

# DEEP GEOGRAPHY: NATURE AND PLACE IN *THE SIGN OF JONAS*

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When Thomas Merton closed the doors of Gethsemani behind him he imagined that his life of geographical exploration was over. Like the ancient Israelites in the desert or the medieval pilgrim, Merton had found the promised land and had reached the holy place. The superficial self that moved across the land would now be abandoned, he thought, and a deeper self centered on no-place would emerge.

Yet as one reflects on the life of Thomas Merton, one must conclude that those adventures and misadventures, those reluctant journeys and deliberate trips, were more than a series of topographical way stations on the road to Gethsemani. They were both expressions of and influences on the deeper patterns of identity that were Thomas Merton. Merton declared that after St. Bonaventure University, there would be no more geography. He was both right and wrong. A new and deeper geography, one that centered exploration on the nooks and crannies of a single good place, would now open itself to this inveterate traveler. Merton had been a lover of nature and places and would continue to be so. Merton had been an explorer of his own inner terrain and would continue to be so. At Gethsemani these two geographies would converge and overlay each other. Merton's notebooks would now become guidebooks, guidebooks to a deep geography in which the divine, human, and natural orders mutually revealed and dwelt in each other.

This essay will explore the place of nature and the nature of place in Merton's life, primarily as revealed in *The Sign of Jonas*. I use the word "life" deliberately to distinguish my exploration from one concerned with Merton's theology of nature, if he had one. Merton rarely wrote as

theologian or a philosopher. His best thinking and writing grew out of his own experience and remained close to it. It is engaged thinking, autobiographical thinking. Merton was able to speak to so many, not because he had devised an abstract system that generalized human experience, but because he had entered so deeply into his own particular experience — of nature, God, and self.

Merton entered the abbey on December 10, 1941. February 21, 1942 marked his entrance into the three year novitiate where he would be schooled in and tested by the Cistercian way of life. Merton soon found himself out in the woods swinging an axe. His old custom of using the woods for reflection and contemplation came up against the Trappist use of it for sweat and hard work. There were no pauses to pray. He was supposed to fling himself into the work with a “pure intention” of doing it for God and with an occasional prayer muttered between clenched teeth. Even so, the young monk was able to steal some admiring glances at the landscape and the at the spire of the abbey surrounded by hills.<sup>1</sup> This vision of a monastery situated in a rural environment was to delight and comfort Merton for years to come. The occasion might be a return from a work assignment with other monks. He recounts one such early experience:

And we came home in our long file over the hill-past Nally's house, with the whole blue valley spread out before us, and the monastery and all the barns and gardens standing amid the trees below us under a big blue sweep pf Kentucky sky, with those white incomparable clouds. And I thought to myself: “Anybody who runs away from a place like this is crazy.”  
(SSM, p. 392)

Merton immediately cautions that nice scenery is not enough to guarantee a vocation. Frater Sacredos, a former Dominican and fellow novice, was to leave the Trappists that very day.

Merton was to spend a lot of time in those early years working in the fields and the woods. Such experiences, shaped by the turning seasons of the year, brought a rhythm to his life and work closely attuned to a rural agricultural life. He learned the lay of the land and the moods of Kentucky weather. Although much of his direct contact with nature during these early years was on work assignments with fellow monks, there were other times when he contemplated the land and its changes at a more individual and reflective pace. These moments came during several intervals throughout the day when the schedule did not dictate a specific task. One of these was in the early morning.

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 385. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

## I

## TIMES &amp; PLACES

At first Merton spent the interval between four and five-thirty in the morning in the church writing verse. His novice master soon put a stop to that, encouraging the young monk to use the time for prayer or spiritual reading. So in good weather he would go outside as dawn broke over the Kentucky hills. Sitting under a tree he would read and meditate and be drawn to the beauty of the landscape: "What shades of light and color fill the woods at May's end. Such greens and blues as you never saw! And in the east the sun is a blaze of fire" (*SSM*, p. 390).

These dawn experiences were especially delightful to Merton. The changing colors and patterns created by the rising sun often captivated him. His verbal "paintings" of this dawn atmosphere demonstrate his artistic sense for the diverse colors and details that make for such a unified scene:

The morning sky behind the new horsebarn was as splendid as his [Ruysbroeck's] writing. A thousand small high clouds were flying majestically like ice-floes, all golden and crimson and saffron, with clean blue and aquamarine behind them, and shades of orange and red and mauve down by the surface of the land where the hills were just visible in a pearl haze and the ground was steel-white with frost — every blade of grass as stiff as wire.<sup>2</sup>

Years later, as a priest, Merton looked forward to those days when he would say early mass for the lay brothers and then have an even longer interval in which he could be alone with the dawn:

I walk out and have the dawn to myself . . . I am alone in the cool world of morning, with the birds and the blue hill and the herd that lows across the fields in our neighbor's pasture, and the rooster that sings *sol-do* in the coop behind the apple trees, and Aidan Nally growling at a team of mules on the side of his hill over yonder. (*SJ*, p. 345)

Springtime, like the dawn of the day, symbolizes a new creation and the hope for renewal. And, like the time of dawn, spring occupies a prominent place in Merton's journal. The slow birth of spring does not escape his eye.

On Easter Sunday, 1948, he notes that "all the apple trees came out in blossom Good Friday. It rained and got colder but today is very bright with a pure, pure sky. The willow is full of green. Things are all in bud" (*SJ*, p. 99). By the next Sunday, the first in April, he can see "the pale green flowers on

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2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 137. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

the maples in the *preau* and all the shrubs in flower too." Lambs are bleating and the little pigs are "running around on the hillsides and charging upon the teats of their huge mothers." On April 25 he writes that: "All the trees are full of small leaves just beginning to unfold . . . and there are flowers in the ditches and along the edges of the woods." By May 2, "trees are all clothed and benches are out and a new summer has begun." On May 6, the Feast of the Ascension, Brother Louis and Father Macarius blessed the fields and also "some calves who came running up and took a very active interest in everything. Then we blessed pigs, who showed some interest at first. The sheep showed no concern and the chickens ran away as we approached. The rabbits stayed quiet until we threw holy water at them and then they all jumped" (*SJ*, pp. 100-103).

Merton loved the brilliance of the dawn and he loved the greening of springtime, but he had always had a special appreciation for the starkness of late fall and winter landscapes. This old affinity begins to take on new meaning as Merton's experience with the spiritual life deepens:

There has been no sun in the sky since New Year's but the dark days have been magnificent. The sky has been covered with wonderful black clouds, the horizon has been curtained with sheets of traveling rain. The landscape has been splendidly serious. I love the strength of our woods in this bleak weather. And it is bleak weather. Yet there is a warmth in it like the presence of God in aridity of spirit, when He comes closer to us than in consolation. (*SJ*, p. 263)

Certainly it would be easier to speak of "warmth" when spring is in the air, and the sun's heat and life's vibrancy easily symbolize God's presence and action, but for a person schooled in the spiritual life, the presence of God can sometimes be more obvious in the absence of such dazzling displays and emotional fervor.

From the time of Merton's entry into Gethsemani until 1949 his movements were largely restricted to an enclosure within the enclosure (except, of course, for work in the fields and woods). The area he used included the cemetery, the garden, and the inner court or *garth* (*preau*, in French). He took advantage of every opportunity to walk up and down under the trees or along the wall of the cemetery on the west side of the abbey church. There he would be "content looking at the low green rampart of woods that divides us from the rest of the universe and listening to the deep silence" (*SJ*, p. 63). The cemetery was his favorite place to walk in the evening. He would pick up a sentence or passage from a book, close it "and walk about the cemetery in peace, watching the sun go down behind the hills" (*SJ*, p. 54). The places that Merton used outside for reading and prayer frequently served also for journal subjects. Merton's attention

would be drawn by an object or scene and it would enter his notes, giving the reader a sense of the moment and place of writing. Seated in the garden one day in May he notices that "the little locust tree by the corner of the wall has died and spilled all the fragments of its white flowers over the ground until that part of the garden looks like a picture by Seurat" (*SJ*, p. 49). On an October evening in the cemetery he informs us: "Now a beautiful yellow rose bush has filled with flowers. They stand before me like something very precious in the late slanting sun as I write. The evening is very quiet" (*SJ*, p. 71).

Sometimes one is informed very directly and in some detail where Merton is situated. On a July day he tells us:

Here I sit surrounded by bees and write in this book. The bees are happy and therefore they are silent. They are working in the delicate white flowers of the weeds among which I sit. I am on the east side of the house where I am not as cool as I thought I was going to be, and I sit on top of the bank that looks down over the beehives and the pond where the ducks used to be and Rohan's knob in the distance. (*SJ*, p. 203)

Sometimes an unexpected event grabbed his attention and pulled it away from reflective writing. For example, in the middle of a long entry on the Gospel of St. John, Merton interjects: "There is a small black lizard with a blue, metallic tail, scampering up the yellow wall of the church" (*SJ*, p. 226). While writing a long passage on how the hills are saturated with psalms, he himself becomes aware of being surveyed. "A buzzard comes by and investigates me, but I am not dead yet" (*SJ*, p. 69). During an otherwise prosaic reflection on the Book of Josue, Merton cries: "Look, outside the window the sky is beginning to be very blue and the sun is dazzling on the white side of the Church" (*SJ*, p. 282). But there are also times out of time, times when a peculiar conjunction of lights, sounds and smells lifts one above or leaves one suspended within time:

The low-slanting rays picked out the foliage of the trees and high-lighted a new wheatfield against the dark curtain of woods on the knobs, that were in shadow . . . Sheep on the slopes behind the sheep barn. The new trellises in the novitiate garden leaning and sagging under a hill of roses. A cardinal singing suddenly in the walnut tree, and piles of fragrant logs all around the watershed. (*SJ*, pp. 108-109)

Sometimes Merton's attention is drawn by sounds and not sights: catbirds "sing with crazy versatility above my head," or engage in "bickering" and "squawking"; frogs begin "singing their pleasure in all the waters and in the warm green places" (*SJ*, pp. 50, 103, 292). Then there are the crows which "swear pleasantly in the distance" or engage in "guttural cursing" (*SJ*, pp. 188, 275). Bluejays "which are too noisy," contrast with the cardinals who sing "less worldly tunes with no regard for any other sound on earth."

Merton exhorts all of these: "Praise Christ, all you living creatures. For Him you and I were created. With every breath we love Him. My psalms fulfill your dim, unconscious song, O brother in this wood" (*SJ*, p. 292). Merton had an abiding affection for the farm animals who shared Gethsemani with the monks. He loved lambs — "those little black-eyed things," except when they appeared on holy cards. In his journal also appear sheep, mares, colts, pigs, milking cows, and bulls — "of the bulls I am afraid" (*SJ*, pp. 168, 316).

When the weather did not permit or when circumstances dictated otherwise, Merton would find alternative places to be alone and, preferably, to view the hills and fields. On a rainy December morning one might find him in one of the alcoves behind the church, watching the sun rise "between the garage and the hog house" and admiring "the branches of the whitewashed sycamores" (*SJ*, p. 139). During inclement weather he might sit in a window of the Scriptorium looking out at the animals in the pasture. Or on a feast day he might observe that he had spent "the whole afternoon in the cubbyhole where it says 'sepultura fratrum' and watched the rain falling on the cemetery" (*SJ*, p. 131).

Even when he was ill in the infirmary, Merton could use it as a vantage for viewing the country. On March 19, 1948, he celebrated the first anniversary of his solemn profession in the infirmary. Yet he was glad to get away from his writing responsibilities and the demands of the bells and enter into some recollective state. He moved his table over under the window after prayer and meditation. There he drank some wine smuggled in by Father Gerard in honor of St. Joseph's feast day. He ate "looking out of the window as Carthusians do. The clouds flew, and the huts of the ducks were empty and the frogs sang in the beautiful green pond" (*SJ*, p. 97).

Merton's spiritual life and the landscape wove themselves together as the seasons and years passed. In 1947 he could write: "This whole landscape of woods and hills is getting to be saturated with my prayers and with the Psalms and with the books I read out here under the trees looking over the wall . . . at our forest, our solitude" (*SJ*, p. 69). Later he admits that "for me landscape seems to be important for contemplation; anyway, I have no scruples about loving it" (*SJ*, pp. 108-109). He notes that even St. John of the Cross, hidden away in a church tower, had "one small window through which he could look out at the country" (*SJ*, p. 109).

By 1948, then, Merton was no longer arguing with himself about the relative importance or unimportance of nature to his own spiritual life. He considered it important. And, as Merton's spiritual life deepened, he began seeking something more intimate than viewing the landscape, or even "saturating" the distant hills with his prayers.

## II

## PLACES &amp; EPIPHANIES

By 1949 Merton had already been receiving special permission to leave the enclosure and go into the woods for solitude. On June 26, the Feast of the Sacred Heart, Merton went for a long walk to a hill behind Aidan Nally's place. He thinks: "It is when I am with people that I am lonely, and when I am alone I am no longer lonely" (*SJ*, p. 201). Without the file of monks, Merton again resembles that person who walked by himself among the hills of France, England, Germany, Italy, and New York. Yet this is also a Merton who now belongs to a particular place and is deepening his sense of what constitutes that place — and his place in it. He recalls a view of the abbey: "Gethsemani looked beautiful from the hill. It made much more sense in its surroundings. We do not realize our own setting as we ought to: it is important to know where you are put, on the face of the earth" (*SJ*, pp. 201-202). Merton then notes that the monastery "is in a great solitude." There are "miles and miles" of fields and woods and only one or two houses, neither closer than a mile. No, "there is nothing to complain about from the point of view of geography" (*SJ*, p. 202).

While the monastery may well have been "in" a great solitude, there was no great solitude "in" the monastery. There were nearly two hundred monks then in the monastery, basically confined to the enclosure within the enclosure. This called for change and, as with many other changes, Merton led the way at Gethsemani. At the end of July 1949, Abbot James Fox extended general permission for all professed monks to use the orchard and the area to the east of the church at certain times on Sundays for walking and reading.

On the day this general permission was given, Merton "made a bee-line for the little grove of cedars that is behind the old horsebarn and crowded up against the far end of the enclosure wall and it was nice" (*SJ*, p. 210). The horsebarn and its environs became a new "place" for Merton's prayer and meditation. In November 1949, he wrote to Robert Lax: "I have manufactured a private boardwalk out behind the old horsebarn . . . and there I walk up and down and make up songs . . . . It is about the only way I can pray but it is mildly pacifying and doesn't disturb the cloud where God is."<sup>3</sup> By December 17, Merton had found a better place in which to read and

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3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 172.

pray — “on the top floor of that barn building where the rabbits used to be.” Using a series of ladders he could reach a spot he liked under the roof of this garden house: “There is a chair and there is a beautiful small rectangular window which faces south over the valley . . . . It is the quietest and most hidden and most isolated place I have found in the whole enclosure — but not necessarily the warmest” (*SJ*, p. 250).

This special place made Merton forget, temporarily, thoughts of other places with a deeper solitude. He was glad to be a Cistercian and to “sit in the top of a barn with more beautiful stove-pipes and strawberry boxes and lovelier old junk than a Carthusian ever saw, all alone and *suspense en el aire*” (*SJ*, p. 251). This garden barn and other places in the enclosure were to be the setting for new breakthroughs and self-revelations for Merton. The year 1949 had been a year of great joy as well as of great pain. Finally, in the last month of 1949, he experienced a sudden deepening of internal freedom and solitude. As was his custom, he took pains to “paint” the place and moment.

I shall remember the time and place of this liberty and this neutrality which cannot be written down. These clouds low on the horizon, the outcrops of hard yellow rock in the road, the open gate, the perspective of fence-posts leading up the rise to the sky, and the big cedars tumbled and tousled by the wind. Standing on rock. Present. The reality of the present and of solitude divorced from past and future. To be collected and gathered up in clarity and silence and to belong to God and to be nobody else's business. (*SJ*, p. 252)

This experience must be placed also in the context of the strong need to free himself from the many claims placed on him by others and from those writing duties he had imposed on himself. A few days earlier Merton had been wondering why he wore himself out reading, writing and talking so much and getting excited over relatively trivial matters. He was now teaching courses to the novices as well as writing. He realized that he must carve out a deeper interior solitude. He wanted to pull back from the notoriety that his books had brought him. He (supposedly) wanted to be unknown: “They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis — he's half dead too. For my part my name is that sky, those fenceposts, and those cedar trees. I shall not even reflect on who I am” (*SJ*, p. 253).

Merton begins to work out the significance of his experience and integrate it into his own life. While working on Augustine's *City of God*, he begins to realize how impure and full of self were his previous desires for and concepts of solitude. Now he sees clearly “that solitude is my vocation, not as a flight from the world, but as my place in the world.” Solitude only means separation from those destructive forces in self and history that work against “the Life and Peace that build The city of God in history.” He



realizes that much of what he has written has not come out of "a lucid silence" and has lacked the simplicity and fruitfulness that it might have had" (*SJ*, pp. 257-258).

On February 5, 1950, Merton is out in the early morning frost, listening to the birds and watching the sun "coming up and throwing soft mother-of-pearl highlights on the frozen pastures of Olivet." He reflects on the readings from the book of *Genesis* in the office. It strikes him that the liturgy of Septuagesima overlooks "the thought of creation." People see it too often as some feast day for original sin, rather than "as the beginning of the Easter season." The whole description of creation and paradise is meant to bring joy, not sorrow, the joy "for which we were created" and which has been restored to us by Christ. The main reason we do not have joy is that "we take ourselves too seriously." We should first humbly see the truth — our own unimportance "in comparison with God" — and then be led to joy void of self delusion and vanity (*SJ*, pp. 272-273).

Several days after his reflection on joy and creation, Father Louis is out in the midst of nature. There are no buds this early in February to speak of spring, yet "the wilderness shines with promise . . . Everything foretells the coming of the holy spring." At the heading of this entry for February 27, Merton notes in italics that "*the air and I will never tell our secret.*" This alerts the reader to the significance of the following:

I had never before spoken so freely or so intimately with woods, hills, birds, water and sky. On this great day, however, they understood their position and they remained mute in the presence of the Beloved. Only His light was obvious and eloquent. My brother and sister, the light and water. The stump and the stone. The tables of rock. The blue, naked sky. Tractor trucks, a little waterfall. And Mediterranean solitude. I thought of Italy after my Beloved had spoken and was gone. (*SJ*, p. 280)

In March of 1950, he could note with delight that his chief joy was to escape to the garden house attic and to look out over the valley:

There in the silence I love the green grass. The tortured gestures of the apple tree have become part of my prayer. I look at the shining water under the willows and listen to the sweet songs of all the loving things that are in our woods and fields. (*SJ*, p. 288)

So much does he love that place that even as he walks toward it "delight begins to overpower me from head to foot and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones." On Good Friday, 1950, he is again out by the garden house where the sun "was warm and all the loving creatures sang." It was probably the richness of his experience there that started him dreaming again, "the reprehensible dream of building a hermitage" out in the woods (*SJ*, p. 299).

In December 1950, Merton was reading Thoreau's *Walden*. He quotes the following passage:

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 come to die, discover that I had not lived.*

(*SJ*, p. 316, Merton's italics)

Thoreau fit in very well with Merton's growing desire for more solitude. Thoreau's views on simple living and later on civil disobedience were to affect Merton in many subtle ways. Merton here seems to admire especially "the Ascesis of solitude. Simplification of life. The separation of reality from illusion" (*SJ*, pp. 316-317).

Seated in the garden house in March 1951, Merton declares, again, that he is weary from writing. He looks fondly on manual work in nature where the spiritual life is taught by those "essential facts of life":

... in the fields, in the rain, in the sun, in the mud, in the clay, in the wind: these are our spiritual directors and our novice-masters. They form our contemplation. They instill us with virtue. They make us as stable as the land we live in. You do not get that out of a typewriter. (*SJ*, p. 321)

He reflects on the manuscript of his 1941 novel, *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis* (later published as *My Argument with the Gestapo*), at which he had been looking the day before. He sees now that his solution to the problem of "the world" was wrong and that it was wrong to condemn the whole world as evil, to ridicule it and reject it in the name of some supernatural solution. He says that the monastery has given him perspective and taught him "how to live." His task now is to start, "for the first time, to live as a member of the human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself." His first act as a human is to recognize how much he owes everybody else (*SJ*, p. 323).

These others include all the ordinary people in America whose prayers are helping him in his efforts to become a saint. He notes that he has lived for thirty-six years without being a citizen of any country. When he entered the monastery, he was proud of being a citizen of heaven and felt he needed no country. Now he thinks differently. God has brought him to Kentucky, "the precise place He had chosen for my sanctification" (*SJ*, p. 323). Merton is preparing to become a citizen.

A few months later, in looking over the galleys for the French translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he realizes how he has changed over the years since he wrote that best seller: "... consequently *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the work of a man I never even heard of. And this journal is getting to be the production of somebody to whom I have never had the dishonor of an introduction" (*SJ*, p. 328).

April 1951 marked a decade since Merton first visited Gethsemani. That month was to prove significant as it brought him deeper into the mystery of his own solitude, the mystery of the place that now, more deeply than ever, he was claiming and which was claiming him. It also brought him to a realization that writing and contemplation were not opposed realities but complementary movements within his life.

Merton began to understand that in some ways he had already been a hermit but had not lived as one. That is, he had the large quiet vault in the guest house for his work but until now had not appreciated it as a place for contemplation. Perhaps he had not understood how writing and contemplation could flow into and out of each other. There was little need for sharp distinctions between them. These thoughts were sparked by an account of a Syrian Maronite hermit, Father Charbel Makhlof. Fifty years after his death his body was found in an incorruptible state and miracles soon followed. Like Charbel, "it seems to me that I have been asleep for nine years — and that before that I was dead. I have never been a monk or a solitary. *Take up thy bed and walk!*" (*SJ*, p. 325).

April found him struggling for a deeper level in his interior life. Again the garden house was the place of epiphany and Father Charbel the symbol of its meaning. The incomprehensible mystery would not be revealed to others, Merton "tells" Charbel: "Because I will not tell them about the moon, about the cold hour beyond price, the mist in the early valley, the sun I did not know was rising behind me, or the sweet-smelling earth." The barn itself "had become the very mystery in which I was hidden." A dead yet living man had climbed the ladder to the attic with mud on his feet. That mud would be on his hands when he descends, but he will descend in glory. "This barn cannot be known. It is Mount Lebanon, where Father Charbel saw the sun and moon" (*SJ*, pp. 325-326).

There had been another place and a different kind of ladder the afternoon before his early morning epiphany. Again, Merton gives only indications: "There, there is the crooked tree, the moss with my unspoken words, those pines upon that cliff of shale, the valley living with the tunes of diesel trains. Nobody knows the exact place I speak of and why should I tell them?" (*SJ*, p. 327). He will not tell where, like Jacob, he woke up at the foot of his ladder, for each person must climb that spiritual ladder to his or her own "unrecognizable house." Yet, what is he to do now? Simply write "the rest is silence" and sell the book to the public? No, like Jacob, his life goes on and like Jacob he must marry again and again and care for his flock. He must "thank God for the hill, the sky, the manna on the ground which every morning renews our lives and makes us forever virgins" (*SJ*, p. 327).

Unlike France, the geography of Gethsemani was not influencing Merton merely in an unconscious way. Difficult struggles and rich breakthroughs were occurring here. He was actively involved in making Gethsemani a sacred place. A new geography was being discovered and created.

### III

#### FORESTER & FAMILY MAN

From his earliest days at Gethsemani, Merton had loved being in the woods. In the early 1940s there were still woods within the enclosure and there were hundreds of acres around it that belonged to the monastery. By June 1951, however, all of the groves of cedar trees within the enclosure had been cut down either for fuel for the furnace or for sale to raise money. Merton, now Master of Scholastics, went out to explore "a wooded bluff outside the east wall which is sufficiently fenced-in to be considered an extension of the enclosure . . . as a refuge for my scholastics" (*SJ*, p. 329).

Merton's heart is opening to accommodate the young monks as it seeks a wider experience of the woods. Echoing Thoreau, he says that he is now "a grown-up monk and have no time for anything but the essentials" (*SJ*, p. 330). In the months following his appointment as Master of Scholastics, Merton found himself growing in unexpected ways. He was learning how to care for others as individuals, how to share their burdens, how to listen to them and give them advice as well as how to anguish over words that did harm. Importantly, he was learning that compassionate involvement with others need not be an obstacle to solitude:

I know what I have discovered: that the kind of work I once feared because I thought it would interfere with "solitude" is, in fact, the only true path to solitude . . . once God has called you further into solitude . . . What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. (*SJ*, pp. 333-334)

In January of 1952, Merton was out working alone in the woods. He repeats to himself the question the Magi asked about where to find the King of the Jews. Merton knows where He is. "He and I live in the trees." Yet this "hermit" is now "more of a family man" than he ever was in his whole life. And precisely because of that he is a "mature" hermit, now almost thirty-seven years old.

Merton had been made a kind of official monastery "forester" in October of 1951. He was responsible both for marking trees which would

be cut down and for planting new trees. Dom James Fox had found a way to give Merton more solitude without giving him a hermitage. The position enabled Merton to roam freely into hollows and woods that he had never had a chance to explore before. He also had more time for solitude, prayer, and some liturgical singing “to the silent glens” (*SJ*, pp. 336). He used his new position as a way to get the scholastics out into the woods so they could have some experience of solitude. He was learning to respect them as individuals, to recognize their own inner solitude and thus to “meet them in my own solitude.” Having found a degree of solitude within himself he began to see that he was no different than any other human being. Each person as a human being is called to “lay open” the depths of their solitude to themselves, to others and to God. He reflected on his new identity as forester and family man:

Thus it is that I live in the trees. I mark them with paint, and the woods cultivate me with their silences, and all day long even in choir and at Mass I seem to be in the forest: but my children themselves are like trees, and they flourish all around me like the things that grow in the Bible.

(*SJ*, pp. 337-338)

This passage invites commentary in light of what we know about Merton and his life to that point. Merton never had much of a real family life. Even the time with his father in France was limited both in quality and duration. Nor had he ever fully appreciated or reciprocated the love and concern of his grandparents. His most recent loss was probably the hardest to bear since it severed the last tie with immediate family. His brother, John Paul Merton, died in April 1943 after his plane crashed into the English Channel. His back broken, he survived only a few hours in a raft and was buried at sea. His parents, Owen and Ruth Merton, had been cremated so there were no gravesites to visit, no tombstones for Thomas Merton to read. But there was a poem to write, a poem as much about Tom as about John Paul. It began:

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;  
And if I cannot eat my bread,  
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.  
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,  
My thirst will turn to springs for you, poor traveler.

(*SSM*, p. 404)

Of a family of travelers, only Thomas Merton remained. The fifth section of *The Sign of Jonas* is titled “The Whale and the Ivy.” The whale is the traveler, the ivy the fixed one. Merton’s genuine affection for his “children,” his sons, deepened his rootedness in the place and also fulfilled a need that he only dimly realized he had.

Writing books on spirituality was certainly a way of communicating something of himself but neither that act nor the reader's response could adequately substitute for the concrete experience of love or friendship. Perhaps he imagined that he had transcended such "needs" and could find total completion in an intimate relationship with God. Had not the saints taught that? Did he not want, still, to be a saint? Or were there perhaps other ways to realize that ideal, ways more in line with the concrete person who was Thomas Merton? There were to be no quick answers to those questions, despite the answer suggested at the end of *The Sign of Jonas*. But there was certainly a new realization by Merton that the old answers were no longer adequate.

One can see in the above passage about his "children" that his relationship with the forest had become more concrete and more mutual. If the first stage in Merton's deepening geography was the gradual saturation of the hills with his prayers and the second stage was a gradual evocation of epiphanies from the land, then the third stage is the saturation of Merton by the forests themselves. For "all day long even in choir and at Mass I seem to be in the forest." Or, put another way, the forest is now in him, just as his "children" are. Merton seems to be discovering that real solitude is inclusive, not exclusive — that it consists in finding that common ground with all beings which is the deepest ground of one's own being. In such a realization both place and person are saturated with the source of their being.

When your tongue is silent, you can rest in the silence of the forest. When your imagination is silent, the forest speaks to you, tells you of its unreality and of the Reality of God. But when your mind is silent, then the forest suddenly becomes magnificently real and blazes transparently with the Reality of God . . . and we who are in God find ourselves united, in Him, with all that springs from Him. This is prayer, and this is glory!

(SJ, p. 343)

The journal section of *The Sign of Jonas* ends in June 1952 with an entry titled "Octave of Corpus Christi." This is more an essay than the other entries in the journal. In it Merton summarizes and develops some themes touched upon earlier in the work. In the first section there is a reaffirmation of Gethsemani as the proper place for Merton. As his senses bathe in the beauty of the cloister "paved with flowers," the smell of incense wafting through the air, and the warmth of the June morning, he remarks:

I feel as though I had never been anywhere in the world except Gethsemani — as if there were no other place in the world where I had ever really lived. I do not say I love Gethsemani in spite of the heat, or because of the heat. I love Gethsemani.

(SJ, p. 344)

Merton then describes and comments on some of the new buildings,

machines, and jobs that are signs of change at Gethsemani. Some of these changes Merton objects to, some he accepts, and some he embraces. Things will continue to change at Gethsemani. Merton will initiate some changes and fight others. Places are never static, even in our memories, for our own recollections change as we do.

Merton turns from a consideration of the buildings of Gethsemani to the land. He expresses again his love for the “cool world of morning,” for the beauty of the hills and fields, and for the sight and sound of the animals.

This is the land where you have given me roots in eternity, O God of heaven and earth. This is the burning promised land, the house of God, the gate of heaven, the place of peace, the place of silence, the place of wrestling with the angel. (S), p. 345

Merton has finally become a dweller: “*Blessed are they who dwell in thy house, O Lord!*” he prays. Then he takes note of the changes to places with which he has come to identify himself. “The roof is peeling off the old garden house, which has become a rejected building,” Merton laments. The old wagon shed was also falling apart and would be replaced by a large hangar for “the machines.” The old horsebarn was gone too. In its place Merton would plant “some shade trees, that it may some day be a place of contemplation” (S), p. 346). Merton then goes into a long paean to God as present in creation yet not possessive of created beings. He writes:

God is pure and because He is pure He does not need to keep the birds in cages. God is great, and because He is great He can let the grasses grow where they will, and the weeds go rambling over our fallen buildings (for the day will come when all our buildings will have fallen down, because they were somebody’s possession). (S), p. 347

The “laws” of nature are rooted in the freedom of God and therefore all beings are free to develop, each according to its own unique individuality. Each thing grows the way it likes and does the things it does “for the pleasure of God.” God shares with all beings His glory, that presence in them that does not touch them. It is both glory and shyness. “His glory is to give them everything and to be in the midst of them as unknown” (S), p. 348).

## IV

## FIRE WATCH

There could be no better climax to Merton's first decade at Gethsemani and no finer tribute to his own deepening experience of its geography than "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952." That it is one of Merton's finest essays, and that it combines biography and spirituality is no coincidence. It gives ample and exquisite evidence of Merton's eye for detail, his love of nature, and his ability to evoke a sense of place. His themes are developed in a sustained manner and move toward a gorgeous finale.

It is a hot night and at eight o'clock the monks, "packed in the belly of the great heat," sing to the Mother of God like exiles in the belly of a ship sailing to glory. Then, like a "holy monster," the community breaks into parts and disperses into the "airless cloisters." Merton picks up the sneakers, flashlight and keys that are the signs of office for the watchman. By eight-fifteen Merton sits in "human silence." But then he begins to hear

... the eloquent night, the night of wet trees, with moonlight sliding over the shoulder of the church in a haze of dampness and subsiding heat. The world of this night resounds from heaven to hell with animal eloquence, with the savage innocence of a million unknown creatures. While the earth eases and cools off like a huge wet living thing, the enormous vitality of their music pounds and rings and throbs and echoes until it gets into everything, and swamps the whole world in its neutral madness which never becomes an orgy because all things are innocent, all things are pure.

(*SJ*, p. 350)

The night and the heat and the animals are holy, Merton insists, even if some people act crazy and commit evil in the night. The night was not created to hide sins but "to open infinite distances in charity and send our souls to play beyond the stars."

The watchman begins his rounds and leads the reader on a journey through the various levels and sections of the monastery. As he travels he evokes scenes from his life here, so that the journey moves through both space and time. The walls, stairs, rooms, and windows are no longer "objective" realities separate from Merton. As a part of place, they are interwoven with Merton's own identity. They come alive through the images of memory and the sensual experience of noises, lights, smells, hard floors, hot air, and cool walls. Under Merton's touch, place becomes an organic reality made up of humans and the host of living beings and artifacts that relate to, affect and are affected by human presence. Merton's rounds affirm and celebrate that his identity was shaped by Gethsemani and, in turn, shaped Gethsemani.



As the watchman enters the choir novitiate, he takes note of the bulletin boards and the lists and notices posted on the walls. The walls have “their own stuffy smell” and these smells trigger memories:

... I am suddenly haunted by my first days in religion, the freezing tough winter when I first received the habit and always had a cold, the smell of frozen straw in the dormitory under the chapel, and the deep unexpected ecstasy of Christmas — that first Christmas when you have nothing left in the world but God!  
(*SJ*, p. 352)

Suddenly other dimensions of the fire watch open:

The most poignant thing about the fire watch is that you go through Gethsemani not only in length and height, but also in depth. You hit strange caverns in the monastery's history, layers set down by the years, geological strata: you feel like an archeologist suddenly unearthing ancient civilizations. But the terrible thing is that you yourself have lived through those ancient civilizations. The house has changed so much that ten years have as many different meanings as ten Egyptian dynasties. The meanings are hidden in the walls. They mumble in the floor under the watchman's rubber feet.  
(*SJ*, pp. 354-355)

Merton's prose seems to indicate that this experience is new to him. His study of geology at Columbia, however, provides him with a fit metaphor with which to express this insight. He had defined the history of his self before by its movement from place to place. Now, after a decade in one place, he begins to see history of self as intimately connected with the history of place. Now his own changes cannot be fully comprehended without taking into account the changes in the place.

Merton moves on through the other stations of the rounds and other memories and reflections. Finally he climbs “the trembling, twisted stair into the belfry.” He shines his light on the gears that keep the old tower clock running. He checks the fuse box. His “whole being breathes the wind which blows through the belfry.” Then his hand opens the door and he walks “upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer.” This makes him think about his death and when and how that door will open or be opened by God. Will God open it “upon the great forest and set my feet upon a ladder under the moon, and take me out among stars?” Merton looks over the hills and forest bathed in moonlight:

Now the huge chorus of living beings rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things. And far above me the cool sky open upon the frozen distance of the stars.  
(*SJ*, p. 360)

Both the journey through the monastery and now the view of the moonlit Kentucky hills have evoked in Merton experiences from his own life. Merton asks God if God remembers “the place by the stream” or “the

Vineyard Knob that time in autumn, when the train was in the valley" or "McGinty's hollow" or "the thinly wooded hillside behind Hanekamp's place." These were places of epiphany where Merton came to know and be known by that mystery he only rarely felt in other times and places. These times and places were nourishment for the growing ivy and not simply pointers for the journeying whale. They pointed toward inner depth, not toward some other place. Echoing Blake, Merton declares that all "things of Time are in connivance with eternity" which meets this world "in the present" and "in the palm of the hand" (*SJ*, p. 361). Ultimately, the divine, the human, and the natural dwell with each other in place: "Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me" (*SJ*, p. 360).