

A Gallery of Women's Faces and Dreams of Women From the Drawings and Journals of Thomas Merton

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Among Thomas Merton's literary gifts was his ability to craft elements of his biography into literary metaphors that incite his readers not only to identify with his autobiographical art but also to undergo inner experiences of being transformed by reading him. The effect of reading Merton's autobiographical works, to include letters, journals, poetry, and primarily his autobiography, is a species of *metanoia*. Reading Merton threatens incidences of being changed, of wanting to lead a different, deeper kind of life.

Although the nature of the transformation that Merton initiates in a reader, many only guess at something more than having a pleasurable experience of good writing which often happens while reading Merton. This 'something more' is a central element of Merton's genius that transcends a writing ability that often displays mediocrity when having been published quickly. This 'something more' proceeds from his talent at disclosing his biography selectively and in an expressive way so that he communicates symbolic religious patterns within his personal experience that resonate with patterns that ground the personal experience of his readers. His art of confession and witness does not merely disclose itself for the reader's review, but imposes itself powerfully upon the reader as a form of teaching by personal example that both seduces and constrains the reader to 'go and do likewise'.

Some readers attest literal conversion to Roman Catholicism as a result of having read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. More generally, I have heard visitors to the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville speak

of having been 'saved', of having been 'gotten through a rough period in their lives', and of having 'their faith restored'. I cannot forget a senior at Bellarmine coming into the Merton Center with a Merton book under his arm. He looked like a baseball player. I asked him if he wanted a 'tour'. About mid-way through our walking the Center he stopped me in mid-sentence and blurted out 'I feel that Merton is talking directly to me'. His words blew me suddenly away and back. I at 55 could have been listening to myself speak again in a son. When he had departed, I pondered how this student of another generation was hooking into Merton without any benefit from the Thomas Merton Center's existence, or from the International Thomas Merton Society's, or from his having read *The Merton Annual* or attended conferences. Just like me 42 years ago this young guy, with no one to explicate his feelings for him, was experiencing the power of Merton's craft to rouse questions that resonated with important questions arising out of his own raw experiences.

In light of this knowledge that Merton can powerfully 'confess' and 'witness' directly for himself, I present this gallery of Merton's drawings of women's faces coupled almost without commentary with excerpts from his poem *Hagia Sophia* and then with dreams and daydreams about women in his journals to serve as company to this issue of the *Annual's* articles that are themed about Merton and the feminine.

A great deal could be said about 'Merton and the feminine' that exceeds a too narrow focus on the report by Merton of his relationship to the student nurse known as 'M'. While studying the implications of Merton's account of 'M' in his life and reading hints of psycho-development therein are interesting pursuits, I assert that we readers might at least as profitably explore the literary influences upon Merton's reports of his encounters with 'the feminine' that appear with such force in the 1950s and 1960s. Merton's reading of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* is an obvious literary influence upon Merton's reflections on women in his writing but less obvious, and perhaps as important, is the influence of books by Paul Evdokimov and Karl Stern.

Based on my reviewing Merton's copious marginalia in the original French edition of his copy of Paul Evdokimov's *La femme et le salut du monde* published in 1958, this text is required reading in my opinion for appreciating the appearance of the dream figure 'Proverb' in Merton's journals of the same year. Equally instructive is a reading of the Jewish psychiatrist turned Roman Catholic, Karl Stern's *The Flight from Woman*, another text published in 1958 and that Merton read that same year. On 23 March 1958 Merton's journals indicate that Karl Stern visited and spoke at Gethsemani 'the other day'. On 19 March,

four days before this comment on Stern's appearance, Merton writes his original entries for the 'Fourth & Walnut' experience in his journal. This is not coincidence.

Paul Evdokimov and Karl Stern might not be among the unacknowledged literary influences on Merton's journal reflections that have come to be known to his readers as 'Fourth & Walnut'. I would guess, however, although it would take a thorough study to prove it to myself, that Evdokimov's and Stern's texts are very important influences on Merton's progressive appropriation of *Hagia Sophia* as one of his leading metaphors for God's presence in his life.

While I believe that 'Fourth & Walnut' is a significant literary event in Merton's writing, I am dissuaded from regarding it as an historical 'epiphany' or 'revelation'. It is a literary event with literary antecedents (that might well include Evdokimov and Stern). This opinion does not diminish 'Fourth & Walnut's' power or importance in the history of Merton's writing. It does however undermine what appears to be the accepted historicity (whimsically now pointed to with a bronze marker on the spot in Louisville) of Merton having thought all these things 'suddenly' and exactly as they are recounted in his private journals later to be doctored for re-presentation in *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*.

'Proverb' is the mother of, or better, the 'sister' of Merton's experience at 'Fourth & Walnut'. Proverb's epiphany is recorded in Merton's journals on 28 February 1958 just nine days before his 'revelation'. Furthermore I find it significant that his journal reflections of 19 March 1958 on 'Fourth & Walnut' are written in his journal while he is at St Anne's, the small tool shed he was using as a 'hermitage' out in Gethsemani's fields. 'Anne' is an important name for Merton but I assume that the toolshed is named for the mother of Mary. And as St Anne is the mother of Mary, mother of God's Word incarnate and thus the archetype of Holy Wisdom, so is Merton's toolshed that he named for Anne one of the midwives for Proverb's appearance. In the future I hope more carefully to study the significance of the tool shed 'St Anne's' in Merton's writing.

The drawings of women's faces in the gallery that follow are selected from among 800 drawings produced by Merton of various subjects which are now archived at Bellarmine University's Thomas Merton Center in Louisville, Kentucky. The dreams are selected from among the 35 dreams that he recorded in his journals. These 35 extant dreams in the journals are indeed a small harvest in 29 years of extant journals but their very scarcity commands attention to their presence. I warn myself however that, like 'historical events' such as 'Fourth & Wal-

nut', Merton's recording his dreams in his journals are perhaps also best considered 'literary events' rather than strict and accurate rehearsals—if this is even possible—of his actual dreams. And as literary events—rather than an historicalreporting of dreams—they become perhaps more important in understanding the trajectories of Merton's intentions as a literary craftsman as he shapes his encounters with 'the feminine' within his writing.

If these introductory remarks and the snatches of commentary you will find in the footnotes are not helpful, ignore them: they are only surmises and conjecture. Enjoy this small exhibit of figurative and literary artifacts on your own terms. Let this gallery suggest to you whatever might come of instruction and delight as you give yourself over to considering these icons and literary images of 'the feminine' produced by Thomas Merton.



There is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.

I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity.¹

1. The drawings by Merton are produced with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust. Thomas Merton, 'Hagia Sophia', in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 363. All subsequent references are by Merton.



It is like being awakened by Eve. It is like being awakened by the Blessed Virgin. It is like coming forth from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in Paradise.

When the helpless one awakes strong at the voice of mercy, it is as if Life his Sister, as if the Blessed Virgin, (his own flesh, his own sister), as if Nature made wise by God's Art and Incarnation were to stand over him and invite him with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live. This is what it means to recognize *Hagia Sophia*.²

2. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 364.



The other day (St John Baptist perhaps) after my Mass I suddenly thought of Ann Winser, Andrew's little sister. She was about twelve or thirteen when I used to visit him on the Isle of Wight, in that quiet rectory at Brooke. She was the quietest thing on it, a dark and secret child. One does not fall in love with a child of thirteen, and I hardly remember even thinking of her. Yet the other day I realized that I had never forgotten her and, with a sort of Burnt Norton feeling about the part of the garden I never went to, and that if I had taken another turn in the road I might have ended up married to Ann. Actually, I think she is a symbol of the true (quiet) inner woman I never really came to terms with in the world, and because of this there remains an incompleteness that cannot be remedied.³

A Dream:

On the porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect, 'She belongs to the same race as St Anne'. I ask her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it—perhaps the others have mocked her for it.⁴

3. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Journals, V, 1963–66; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 259. This journal entry for 26 June 1965 about Anne Winser, while appearing in the journals seven years after the epiphany of 'Proverb' and one year before the epiphany of 'M', places an early incarnation of 'Proverb' in Merton's life in his encounter with young Anne. Anne Winser might also be considered a guardian spirit at the toolshed hermitage that shares her name.

4. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Vocation* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III, 1953–60; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 176.



A Prayer to Proverb:

Dear Proverb, for several days I have intended to write you this letter, to tell you that I have not forgotten you. Perhaps now too much time has gone by and I no longer exactly know what I wanted to tell you—except that though there is a great difference in our ages and many other differences between us, you know even better than I that these differences do not matter at all. Indeed it is from you that I have learned, to my surprise, that it is as if they never even existed.

How grateful I am to you for loving in me something that I thought I had lost entirely, and for loving someone who, I thought, I had long ago ceased to be. And in you, dear, though some might be tempted to say you do not even exist, there is a reality as real and as wonderful and as precious as life itself. I must be careful what I say, for words cannot explain my love for you, and I do not wish, by my words, to harm that which in you is more real and more pure than in anyone else in the world—your lovely spontaneity, your simplicity, the generosity of your love.⁵

5. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 176.



I think what I most want to say is that I treasure, in you, the revelation of your virginal solitude. In your marvelous, innocent love you are utterly alone: yet you have given your love to me, why I cannot imagine. And with it you have given me yourself and all the innocent wonder of your solitude. Dear, should I ask myself seriously if I will ever be worthy of such a gift? No, I am not — not because I could never probably be worthy, but because of my own love for you. And so, I give you everything.

Dearest Proverb, I love your name, its mystery, its simplicity and its secret, which even you yourself seem not to appreciate.⁶

6. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 176.



At 5:30, as I was dreaming in a very quiet hospital, the soft voice of the nurse awoke me gently from my dream—it was like awakening for the first time from all the dreams of my life—as if the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom had awakened me. We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the feminine voice, and the voice of the Mother: yet she speaks everywhere and in everything. Wisdom cries out in the marketplace—‘if anyone is little, let him come to me’. Who is more little than the helpless man, asleep in bed, having entrusted himself gladly to sleep and to night? Him the gentle voice will awaken, all that is sweet in woman will awaken him. Not for conquest and pleasure, but for the far deeper wisdom of love and joy and communion.⁷

7. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (ed. Victor A. Kramer; Journals, IV, 1960–63; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 7.



My heart is broken for all my sins and the sins of the whole world, for the rottenness of our spirit of gain that defiles wisdom in all beings—to rob and deflower wisdom as if there were only a little pleasure to be had, only a little joy, and it had to be stolen, violently taken and spoiled. When all the while the sweetness of the 'Woman', her warmth, her exuberant silence, her acceptance, are infinite, infinite! Deep is the ocean, boundless sweetness, kindness, humility, silence of wisdom that is not abstract, disconnected, fleshless. Awakening us gently when we have exhausted ourselves to night and to sleep. O Dawn of Wisdom!⁸

8. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, pp. 17-18.



Last night I dreamed that a distinguished Lady Latinist came to give a talk to the novices on St Bernard. Instead of a lecture, she sang in Latin, with meters and flexes and *puncta*, what must have been a sermon of the saint—though I could not quite recognize it. The novices were restive and giggling: this made me sad. In the middle Dom Frederic entered. We stood. The singing was interrupted. I explained in an undertone that I had just now remembered the violation of enclosure and would remedy matters as soon as possible. Where did she come from? ‘Harvard’, I said in a stage whisper she must have heard. Then the novices were in a big semi, loaded on the elevator (how?) to go down from the top of the building, and instead of the Latinist coming with us, I left the novices to escort her down safely by the stairs, but now her clothes were soiled and torn, she was confused and sad, she had no Latin and nothing much anything to say. Is this my dream of the Liturgical revival and of Anglicanism, etc? Perhaps some Anglican *anima* of my own?⁹

9. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 89.



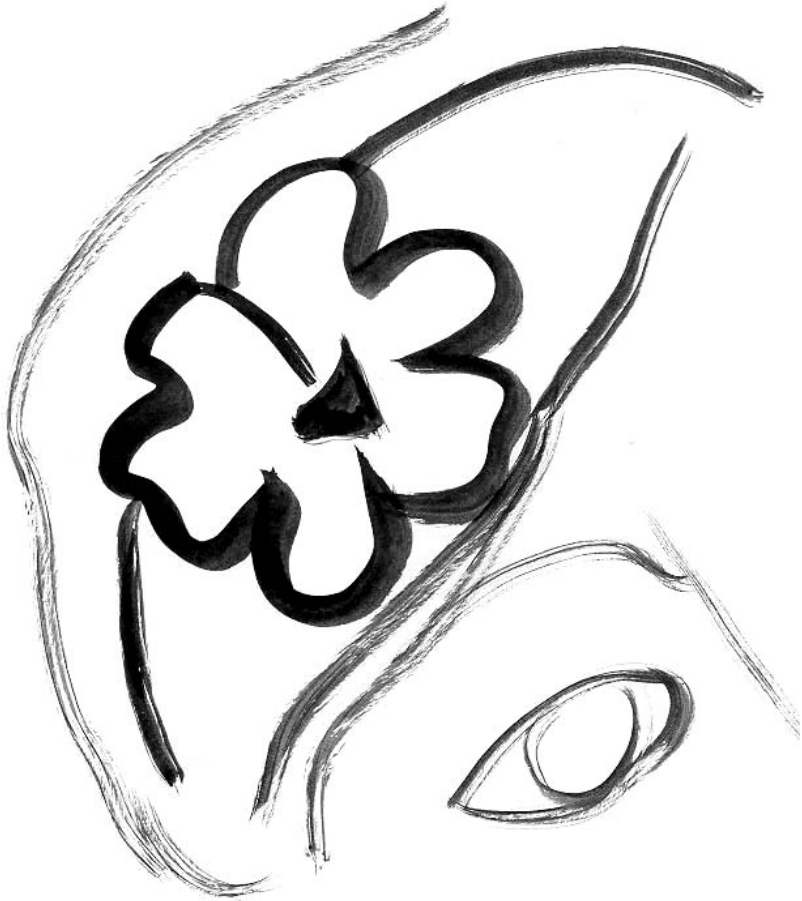
Last night—my dream of the Chinese ‘princess’ has haunted me all day (‘Proverb’ again). This lovely and familiar archetypal person (no object! And how close and real, yet how elusive!) who comes in various mysterious ways into my dreams! She was with her ‘brothers’, and I felt overwhelmingly the freshness, the youth, the wonder, the truth of her—her complete reality, more real than any other, yet unattainable. Yet the sense of understanding, of her ‘knowing’ and loving me, yet not merely in my individuality and everyday self, as if this self were utterly irrelevant to her—not rejected, not accepted either.¹⁰

10. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 167-68.



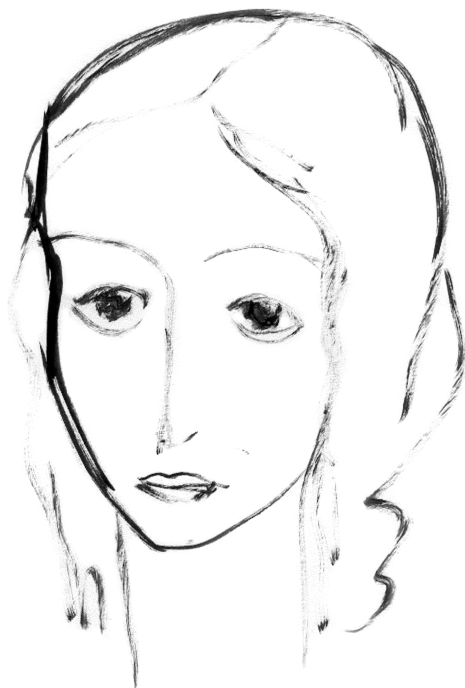
Last night I had a curious and moving dream about a 'Black Mother'. I was in a place (where? Somewhere I had been as a child, but there also seemed to be some connection with the valley over at Edelin's). I realized that I had come there for a reunion with a Negro foster mother whom I had loved in my childhood. Indeed, I owed, it seemed, my life to her love so that it was she really, and not my natural mother, who had give me life. As if from her hand had come a new *life* and there she was. Her face was ugly and severe, yet a great warmth came from her to me, and we embraced with great love (and I with much gratitude). What I recognized was not her face but the warmth of her embrace of her heart, so to speak. We danced a little together, I and my Black Mother, and then I had to continue the journey I was on. I cannot remember more about this journey and many incidents connected with it. Comings and goings, and turning back, etc.¹¹

11. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 202.



I see a tangle of dark briars and light roses. My attention singles out one beautiful pink rose, which becomes luminous, and I am much aware of the silky texture of the petals. My Mother's face appears behind the roses, which vanish!¹²

12. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966–67; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 87.



I dreamt in several different ways of trying to contact M. I cannot remember what the dreams were, only that the last one, before I woke up, was that I was sending a child to the hospital to tell her that I love her. I realized this was most unsatisfactory but there was nothing else I could do. (I was aware that the child would just go in and say, 'He told me today he loves you' in an embarrassed sort of way and walk out again.

I almost never dream of M. as she is but of someone who, I instinctively know, represents her. Yet this girl is 'different' from M. How does one explain this? Still, just when I wake up, the archetypal M. and the reality merge together. The M. I love in the depths of my heart is not symbolic and not just the everyday M. either. She is the deep, mysterious, personal unique potential that is in her: the M. that is trying to become free in my love and is clinging to me for love and help. Yet not that either because it is the insecure and unreal self in each of us that clings so hard to the other. Even that has to be qualified.¹³

13. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 328. Who is Merton dreaming of that represents 'M'? Ann Winser and Proverb could be possible candidates.



I forgot to ask the exact date of M.'s birthday. (She was born just about two months before I came through Cincinnati on my way to Gethsemani! I had walked through Cincinnati station with the words of Proverbs 8 in my mind: 'And my delights were to be with the children of men!'—I have never forgotten this, it struck me forcibly 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!)¹⁴

14. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 130-31. Here is the coda of what I am calling to myself the 'Hagia Sophia dream sequence' in Merton's journals. All these images of women in his journals, drawings and dreams have 'strange connections' in his 'deepest heart'. Merton's encounter with 'the feminine' is an encounter with his deepest, secret self imagined as wise and beautiful and a 'secret child'. Merton is 'Proverb'. In a way, because we only know her through his journals and his own presentation of her, Merton is 'M'. And because she is 'at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's thought and Art within me', Merton is 'Hagia Sophia' at some deepest level of his being. I present this as only as one reading of the literary data.