

Merton's Images of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God

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The Mystery

At the 1993 ITMS General Meeting in Colorado Springs, Dr Robert Daggy held out a mystery to me. There were two copies of Merton's ink drawing, 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament' (Fig. 1, left), a duplication that suggested that this particular drawing was handled by Merton as no other.¹ Sensing something very important to Merton in this, Daggy asked me to study them closely. How Merton handled them was indeed unique:

1. 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament' bears on the page a title, rare for Merton.
2. The Columbia University version's inscription is much neater than that on the Bellarmine copy: 'To Sr. Therese/ from Fr. M. Louis', plus 'T.M.' (the T forms a +) and a reference to 2 Cor. 3.12-18.
3. The Bellarmine version is printed on the same piece of paper, paired with an untitled drawing (Fig. 1, right), clearly a type of 'Veronica's Veil'. At Bellarmine the ink study for this Veronica's Veil is dated 1952.
4. As well as being printed together, these drawings at Bellarmine are on an ivory laid paper of substantial weight, another rarity. The same type of paper holds the Columbia drawings, but they are cut apart.

1. This study benefited from the encouragement of many people, including Br Patrick Hart, OCSO and Br Paul Quenon, OCSO. It was presented at the first young scholars conference hosted by the Thomas Merton Center Foundation in 1996. I am especially grateful to the late Bob Daggy and Fr George Kilcourse.

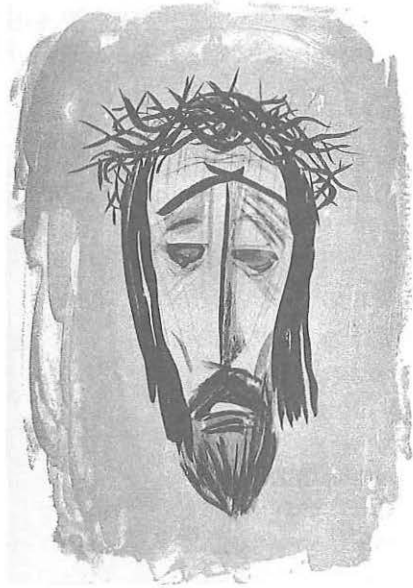


Figure 1. Thomas Merton, *Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament* (left); and *Veronica's Veil* (right), photostatic copies(?) on paper, n.d. The collection of The Thomas Merton University, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

5. The Columbia University *Veronica's Veil* is like our Figure 1 (right) and, like the 'Christ Unveils', is identical except for the color-veil behind the drawing of the Savior's face. The Columbia version is ochre, the Bellarmine olive green. These colors tint the black ink of each 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament' also.
6. When was the drawing of 'Christ Unveils' created? Michael Mott placed it in 1941, and Br Patrick Hart said it dates somewhere from the mid-1940s to the 1950s.² By

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1993), p. 578. Interview with Br Patrick Hart, OCSO, 23 and 29 August 1999. This early dating raises the suggestion that 'artistic imagination', as Romano Guardini postulated, precedes theological reflection by a decade, even a generation'. George Kilcourse raises this issue in his essay, 'Pieces of the Mosaic, Earth: Thomas Merton and the Christ', in Timothy Mulhearn (ed.), *Getting It All Together: The Heritage of Thomas Merton* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 81-109 (102-103). Kilcourse's insights into the links between Merton's visual and verbal artworks catalyzed some of the reflections in this paper.

stylistic indicators I'll venture 1952, for my rationale is its close similarity to a dated ink drawing of 'Christ Crowned with Thorns' (Fig. 2), which is similar to Christ's face in 'Christ Unveils'.

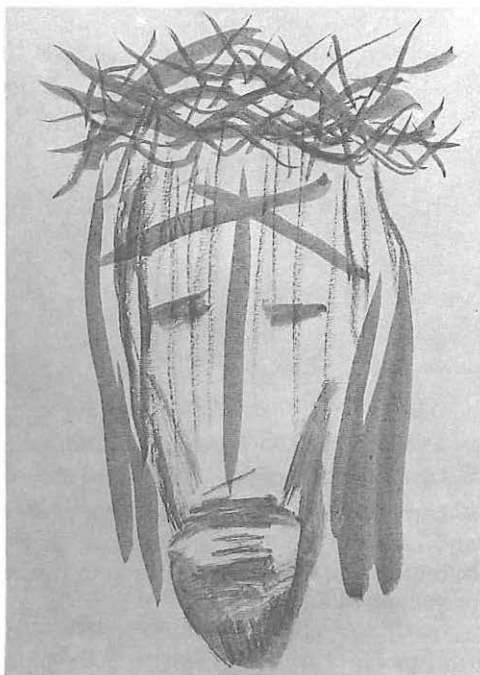


Figure 2. Thomas Merton, *Christ Crowned With Thorns*, ink on paper, 1952. The collection of The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

7. Finally there is a culminating mystery: as these appear to be copies, and cherished enough for Merton to have preserved at both his archives, where are the originals of the pair?³ Did Merton send the originals of both drawings to Boris Pasternak, when telling him of the dream of Proverb (which is related to the 'Christ Unveils')? Merton's letter to Pasternak of 23 October 1958 mentions the need to 'fight our way out of complacency and realize that all our work remains yet to be done, the work of

3. Connected with this are questions such as what copying process was used? Xerographic copiers were commercially available in 1950. More investigation of this technical aspect is needed.

transformation, which is the work of love, and love alone'.⁴ This sounds like 2 Cor. 3.18, in which St Paul states we are being transformed from glory to glory, by the work of the Spirit.

Could Merton have given the drawings to M., the student nurse, in June 1966 after their meetings were discovered? Michael Mott states that the young figure of Proverb in 'Christ Unveils' bears such a striking resemblance to M. that it 'might be a detailed sketch of her in the summer of 1966'.⁵

In 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament' there may be a key to the correspondence of Merton's visual and verbal expressions of his own spiritual growth. Since investigations of Merton's drawings are sparse, this essay will examine it and its mate, in relation both to the prose poem 'Hagia Sophia' and to another pair of images, associated with the poem of 1957, 'Elias—Variations on a Theme'. This pair of Byzantine-Russian icons, 'The Prophet Elias in the Desert' and 'Elias and the Fiery Chariot' (Figs. 3 and 4), inform the theme and style of Merton's poem, and show us visual and verbal links previously unnoticed. Moreover, they represent the two facets of divine nature that the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paragraph 239) celebrates as God's inclusive nature, both transcendent and immanent, masculine and feminine, God as Father and Mother.

In the early 1960s Merton hung in his cell three icons that later were photographed in the chapel of his hermitage. The photo in *A Hidden Wholeness* (p. 33) shows a painted icon of the Madonna and Child, and the two icons of Elias (Elijah), one in the desert being fed by a raven and one ascending in a fiery chariot.⁶ These images, the icons and

4. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), p. 89.

5. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 578. There is a significant dirth of letters in the Lentfoehr archive at Bellarmine, and at Columbia University, from the period Spring through Fall, 1966, so additional research is needed.

6. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 33. Merton mentions in his journals from the 1950s and 1960s the images he put in his working or sleeping spaces; most times we do not learn precisely what they are, but occasionally we do. For instance, for 14 January 1953 he notes 'The Jesus on the walls of this hermitage [St Anne's, a woodshed] is the *Devot Christ* of Perpignan', and the footnote tells us that this French town is near Prades, Merton's birthplace (Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* [ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III, 1953–1960; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996], p. 28). This note



Figure 3. Pskov School of Russian Icons, *The Prophet Elias in the Desert*, color print of icon, c. 1500. The Hermitage, Abbey of Gethsemani, Trappist, KY.

about Perpignan's nearness to Prades appears also in Merton's *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953), p. 1. In this examination of the monk's life of chanting psalms, a long caption explains this *Devot Christ* as an eschatological image indicating the date of Christ's return—when the head of the Crucified, moving year by year, finally drops onto the chest. In the same journal (March and May 1960), Merton described his new cell under the infirmary stairs, and mentions 'three icons and a small crucifix which Cardinal made' hanging there (Merton, *Search for Solitude*, pp. 382, 387). These may be the two Elias icons, but proof is needed; it is tempting to think he had possession of them since composing his poem 'Elias—Variations on a Theme' in late 1954—early 1955. Nevertheless, having the icons by his side in the 1950s is not crucial, for he had access to these images in his research in the monastery archives. The question of what images Merton hung in his work spaces and when deserves a detailed chronology.



Figure 4. Novgorod School of Russian Icons, *Elias and the Fiery Chariot*, color print of icon, fifteenth century. The Hermitage, Abbey of Gethsemani, Trappist, KY.

'Christ Unveils', show Merton's intuitive grasp of a God more inclusive than the traditional patriarchal God, and, like the God of the Psalms, all-encompassing. Elias is fed by the maternal care of the immanent God and assumed into heaven at the end of his life by the transcendent, all-powerful, paternal God.⁷ The two Elias icons form an image of divine inclusivity, which I feel is under-appreciated, when grasped at all. God here is Nourisher, feeding the Prophet at the Wadi Cherith, and God is all-consuming Love, taking Elias to heaven without giving Death any power over him.

7. It is clear to this author that Trappist brothers who now welcome women retreatants have assimilated this inclusive God. They now accept their sisters on a more comfortable footing, seen in earlier days as unwise. This mature attitude shares their gift and witness to the call to holiness and contemplation, given to all.

The decade of the 1950s, as Lawrence Cunningham points out, saw the development of Merton's 'sophianic christology'.⁸ In 1952 he began corresponding with a Carmelite, Sister Anita Wasserman, OCD,⁹ Elias is an important model for her order, and Merton originally wrote 'the "Elias" poem for the nuns of the New York Carmelite Convent'.¹⁰ At Christmas 1951, Merton wrote a poem for the Carmelites, 'Christmas 1951'. After Christmas, 1954, he composed 'Elias—Variations on a Theme' and in July 1955 he sent it to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr for her birthday and profession anniversary. 28 February 1958, he recorded his dream about the young Jewish girl, Proverb, who 'clings to [him] and will not let go, and [he gets] to like the idea'.¹¹ On 18 March 1958, the monk accepted humanity in a new way in the epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville. From August to December 1958, Merton wrote several times to Boris Pasternak, and discussed his dream of Proverb. In a letter of 14 May 1959 to Victor Hammer, Merton sketched out the early draft of the poem 'Hagia Sophia,' which Hammer in 1962 privately printed.

In 1952 Merton drew the study for the 'Veronica's Veil' (Fig. 2). That same year he may have drawn 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament'. 'Veronica's Veil' and 'Christ Unveils' are paired in the copy at Bellarmine, and the faces of Christ in each are similar. Taken altogether, these images of Elias and Merton's drawing of the relation of Christ to the Old Testament can be viewed as a demonstration of Merton's identity integration, the healing of his personality through union with his anima.¹² These three images illuminate the two poems that center on their themes, 'Elias—Variations on a Theme', and 'Hagia Sophia', for both express the monk's profound appreciation for the Old Testament's relevance for his own life. Moreover, both the icon pair and 'Christ Unveils' encapsulate the masculine and feminine principles of creativity and power Merton refers to in his poetry, the transcendent yet immanent deity who is Jesus the Christ and the Wisdom of God. For such an imagistic writer as

8. Cunningham, Introduction to Thomas Merton, *Search for Solitude*, pp. xvi-xvii.

9. Letter to Sr Anita (Ann Wasserman), OCD, 3 May 1952. In Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), p. 177.

10. Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Geography of Solitude: Thomas Merton's "Elias—Variations on a Theme"', *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988), pp. 151-90 (152).

11. Merton, *Search for Solitude*, p. 176.

12. Robert G. Waldron, *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul: A Jungian Perspective* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1994), pp. 97-112.

Merton, seeing the actual images he had at hand in forming the verbal art works, the poems, can aid the reader to appreciate more of the author's integration of verbal and visual talents, his left and right brain functions.¹³

The Images: Elias and Proverb

Landscape, really geography, is a theme scholars have followed closely in Merton's life and writings.¹⁴ While his early life was an actual geographic peregrination, the inner geography Merton cultivated in the monastery was that supplied by the daily readings in scriptures and Psalms. His appreciation for scripture fills the pages of his journals. His desire for desert solitude, for social justice and peace made him the natural ally of prophetic voices. The prophet and traveler Elias is one of the 'burnt men' referred to in the last line of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton wrote, 'I know well the burnt faces of the Prophets and the Evangelists, transformed by the white-hot dangerous presence of inspiration, for they looked at God as into a furnace.'¹⁵ Indeed, the theme of immolation figures in both the icon and the poem, for the fiery chariot is the last we see of Elias in the books of Kings. Just before this, he journeyed toward the close of his life, on an itinerary just as divinely directed as his visit to the Wadi Cherith. Elias visited the centers of the guild prophets, crossed the Jordan, which parted (as did the Red Sea for Moses), then was taken up to heaven miraculously in a whirlwind, represented as a fiery chariot.

Let us look at the correspondence of the two images of Elias and

13. Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1979).

14. Use of the geography theme is quite widespread. The O'Connell article is one among many books and articles. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); William Reiser, in his recent article 'Solidarity and the Reshaping of Spirituality', *Merton Annual* 11 (1998), pp. 97-109 (101), writes: 'Merton's own poetry revealed the extent to which his interior life had become geographic...' The recent paper by William Apel, 'Nineveh to Calvary: Thomas Merton and a Spiritual Geography of the Bible', ITMS Sixth General Meeting, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 12 June 1999 (below, pp. 235-44), continued this theme and cited Merton's book, *Sign of Jonah*, on the transforming effect of scripture. The whole notion of love's transformative power is a rich vein in Merton's work.

15. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (ed. Jonathan Montaldo; Journals, II, 1941-1952; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 362.

their literary realization in the poem.¹⁶ Then we will examine Merton's drawing as it relates to: (1) his dream of Proverb, a young Jewish girl; (2) the manifestation of Holy Wisdom; and (3) the actual person, the young nurse with whom Merton fell in love.

The first line of the poem 'Elias—Variations on a Theme' draws our attention to a rather insignificant detail in the icon (Fig. 3), as the first verse here paints the scene with pine, bird, and pathway dying in the wilds. Elias can hardly sit 'Under the blunt pine' of the icon (difficult to see at the right, over his shoulder), but that stunted poetic line expresses the terse and abrupt introduction we have to Elias in the first book of Kings. It fits also with Elias' state of near-despair in the winter sun that gives light but no warmth,¹⁷ which is rendered in the icon's gold background. There is correspondence also with the awkward style of the fifteenth-century iconographer, whose abstract rocks and stream look unlike our ideas of those landscape features, and more like a child's.

In 1 Kgs 17 we first meet Elias as he springs up, as it were, before King Ahab to predict the drought, and claim power over it. Just as suddenly, God instructs Elias to go to the Wadi Cherith and be fed by ravens. The icon is rough, abstract; it transgresses what Ross Labrie calls 'the usual boundaries of the material world, thereby predisposing the [viewer] toward an awareness of the spiritual'.¹⁸ That is the special power of the icon as an art form.

In Merton's journal for 17 July 1956, he noted the coincidence between Elias and himself: 'Today, for example, it happened in the refectory that the vocation of Elias to hide at Kerith was read, from the Book of Kings [1 Kgs 17]. It just happened to be time for it today. And I am going to the Woods because it is my day to pray.'¹⁹ It is easy to see that Merton is present in the persona of Elias, and Michael Mott judges that this persona 'provides control without loss of immediacy in the austere choruses [of the poem]'.²⁰ Elias waits in the desert, wretched and feeling good for nothing. By abiding there in the stillness, he is fed; in the stillness and hiddenness, he knows that God truly is. He is the hermit, attentive to God's call, transcending the mundane and zealous for the Lord. As Merton described to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, this poem resulted from a private retreat after

16. Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Geography of Solitude', pp. 151-90. See also *idem*, 'Sunken Islands...', *Merton Seasonal* 12.2 (Spring 1987), pp. 4-9.

17. O'Connell, 'The Geography of Solitude', p. 154.

18. Ross Labrie, 'Merton and Time', *Merton Annual* 11 (1998), pp. 121-37 (123).

19. Merton, *Search for Solitude*, p. 46.

20. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 303.

Christmas of 1954. It was the turning point at which he realized that he was indeed called to be a hermit.²¹

The poem's first two sections contain hints in the poetic diction that Merton was alert to the Elias icons' stylized imagery. In both 'The Prophet Elias in the Desert' (Fig. 3) and the poem nothing flows, all is angles and sudden stops, like halting footsteps, or like those rocks in Elias' desert:

Under the blunt pine
In the winter sun
The pathway dies
And the wilds begin.
Here the bird abides
Where the ground is warm
And sings alone.²²

The second verse introduces Elias with the command, 'Listen', as in the opening words of the Rule of St Benedict, and each verse in this section, in the narrator's voice, repeats this command—to a total of seven times. This harks to the narrative of Elias waiting on Mt Horeb to encounter God in 'the gentle breeze'.²³ In the icon Elias is set amidst all he needs, earth, air, water and fiery heat of the sun, the quaternity of elements reflected in the four rocky peaks behind him.

The second section of the poem shows us Merton's Trappist version of Elias' fiery chariot:

Flame? This old wagon
With the wet, smashed wheels
Is better. ('My chariot')
This derelict is better.
('Of fire') It abides
(Swifter) in the brown ferns
And burns nothing. Bring me ('Of fire')
Better still the old trailer ('My chariot')
With the dead stove in it, and the rain
Comes down the pipe and covers the floor.
Bring me my chariot of rain. Bring me
My old chariot of broken-down rain.

21. Letters to Sr Thérèse Lentfoehr, 12 July and 6 August 1955. Parts of these letters are not printed in Thomas Merton, *Road to Joy: Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (ed. Robert Daggy; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), pp. 219-20.

22. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957), pp. 36-42 (36). Part II, quoted next, is pp. 37-38.

23. O'Connell, 'The Geography of Solitude', p. 156.

Bring, bring my old fire, my old storm,
 My old trailer; faster and faster it stands still,
 Faster and faster it stays where it has always been,
 Behind the felled oaks, faster, burning nothing.

While Merton was recuperating from the flu in spring 1950, he mentions sitting in the sun behind the garden house: 'There I sat this morning [25 March 1950] in that Bermuda carriage. (A carriage fits my most decent ideas of comfort. I feel human in the modest carriage with beautiful wheels...)'.²⁴ Contrast Merton's poetic image with Elias' chariot (Fig. 4):

There were supposed
 To be fiery devices,
 Grand machines, all flame,
 With supernatural wings. Beyond the full creek.
 ('Bring me my chariot of fire').

The full creek alludes to the Jordan, which Elias crossed before his ascension, and the quoted line ('Bring me my chariot of fire') is from the favorite British anthem 'Jerusalem', a setting of a poem by William Blake. Ross Labrie, in his recent article 'Merton and Time', takes the old trailer as an example of Einsteinian physics. He says the trailer 'moves "faster and faster", yet mysteriously "stands still", a paradox based not only on Christian theology but on Einstein's modernist view that a moving object may seem to be still or to move at various speeds depending on one's vantage point'.²⁵ That is the paradox also of the icon of 'Elias and the Fiery Chariot', for the viewer knows this static image stands for and translates a 'whirlwind' of powerful movement. This tension is inherent in painting an icon, or any image of movement.

Here are lots of contrasts: Elias is immolated in God's love—the fiery chariot—while Merton's old wagon has a 'dead stove'. The Prophet went beyond the full creek (Jordan River), while Merton's wagon has only 'wet, smashed wheels', unfit to travel. In section IV of 'Elias' Merton puts himself back under the pine tree: he's going nowhere, is not sent, seeks first the Kingdom, abiding under the blunt pine. In the wilds of Kentucky, with a dead stove in an old, beaten up wagon with bad wheels, Merton could feel the same 'divine transport and energy' that caught Elias up into the fullness of God's love.

24. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 425.

25. Labrie, 'Merton and Time', p. 134.

Grandeur was not needed in a dedicated life where all spoke to this poet of divine transcendence coupled with nurturing immanence.²⁶

Tenderness, Suffering, Ecstasy, Love

Our third image of the Old Testament, that drawing by Merton, 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament', is best viewed in relation to his poem, 'Hagia Sophia'. This poem is a verbal rhapsody to God's Wisdom, who appears as a nurse awaking her patient, as the essence of the feminine.²⁷

Since this is the decade of Merton's comprehension of 'sophianic christology', Christ as the Wisdom of God, it is not surprising that Merton, in adjacent entries in February and March 1958, realized Wisdom's manifestations to him of the essential oneness Merton shared with all humanity. He sensed particularly the humanity of the women he saw on that famous corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville; he calls this by an unusual term, 'woman-ness'.²⁸ In appreciation he writes a love letter, because he saw her, 'Dear Proverb', there at Fourth and Walnut, amidst the women. Viewed by the Jungian scholar Robert Waldron as evidence that Merton married his anima in

26. Mary M. Murray, in a letter to Betz, n.d. [26 November 1999].

27. Merton sketched this part of 'Hagia Sophia' in a dream recorded 2 July 1960, the feast of the Visitation, in Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (ed. Victor A. Kramer; Journals, IV, 1960–1963; San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1996), p. 17.

28. Merton, *Search for Solitude*, p. 182. It is startling how he stresses his reaction to the women on the street. In a long paragraph after the epiphany section, Merton says he was 'keenly conscious, not of their beauty...but of their humanity, their woman-ness. But what incomprehensible beauty is there, what secret beauty that would perhaps be inaccessible to me if I were not dedicated to a different way of life. It is as though by chastity I had come to be married to what is most pure in all the women of the world and to taste and sense the secret beauty of their girl's hearts as they walked in the sunlight—each one secret and good and lovely in the sight of God—never touched by anyone, nor by me, nor by anyone, as good as and even more beautiful than the light itself. For that woman-ness that is in each of them is at once original and inexhaustibly fruitful bringing the image of God into the world. In this each one is Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady—(my delights are to be with the children of men!).' The subsequent note to 'Dear Proverb', states, 'I have kept one promise that I have refrained from speaking of you until seeing you again. I know that when I saw you again it would be very different, in a different place, in a different form, in the most unexpected circumstances. I shall never forget our meeting yesterday [i.e. at Fourth and Walnut]. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child sent to me by God!'

Proverb, the love letters continue the integration of his masculine and feminine sides.²⁹ In 'Elias—Variations on a Theme', section IV brings in the voices of nature (pine tree, bird, river). In hearing and recording these, the poem's speaker expresses the divine wisdom of each and we recognize his oneness with them. In other words, his solitude is that of the integrated personality, inclusive not exclusive.³⁰

The process of integrating his personality continued over many years. A further refinement, along Jungian lines, can be seen when Merton indicated his awareness of what was happening. In saying Mass at the Louisville Carmel on the feast of St John of the Cross (23 October 1959), Merton felt a uniting of 'Animus + Anima—Adam and Eve. Man divided and seeking unity in the Sacrifice of Christ the Lord. I was deeply stirred by it'.³¹ In this laconic statement we can sense a profound awakening to the movement of integration within himself, which animated the entire development of Merton's 'sophianic christology'. The drawing helps to place this integration within the Eastern Church's understanding of Christ's Incarnation, so exciting to Merton at this time.

Just five months before, in May 1959 the monk had written to Victor Hammer about that artist's image of Christ being crowned by Sophia. In fact, Merton identified this woman as Sophia, for the painter did not yet know whom he had painted; there seem to be no precedents for this configuration in any icon or painting of Hagia Sophia. The subsequent development of the prose-poem 'Hagia Sophia' is the literary culmination of this mature approach to the male-female, yin-yang balance of life that Merton understood from a deep appreciation for the insights of Jung. In looking at Victor Hammer's painting of 'Hagia Sophia', Merton may have unconsciously seen a transposition of his own drawing, 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament'. The description of Merton's visit to the Hammers' on 21 April 1959 gives a hint at his astonishment at seeing the painting, and we may suppose part of that is the similarity of the painting's composition to Merton's own drawing. When compared to Hammer's print (Fig. 5), it is easy to see the similarities: an older figure stands at the right and reaches toward the seated, younger figure at the left.

29. Waldron, *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul*, pp. 101-103. Merton spoke further on integrating the masculine and feminine in oneself in Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (ed. Jane Marie Richardson; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), pp. 133-34.

30. O'Connell, 'Geography of Solitude', pp. 182-87.

31. Merton, *Search for Solitude*, p. 270.

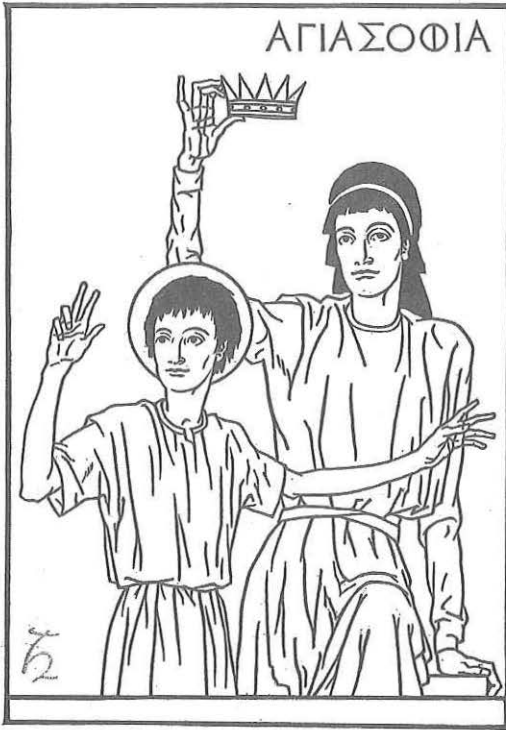


Figure 5. Victor Hammer, *Hagia Sophia and the Young Christ*, linecut, 1961. The Victor Hammer Collection of the Library of the University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

In Hammer's image, the older woman reaches to place a crown on the head of the teenage boy. In Merton's drawing, an older, sorrowful Christ pulls a veil from the fresh face of a dark-haired Jewish girl. At Columbia's archives there is also a pencilled inscription for Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, to whom Merton sent this copy, and a scripture reference, 2 Cor. 3.12-18. This passage in St Paul compares the veil Moses put over his face after speaking with God to the failure of the Jewish authorities to recognize Christ as the promised Messiah. St Paul says, 'Indeed, to this very day, that same veil is still there when the old covenant is being read, a veil never lifted, since Christ alone can remove it'. Paul goes on, 'And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord, who is Spirit'.

Christ is for St Paul the 'power and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1.25). Even without a title on this drawing, the subject of Christ un-

veiling someone would be clear to most Christians, but there is a very striking contrast in the eyes of these two figures, in the general demeanor of the girl and of Christ. The art historian Leo Steinberg commented:

The Thomas Merton drawing is extraordinary. Not only did this talkative Trappist draw well, and with an obviously practiced hand, but the contrasting eyes of his Christ and his 'Old Testament' are original and disturbing. You are clearly right [Steinberg said to my comment] in observing Merton's 'softening' of St. Paul's 'anti-Semitic text' (2 Cor. 3.12-16), but one might go even further. Anyone not knowing the subject of the drawing might conclude that the lovely young girl is the Future. It's like the Old Year unveiling the New in allegorical drawings one used to see around Dec. 31-Jan.1. It's almost as if the qualifiers in 'Old' and 'New Testament' had been shuffled, transposed. Did Merton know what I think he was doing, or am I hallucinating? And look at their eyes: the young girl's wide open; the Christ's almost dimmed with age.³²

The eyes are indeed the key to Merton's pairing of 'Christ Unveils' with 'Veronica's Veil', Christ crowned with thorns. The eyes of Christ in both show the same sorrow and weariness. Their eyes resemble those of the Madonna in the Byzantine-Russian icon of the 'Umileniye ['tender'] Mother of God', an icon Merton revered and eventually displayed as the centerpiece over the altar of his hermitage (dedicated to Our Lady of Mt Carmel). The Madonna's eyes are always sad in this type of icon; sometimes they show the puffiness of recent crying. The infant Jesus is clasped to her bosom and their cheeks are pressed together, as she contemplates his suffering and death. As Merton wrote in 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', 'in Christ, God takes to Himself the solitude and dereliction of man: every man'.³³

Christ stands behind Proverb in Merton's drawing and, like a bridegroom, brings to light her beauty. He removes the veil that obscures the significance of this lovely, ancient, and ever-new Wisdom, eternally fresh and youthful. In the spirit of the ancient icons, Christ and the young woman personify an ascetic delight, the joyfully embraced discipline and self-sacrifice of the followers of Christ. They are both question and answer, an artistic interpretation of Merton's intuition regarding God's infinite mercy and self-revelation in sacred scriptures.

In other words, she and Christ are really two manifestations of the same truth, the wisdom of God, Hagia Sophia. She is Christ manifest

32. Leo Steinberg, in a letter to Betz, 21 April 1993.

33. Thomas Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', in *idem, Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 9-23 (18).

as the infinite, 'inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father's glory... So she does in us...the work of transformation from brightness to brightness, *tamquam a Domini Spiritu*'. (Here is that passage from 2 Corinthians again, with the final part in the Latin.) Many feminist Bible scholars have explored the Christ-Sophia link, and understandably find it rich.³⁴

In the companion piece, printed alongside 'Christ Unveils', the veil behind Merton's spare ink lines rendering the face of Christ (a use of color extremely rare in his work), signifies that this is his version of the most ancient icon, the legendary True Image, *vera ikona*. This image was divinely bestowed on a pious woman who took pity and wiped the blood and dirt from Christ's face on the *Via Dolorosa*. We call the woman Veronica, after the miraculous image on her veil.

Michael Mott, in the 1993 Afterword to his Harvest Books edition of *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, revealed another aspect of this drawing and, though there is some difference of opinion about the dating, he is authoritative about the personal coincidence. Mott compares her to Proverb in Merton's dreams, and to the Jewish girl Merton described to Pasternak, and then writes: 'Each of these images in the series would be the rediscovery of an original...[the] drawing is so like the photographs Merton took of [M.], it might be a careful sketch of her in the summer of 1966.'³⁵

After their affair was halted, Merton made a solemn commitment to the hermit life. He called M. in September, and realized that she was born in Cincinnati. In his journal entry of 10 September 1966, he was startled to realize that he traveled through that city on his way to enter Gethsemani just about two months after she was born. He vividly recalled walking

...through Cincinnati station with the words of Proverb 8 on my mind:
And my delights were to be with the children of men!—I have never

34. Thomas Merton, 'Hagia Sophia', *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 363-71 (369). Feminist Bible exegesis is a burgeoning field, and has a new appreciation for aspects of the Scriptures that reveal the feminine dimension of God and the fully integrated consciousness of Jesus, as He speaks and acts in the Gospel records. See, for example, Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 10th anniversary edn, 1994); and *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary* (ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; 2 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1993-94). For an overview of the issue, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

35. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 578.

forgotten this, it struck me so forcefully then. Strange connection in my deepest heart—between M. and the 'Wisdom' figure—and Mary—and the Feminine in the Bible—Eve etc.—paradise—wisdom. Most mysterious, haunting, deep, lovely, moving, transforming!³⁶

Conclusion

The Elias icons and Merton's drawing, seemingly so different, are linked by that centering force found in so much of Merton's output. The force springs from the awesome unity of a God both transcendent and immanent, those overriding qualities conventionally associated with male and female, masculine and feminine principles in human experience. Merton's poems about Elias and Hagia Sophia verbalize the unspoken message of their corresponding images, and hide within themselves Merton's special vision of an inclusive God. The eyes of Merton's young Jewish girl, tender, silent, transfigured by this same vision, carry 'a truth for Merton that far extends his writings in many ways'.³⁷ Christian monastic life fosters and nourishes this eschatological secret of a unity already achieved and available to the readied heart. This ever-present joy, this mysterious and hidden ascetic treasury catalyzes the monastic liturgy, the on-going 'work of the people of God'.

Only living this life of practiced, unceasing praise and supplication, as Merton did, prompts recognition of the eloquent balance of transcendent and immanent, of God's justice and mercy, shot throughout the Psalter and traditions. Yet, one needn't look for this only in monasteries and houses of prayer. Many Christian devotions celebrate this same unity of the transcendent and immanent God. The *Angelus*, for example, is a very popular, thrice-daily prayer in praise of a woman who is paradoxically both virgin and mother. Her transformation in agreeing to conceive by the power of the Spirit, occurs at the instant of union of transcendence and immanence, which expresses the mysterious unity at the heart of God's own nature: Love! This Love transforms all it penetrates, reconciles bitter oppositions, marries the brother with his anima, the sister with her animus. Personality integration, Jungian psychology tells us, is the healthy activation of eros and libido (official terms for relatedness and energy). This integration depends precisely on an individual's maturing into a whole person,

36. Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: Journals, VI, 1966–1967; HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 130–31.

37. Mary M. Murray, in a letter to Betz, n.d. [26 November 1999].

capable of both life-giving interdependency and moderate self-sufficiency.³⁸ One's inner structure, one's 'inscape' to use Rilke's word, is transfigured, made something entirely new, yet existing from the beginning and playing before the throne of God and, as in Proverbs 8, taking delight in the children of men.

In looking at these images from the 1950s and their corresponding poems, we have seen a growing resolution of the dualities that haunted Merton's life, transcendence in stillness, youthful freshness revealed through the old and weary, ascetic discipline bringing delight, and powerful, masculine prophecy yielding in submission to God's call. While the search for the original of the drawing goes on, these two copies of 'Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament' express in an instant apprehension what Merton was still realizing in his life in 1966. That year he formally affirmed his submission to a vocation to the hermit life.

38. Waldron, *Thomas Merton in Search of his Soul*, p. 98.