context and its relative lack of philosophical sophistication, Thoreau's doctrine of civil dissent is historically linked with the larger protest against the established order of the age in which he lived. Certainly, there are like elements of rhetoric, style and content in Thoreau's work.<sup>41</sup> On 26 January 1848, at the Concord Lyceum, Thoreau delivered his essay on civil disobedience, under the title "Resistance to Civil Government." The impact of Garrison is evident in Thoreau's words.

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? . . . How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also . . . Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? . . . if the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go; perchance it will wear smooth -- certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or

40. For Garrison's comments in *The Liberator*, see *Great Issues in American History*, p. 322. For a comprehensive treatment of these issues with appropriate texts from the seventeenth century to the 1960s, see: *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966).

41. For the fullest account of Thoreau's life and work, see: Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*; rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). See also: *Henry David Thoreau: Studies and Commentaries*; edited by Walter Harding, George Brenner and Paul A. Doyle (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972) and Walter Harding & Michael Meyer, *The New Thoreau Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1980).

a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.

But, we know very well, the revolution Thoreau pleaded for was non-violent and spiritual, fought primarily in the heart of each person. Speaking of the fundamental option between complicity with an unjust government and revolution, Thoreau added these words in the course of his lecture:

If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which way to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood . . . If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance, then the revolution is accomplished.

(*RP*, pp. 65, 67, 72, 73, 76, 77)

On 16 June 1854, Thoreau wrote: "The remembrance of the baseness of politicians spoils my walks. My thoughts are murder to the State; I endeavor in vain to observe nature; my thoughts involuntarily go plotting against the State. I trust that all men will conspire."<sup>42</sup> After meeting insurrectionist John Brown during his visit to Concord in 1857, Thoreau championed Brown's cause and became the first man in the North to plea for Brown's stance as a worthy example of a noble man "dying for a principle."<sup>43</sup> But Thoreau's real appraisal of human life and his balanced perspective was summed up by himself in the opening paragraphs of his essay on civil disobedience, where he wrote: "To speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government" (*RP*, p. 64).<sup>44</sup> We can be sure that Thomas Merton would concur with this opinion.

42. *Journal* (Dover Edition), Vol. 6, p. 358 (Vol. 1, p. 756).

43. Thoreau expressed himself as an "abolitionist" in "Slavery in Massachusetts" (4 July 1854); "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (lecture; first printed version 1860); "Martyrdom of John Brown" (2 December 1859); and "The Last Days of John Brown" (4 July 1860); see: *Reform Papers*, pp. 91ff.; 111ff.; 139ff.; 145ff; (Textual Introductions), pp. 331ff.; 341ff.; 355ff.; 363ff.

44. Thoreau speaks of Benjamin Franklin in this essay. For a discussion of the motto -- "That government is best which governs least" -- with regard to Thoreau and Thomas Jefferson see: (Textual Notes), p. 322. Thoreau refuted what he considered the principle of moral expediency in William Paley's "Duty of Submission to Civil Government Explained" -- that is, taking the easier way out of a civil difficulty or opting for the safer path of conduct -- but by no means was he an anarchist who favored violence as an end in itself. (See the text of his essay, pp. 67-68 and the critical notes, pp. 323-324.)

## 9. "Disarming the Heart"

Half-way up the dirt road ascent there is a view of the Abbey of Gethsemani, left, and Merton's cinder-block hermitage, right, in perfect linear balance, in tension, a visual line from one end of the horizon to the other, two scales hinged at an invisible center, both kept level by the other. How much they need each other, the *cenobium* and the hermitage, the community and the solitary monk. Gethsemani needed Thomas Merton. Merton needed Gethsemani. We need our particular communities and our families, and we need to go apart to rest and pray, at least for a little while now and then.

In September 1850, Thoreau made an excursion to Quebec with his friend William Ellery Channing. In the account of the journey which he called *A Yankee in Canada*, Thoreau wrote of the *coureurs de risques*, "the runners of risks" and the *coureurs de bois*, "runners of the woods" -- Canadians possessed a roving spirit of adventure which carried them farther, in exposure to hardship and danger, than ever the New England colonist went, leading them not to clear and colonize the wilderness, but to "range over it" (*de courir les bois*). The energies of the youth were spent this way, to the detriment of a militia to fight Indians and the English. Thoreau contrasts this with the *cessitaires* who built on narrow stretches of land, all adjacent, along the rivers. The government had to compel emigration in their regard to bring the estates under cultivation, leaving the owners of the "terre" now less reluctant "to leave the paternal roof; than formerly, "removing beyond the sight of the parish spire, or the sound of the parish bell."<sup>45</sup> Perhaps the monastic experiment is a balancing in the tension between the *cessitaires* on the nearby settled "terre," and the *coureurs de risques*, within each Order, within each Community, within each monk himself. In his Canadian adventure, as in everything else, Thoreau was alert, attentive, responsive to his environment. He said he found the Falls of St. Anne "by guess and by compass . . . at their discretion." Speaking of his arrival and first impressions of Quebec City, he recalled: ". . . we endeavored to realize that now . . . we were taking a walk in

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45. The Princeton Edition of Thoreau's travel writings has not yet been published. I am citing from *A Yankee in Canada* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1961), pp. 58-59. Hereafter referred to in the text as YC. Three portions of a projected five-part publication of this essay appeared in *Putnam's Magazine*, starting in January 1853 before Thoreau removed the manuscript due to the editor's censoring of certain passages. The essay was first published in full text with miscellaneous papers in 1866 after Thoreau's death under the title *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (*A New Thoreau Handbook*), pp. 46-48; this source gives the trip length as twelve-and-a-half days. Thoreau appears anti-Catholic in this essay, as well as anti-British, but his railings as always were against dehumanizing institutions not persons; wherever he found sincerity he always gave respect.

Canada . . . which a few days before had seemed almost as far off as England and France." He continued: "Well, I thought to myself, here I am in a foreign country; let me have my eyes about me, and take it all in" (YC, pp. 70, 44-45). By our own intuition, with the advice of a spiritual guide, we attempt to find our way to God. Do not Thoreau's words articulate my own arrival and stay here? I sense the special grace that brought me here and I endeavor to realize the meaning of my walking in Merton's path. "Connections," Merton would call all these.



I disconnect the big push broom handle and carry it as a walking staff and as a protection against dogs. Birds chatter at each other across the lawn as I stand by the board fence in front of the hermitage. A tree split, by lightning or decay, has been pieced together with iron rods, the work of some gentle healing hands ministering as to human limbs. Climbing the rickety ladder behind the house I see the flat tar roof and shiny metal lightning rods, sharp like punji sticks. The tool shed is about the size of Thoreau's cabin at Walden, but I make no attempt at accurate judgment. It is more the feeling of the place that draws the parallel. Saws and pitch-forks and crucifix all suspended together; Louisville phone directories and twigs to kindle the fire stacked along the floor -- cozy place for snakes and mice. Standing on the wall of stones (built 2' high and winding about 40' behind the hermitage) I hear the woodpecker and railroad whistles, the ubiquitous crow, the whishing car.



Taking a foot-path once walked with friends twelve years ago, I retrace our steps, find the stone cross, and make my way down to the road, thick with mud and puddles to be jumped. The monastery and out-buildings loom high to my left. I turn right at the logging trail, a swath gashed across the hillside. The wood-cutters are thinning the forest to help the young trees grow, but I am filled only with a sense of desolation and destruction. Felled limbs all around. Deep ruts cut here and there. Half trees hanging from those still standing. Immense trees saw-scarred or fallen. Stacks of logs and trunks of every length, awaiting their burning.

Trellises of pine and sabers of cedar cross above me as I pass, my nostrils tingling with the scent of wood-chips and mucky leaves and fungus all mushed together. The shock of car light cast along the path, its glass and metal casing catching the sun like a diamond brooch against a cape of



suede. Vast shadow across the sun! A vulture hawk glides low over my head, slick and glimmering against the sky. Higher up into the hillside the path narrows. Packed thick with crisp leaves, it becomes more solid under foot, finally, steadily, bringing me back, directly behind the hermitage.



In writing *A Yankee in Canada*, Thoreau was as anti-war as in his essay on civil disobedience. The guns of the citadel of Quebec, he concluded, were faithfully kept dusted by officials, in accordance with the motto: "In time of peace prepare for war," and he lamented: ". . . but I saw no preparation for peace: she was plainly an uninvited guest." For him the guns and fortress carried their beholder back to the Middle Ages, to the siege of Jerusalem, to the time of St. Joan of Arc, and to the days of the buccaneers. Comparing it to a Lombard gun seen in the armory, Thoreau judged the whole citadel a fit object for the museums for the curious:

Such works do not consist with the development of the intellect. Huge stone structures of all kinds, both in their erection and by their influence when erected, rather oppress than liberate the mind. They are tombs for the souls of men, as frequently for their bodies also. The sentinel with his musket beside a man with his umbrella is spectral. (YC, pp. 97, 99-100).

What would Thoreau say of our immense Trappist monasteries, especially those in the Orient and Third World countries, symbols of a culture and ethos so foreign to their own? Our Abbot General Dom Ambrose Southey has raised a similar observation, from the perspective of poverty. Merton the hermit gazed upon his own abbey and wrote:

Over there is the monastery, bugging with windows, humming with action. The long yellow side of the monastery faces the sun on a sharp rise with fruit trees and beehives. This is without question one of the least interesting buildings on the face of the earth. However, in spite of the most earnest efforts to deprive it of all character and keep it ugly, it is surpassed in this respect by the vast majority of other monasteries. It is so completely plain that it ends, in spite of itself, by being at least simple. A lamentable failure of religious architecture -- to come so close to non-entity and yet not fully succeed! I climb sweating into the novitiate, and put down my water bottle on the center floor. The bell is ringing. I have duties, obligations, since here I am a monk. When I have accomplished these, I return to the woods where I am nobody. (D, pp. 55, 57).



Thoreau visited Canada during a period of relative peace in the United States: the war with Mexico was over and the Civil War had not yet

begun. For him, the military in Quebec symbolized the presence of the oppressive government of England from which his own country had long been free. Ironically, he spoke in this instance in favor of the American government over against what he perceived as an aristocratic feudal-like power foreign to the ways of the New World. The America he knew allowed for "manliness," "originality," "independence" and for the most part left him alone (YC, pp. 105-106).

Thoreau continued his walking tour and his critique: "A fortified town is like a man cased in the heavy armor of antiquity, with a horse-load of broad-swords and small arms slung to him, endeavoring to go about his business. Or is this an indispensable machinery for the good government of the country?" History proved to Thoreau the uselessness of such battle preparation, and the folly of the garrison. Wolfe sailed by it with impunity, and took the town of Quebec without experiencing any hindrance in the least from the fortifications. "They were only the bone for which the parties fought," commented Thoreau. The sentinel keeps his watch for another hostile Wolfe; or some persevering Arnold about to issue from the wilderness; some Malay or Japanese, perchance, coming around by the north-west coast, to assault the citadel: "Why I should as soon expect to find the sentinels still relieving one another on the walls of Niniveh, which have so long been buried to the world! What a troublesome thing a wall is! I thought it was to defend me, and not I it. Of course, if they had no wall they would not need to have sentinels" (YC, pp. 100-102). Gandhi reiterated this theme with similar metaphor when he said that he who has no treasures to steal has no need of guards to protect them. Thoreau and Gandhi and Merton sought to remove the metaphysical wall, each in his own way. The inner way, the way of working on oneself. Destructing the inner fortifications. Removing the bricks one by one. Where does that leave us? We all begin and end in the same place. We all share a common vulnerability.



On 19 February 1841, Thoreau wrote: "We seem but to linger in manhood to tell the dreams of our childhood, and they vanish out of memory ere we learn the language" (J, p. 269). The more we study Thoreau, the more we realize his own flexibility, his power to change. Some may choose to judge him unstable and contradictory. Like the rest of men, perhaps he was. But he had a sense of proportion in things natural, human and divine. He was a man of his times and he knew it. The Walden experiment was neither the strict isolation presumed nor the book the simple

product of his two year stay. Thoreau and his writings evolved. Consistently opposed to government interference in individual's rights, he nonetheless supported government policies protecting common lands, mountains and rivers from human despoilment. He turned the tools of his advantage, being himself an advanced pencil maker and self-appointed community surveyor. The Yankee from Concord got to Canada on the Fitchburg railroad and Burlington steamboat. In his last years he ventured as far as Minnesota in search of health and Indian culture, no mean feat in his day, even by rail and water-wheel.



Merton himself was a transcendentalist and could identify with Thoreau on principle, his own practice equally divergent from the idealized image of hermits in ancient Egypt or medieval France. Both entered into their chosen reclusions in the same month on days of personal significance, Thoreau writing his own "declaration of independence" with his July 4th actions, Merton professing his spirituality of darkness and light, *todo y nada*, with John of the Cross and Teresa large and small under the patronage of Our Lady of Carmel one hundred and twenty years later. Merton's cabin, in his time, was primitive enough, and the thought of the not-healthy middle-aged monk using logs to warm himself and the woods to relieve nature remind us of his seriousness. Merton, like Thoreau, wanted and welcomed guests, most of them anyway. There were many days in the Abbey and trips to nearby towns. As monk-author his peace of heart was sometimes disturbed by loss of manuscripts in the mail and publication delays.

From this cabin in the Kentucky woods Merton mocked the passengers of an overhead plane downing their "timeless cocktails" and slammed the 3:30 A. M. SAC bomber with unbending invective in a flash of sarcasm: "[loaded with] strong medicine . . . strong enough to burn all these woods and stretch our hours of fun into eternities" (*D*, pp. 14, 29). But Merton the Gethsemani hermit got to the West Coast and the Orient on jet flights. And Merton the Trappist pacifist came back a corpse transported from Thailand by the armed forces on a military plane used in the Vietnam War. Greatest irony of all -- the man who eschewed machinery and modern devices delivered the last talk of his life before movie cameras and died from the electricity of a floor fan!



## 10. "The Return"

Henry David Thoreau left us tender, even exquisite lines describing his own sense of the fragility of life and human impermanence. In "Sic Vita," a poem of his younger years, he wrote:

I am a parcel of vain strivings tied  
By a chance bond together  
Dangling this way and that, their links  
Were made so loose and wide,  
Methinks,  
For milder weather.<sup>46</sup>

Like Merton in his own lifetime, Thoreau had the reward of peace to a high degree already in this world. Yet, like Merton, he knew the depths of human longing. In his mid-thirties, Thoreau confided to his journal: "I pine for one to whom I can speak my *first thoughts* . . . . I know of no one to whom I can be transparent instinctively."<sup>47</sup> Five years before his death on 6 May 1862, he wrote these lines in his journal: "That aching of the breast, the grandest pain that man endures, which no ether can assuage . . . If the teeth ache they can be pulled. If the heart aches, what then? Shall we pluck it out?"<sup>48</sup>



Night is setting in. Darkness is coming on. I stop. I sit in Merton's chapel. Nothing else is happening. I am not being carried away by any other current. I pray Vespers, using texts as they come to hand. *Psalm 11* -- images of war and peace, solitude and social involvement with evil, images of destruction, associations with the SAC plane: "He rains upon the wicked fiery coals and brimstone; a burning blast is their allotted cup." But this destiny is our own choice and our own doing if it be done. We take refuge in the Lord. We seek our own peace with ourselves and each other. *Psalm 13* -- "How long, O Lord? Will you utterly forget me? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I harbor sorrow in my soul, grief in my heart day after day?" Tonight, sitting in joyfulness of heart, I reach out in spirit to prisoners in their confinement and the lonely in their unwanted isolation, and wish for them this place, this clear cold night, this stillness.

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46. Thoreau quoted this poem in the Friday section of his first book; see *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, p. 383.

47. Quoted by William Howarth in *The Book of Concord: Thoreau's Life as a Writer* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 79.

48. The entry was dated 23 February 1857; *Journal* (Dover Edition), Vol. 9, pp. 177, 278 (Vol. 2, pp. 1121, 1122).

The psalm concludes: “. . . let me sing of the Lord, ‘He has been good to me!’” And the desert text of *Hosea*, the promise of restitution to full union in love and mercy. What punishment for our sinfulness: “I will espouse you to me forever; I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord.” While the whole of this hermitage and its surroundings were for Merton a hallowed place of prayer, we can imagine him here, in this little chapel, in special union with Our Lord in the Eucharist, in the undisturbed hours of the night, before and after the SAC plane’s passing. The loneliness and inner restlessness he later expressed in the Asian journal<sup>49</sup> were elements in his encounters with Christ here in this room. And Merton, to his core, was a priest of the Eucharist. Concluding Number 87 of *Cables to the Ace* he wrote: “I am about to build my nest in the misdirected and unpaid express as I walk away from this poem, hiding the ace of freedoms.”<sup>50</sup>

A senior monk who knew Thomas Merton well once told me: “Ah, that was Louie. Always hiding ‘the Ace of Freedoms’ -- like Christ!” Merton felt he had to pretend not to be religious, sometimes putting on a rough and bravado air, so as not to lose what he really was, killing the “Ace of Freedoms” to help him live secretly in his heart. This is what I feel about Merton from this room, perhaps of all in the hermitage the least changed since he left. The west wall holds the black metal tabernacle painted with pale gold sun-burst face on the door, and red splotches on the side.

On this wall also hangs the ceramic crucifix made by Ernesto Cardenal while he was a member of this community, and five icons. The triptych above the tabernacle was sent to Merton as a gift by scholar Marco Pallis. The Madonna and Child icon, from Mount Athos, was sent by artist and designer Robert Rambusch.<sup>51</sup> Two others, Elias in his fiery chariot and Rublev’s Trinity, were made by Brother Columban at Saint Meinrad. I do not know the source of the fifth icon -- Elias in his cave -- the title paper pasted on the back is printed in German.

On the floor there are three rugs from Christ in the Desert Monastery, Abiquiu, New Mexico, one larger in Indian maze-patterned border of black, gray and white, the center tan. The smaller ones are variegated in color and criss-crossed geometric patterns. In the far corner of the room, left, a small table, covered with a blue woven cloth, holds the extinguished

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49. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 103, 148, 184.

50. *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 60. Hereafter referred to in the text as C.

51. Brother Patrick Hart -- Merton’s onetime secretary -- clarified these details for me in a letter dated 5 June 1985.

vigil lamp below the empty tabernacle and an oblong box with objects of great personal value to Merton. It contains eight relics in gold and silver filigree cases and a rough beaded prayer-rope, all carried by him to Asia and returned here after his death. This is verified by a note written by Merton's Abbot and pasted on the back of the box. We can thus learn Merton's favorite saints: Charbelus (hermit), Peter Damascene, E.C.D.; Nicholas of Flora; Therese of the Child Jesus; Bruno (Carthusian); Romuald (Camoldolese); Thomas of Canterbury (bishop, martyr); Bede (Confessor, Doctor, historian). In the corner, right, is a small table with *lectionary* and *sacramentary* of the New Rite, cruets, a bookstand, matches and tapers. The small altar in the center of the small room is of cedar. The bottom part itself a cabinet with chalice, linens and other items for the Holy Sacrifice. Economy of space is observed. On the altar, two brass candlesticks, square, with small flanges. An old desk lamp rests on the altar for use by the celebrant. A black cover protects the altar cloth. Overhead, ceiling lights. Two chairs and a prie-dieu complete the room.



The wind howls. The roof beams creak. I think of Merton and Thoreau, lights across the ridge of death. I think of Christ: "... *lumen ad revelationis gentium.*" I challenge the hermitage darkness with electricity, wrap myself against the cold and step into the black night. I return, all around me now more perceptible, the full moon to my back and wild dogs baying in the distant woods. The hoot owl is silent. Water gleams in mud ruts. I hop here and there to keep my dry feet clean. Like stars, lights from far away farm houses silhouette the sight line. A bell rings, unseen guide.

Turning the curve of the foot path, my shadow stretched before me, I gasp at the immense luminescence of the Abbey. Lit with lanterns, it is a British man-of-war anchored in a foreign harbor. Or perhaps some Whistler or Monet instant reprint. The sky above and ahead of me a tunnel of black with silver shining through and fading, a vast canvas thrashed by El Greco with his enormous brush. Branches like black snakes strike at my imagination. I turn and cross the causeway, find my way along the bulk of the great retaining wall. Pavement is smooth to booted feet, steady, sure. Landmarks from Merton's "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952" (*Sign of Jonas*) -- the sheet-tin steeple, the old novitiate and infirmary -- have vanished. Tonight, Nature has transformed Merton's "lamentable failure of religious architecture," has softened rough edges, mollified the bleakness of line and form. I go inside, along empty corridors. The *preau*, sterile, cold, hard by daylight,

tonight like water. Lights from rooms and lamps along its concrete paths flicker and sparkle, like Japanese lanterns or luminarillas around a hacienda somewhere in Santa Fe, in the movement of clouds and shadows. No need to wear my hood up. I allow the breeze to sooth my face, tousle my hair.



The flit of light casts Sesshu patterns on the wood-block floor as I step into the Abbey church. At last I sit in this deep, great whale of Father Louis. I listen to my own necessity. I want to build a tabernacle over these sacred days here. Then, a familiar voice in the night. Gethsemani's Jonas whispers back to me: "*But birds fly uncorrected across burnt lands. The surest home is pointless*" (C, p. 60).