

# THOMAS MERTON'S *THE SIGN OF JONAS*: A Jungian Commentary

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The heat is upon us but it is not too bad. We are starting a new routine of night watches around here — to guard against fires. We take turns going around the house for two hours while everyone else is asleep. I am on tonight and think it is quite probably going to be fun.<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins Thomas Merton's fire watch duty which he immortalized in "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*. Many consider it his finest prose work, including Jacques Maritain who praised it as the most beautiful spiritual writing composed in the twentieth century, an extraordinary encomium from the French Thomist.<sup>2</sup> Its haunting, shimmering beauty, graceful rhythm, and rich symbolism have earned "Fire Watch" the appellation of prose poem. As with all great prose and poetry, it offers readers a wealth of associations, resonances, and interpretations.

David D. Cooper, for instance, presents a fresh, intelligent, and enlightening analysis of "Fire Watch" in *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial*. He proposes that its lyrical loveliness is the direct, though paradoxical, result of Merton's efforts to deny his vocation as writer, one which he thought at the time was incompatible with his higher vocation as a contemplative (Cooper, pp. 46-55). For Cooper, then, "Fire Watch" symbolizes Merton's merging of both vocations, that of writer and that of contemplative, in language that transcends duality and reaches toward the ineffable beauty of God. However, Cooper's idea of the merging of vocations can also be

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1. Thomas Merton to Therese Lentfoehr, 7 July 1951. In Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 208.

2. David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of Radical Humanist* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 37. Hereafter referred to in the text as Cooper.

viewed another way: it is one phase in the larger process which Jung calls individuation, involving the integration of the various facets of one's personality whose ultimate goal is psychic and spiritual wholeness.

Merton's interest in psychology is well known. He viewed it as a means toward greater self knowledge.<sup>3</sup> His interest, however, lay more in Freudian than in Jungian psychology, although the latter is more compatible with Merton's vocation since Jung saw religion not as neurosis, as Freud did, but as a cure for neurosis. Perhaps if he had lived longer, Merton would have come to appreciate Jungian theory, an appreciation that many religious men and women have experienced in the last two decades. Nevertheless, to study Merton from a psychological perspective is justifiable and appropriate — justifiable because Merton valued psychology, having read both Freud and Jung; appropriate because Merton is a modern person.<sup>4</sup> To borrow the title of one of Jung's books, he is a "modern man in search of a soul," and modern people's newest branch of knowledge is psychology. Furthermore, *The Sign of Jonas*, revealing as it does Merton's intimate identification with that Biblical figure whose experience Jung describes as the archetypal "night sea journey," lends itself to a Jungian interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Thus, such a study will not only illuminate more fully Merton's inner journey, but it will also emphasize more clearly its universality, rendering it more relevant to believers and unbelievers alike.

It may be useful here to review the archetypal myth of Jonas. Jonas is summoned by God to journey to Nineveh to preach repentance to its inhabitants. Instead, Jonas disobeys God's command and sails in the opposite direction to Tharsis. While he is at sea ("at sea" in more ways than one), a great storm arises, buffeting and endangering the ship with its men and cargo. The frightened mariners, hoping to salvage the ship and themselves, jettison small wares to lighten the vessel. Meanwhile, as the storm rages, Jonas retires to the inner section of the ship to sleep. Later, with no abatement of the tempest, he awakes and admits that he is the sole cause of the storm, having disobeyed God. To save the ship and its men, Jonas willingly offers to sacrifice his life, allowing the mariners to cast him into the tumultuous sea. Immediately a great fish swallows him and for three days he remains a captive in the dark belly of the fish which transports him to the

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3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 201. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 288.

5. Jolande Jacobi, *Complex, Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 155.

deepest caverns of the ocean. Then, as a result of his praying to God, Jonas is vomited onto dry land where he resumes his journey — not to Tharsis, but to Nineveh.

While at Nineveh, Jonas preaches repentance so successfully to the people that all the inhabitants clothe themselves in sackcloth and ashes in reparation for their sins. God is moved to pity and He mercifully spares them and their city. Jonas, however, feels that he has been deceived and is angered by God's turnabout. He seethes with self-pity until one day, in a moment of selflessness, he expresses compassion for a dying plant. At this instant God reveals to Jonas his reason for sparing Nineveh: if a mere human is able to pity a sick creature he did not create, cannot God be merciful to His children?

Jonas' archetypal night sea journey serves effectively as a paradigm of Jung's theory of individuation. Jung defines individuation as: "A person becoming himself, whole, indivisible and distinct from other people though also in relationship to these."<sup>6</sup> The key word in his definition is *whole* by which Jung means "the fullest possible expression of all aspects of the personality, both in itself and in relation to other people and the environment" (Samuels, p. 76).

All persons are called to wholeness (God's summons to Jonas). The call may come at any stage of life, but it is strongest at mid-life. The call may be either ignored or obeyed. Too often we do not heed the summons, often deliberately escaping wholeness by evasion (Jonas' traveling to Tharsis). However, the penalty for not heeding the unconscious (the *locus Dei*) is severe, resulting in psychological and spiritual turmoil (the storm) which can seriously upset our lives to the point that we try to escape our real and immediate problems (Jonas asleep), or we solve them superficially (jettisoning light wares). But courage must be mustered to confront the deep waters of our psyche where true self-knowledge resides (Jonas thrown into the sea). The embarkation into the unconscious to face those unknown aspects of ourselves cannot be a direct confrontation, or we risk annihilation. Thus there is a need for an intermediate step (the fish). A journey willingly and knowingly accepted will eventually result in rebirth (Jonas' return to land). Rebirth, as the word implies, is just the beginning. Individuation is a lifetime process. Jonas still has much to experience, to learn. As with the Ancient Mariner whose albatross was unfettered from his neck only after he blessed God's creatures of the sea (acceptance of unconscious elements), so too

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6. Andrew Samuels, et. al., *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 76. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Samuels*.

with Jonas: his enlightenment, initiated in the sea, leads him to compassion for a helpless, dying plant. Thus, the once "dying" Jonas is led to a more "whole/holy" life by accepting and fulfilling his destiny which is the will of God.

This paradigm of Jung's theory of individuation can be applied to "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952." The date is significant: it celebrates the birth of the United States and Merton's recent naturalization as an American citizen (recorded in section six of *The Sign of Jonas*). Furthermore, this date symbolizes the continual birth and rebirth that is Merton's interior life, all of which is integral to his journey to wholeness, his journey to God. The superficial, and also serious, purpose of the night round is to detect possible fire in the monastery, but, on a deeper level, the journey is a search for the fire of purgation and illumination. At the halfway point of the fire watch (mid-life) Merton recognizes this profound aspect of the journey when he concludes that it is God's way of isolating him "to search your soul with lamps and questions" (Jonas isolated in the belly of the fish).<sup>7</sup> The fire watch becomes what Merton designates an "examination of conscience," or, as Jung would describe it, a "circumambulation of the self" whose purpose is self-knowledge which leads to wholeness, or if you will, holiness (*SJ*, p. 352).<sup>8</sup> Jung himself remarks: "Self-knowledge, in the form of an examination of conscience, is demanded by Christian ethics. They were very pious people who maintained that self-knowledge paves the way to knowledge of God."<sup>9</sup> Merton's journey, then, through the quadrangular, cloistered monastery traces a *mandala* figuration: a circle within a square which is the symbol of wholeness. Jung views quaternity as the symbol *par excellence* of the integrated psyche (*Memories*, p. 196). It is also helpful to our understanding of this symbolic journey to bear in mind that Merton's buffer against total engulfment by darkness (the unconscious) is the monastery itself which in effect is Merton's fish, or, as he describes it, his "holy monster" (*SJ*, p. 349). The monastery will aid Merton in delving into the deepest aspects of his psyche where he will confront many things about himself, about Gethsemani, about the human family.

Before the watch begins Merton decks himself, not with weapons as heroic figures of the past did as they prepared for war, but with a flashlight,

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7. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 352. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

8. Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 196. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Memories*.

9. Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Reflections*; eds. Jolande Jacobi & R. F. C. Hull (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1970), p. 228. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Reflections*.

sneakers, keys, and a clock. Merton is a modern hero — a watchman of the inner life. Each of these items has its obvious function, but each also symbolizes various aspects of the archetypal journey to wholeness. The flashlight represents the eye of consciousness (ego) capable of rendering attention to the darkest areas of the psyche. The sneakers, reminiscent of the sandals of fleet-footed Mercury who led souls into the underworld, remind us that the individuation process requires silence, the *sine qua non* of the inner life, for only in silence can one hear the still, small voice of the self. The keys represent the insights, dreams, surmises, and memories that will open the darkest and deepest rooms of the psyche. These yield gem-like truths about our shadow which Jung defines as “the thing a person has no wish to be” (*Samuels*, p. 138). The clock is a constant reminder that we live in time and therefore we must lose no time in realizing the self: individuation is urgent business.

Merton, who describes himself elsewhere as a “solitary explorer” dedicated to investigating areas of the psyche “deeper than the bottom of anxiety,” commences his journey in the lowest section of the monastery — the cellar — where he walks not on concrete but on Mother Earth.<sup>10</sup> Here he meets with “naked wires, stinks of the hides of slaughtered calves,” all representative of the instinctual facets of life, of the particular aspects of Merton’s personality which had to be faced, accepted, and integrated into his life as a monk (*SJ*, p. 350). At the end of a long catacomb in the cellar, Merton encounters a “brand new locked door into the guest wing that was only finished the other day” (*SJ*, p. 350). The door is not to be opened. The guest wing symbolizes the world which Merton is not ready to face. He is currently embarked on an inner journey which will eventually lead him outward to the world in love and compassion. Both Jung and Merton write that the journey to wholeness necessitates love for others. Jung writes: “Individuation does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to oneself” (*Reflections*, p. 317). From the number of people who visited Merton at Gethsemani and from the scope of his correspondence, we know that he indeed gathered the world to himself. He wrote: “A man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and give to other people in the purity of selfless love.”<sup>11</sup> For Merton the time was not yet ripe. He was not ready for the world.

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10. Thomas Merton, *Faith & Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 213. Hereafter referred to in the text as *FV*.

11. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 64.

On his way to the bakery, the second station of the night round (the pattern of which is reminiscent of the stations of the Cross), Merton encounters the old furnace where he was ordered to burn Abbot Frederic Dunne's letters. This reminds us of the old Merton of London, New York, Columbia who became the new Merton through the spiritual fire of purgation and monastic forging. We also recall the similar break with the past when he burned papers before entering the monastery (*Mott*, p. 201). In this fire of individuation Merton continues to burn away false selves — the deception, the falsehood, all that would interfere with his attainment of his true self which is Christ. Jung comments on Christ as archetype: "The self is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. And do you know who the self is for Western man? It is Christ, for Christ is the archetype of the hero, representing man's highest aspiration. All this is very mysterious and at times frightening."<sup>12</sup>

Walking further on in the cellar near the bakery with his feet now on concrete, Merton glimpses jars of various kinds of fruits. The bakery and the fruits suggest that, if needed, the unconscious always yields nourishment for the libido (energy) necessary to continue the journey to self-knowledge. At this point in the dark journey, Merton's flashlight illuminates an engraving of the Holy Face. This is a reminder of two important facts: first, Christ is the goal of the inner journey; second, knowledge of Christ leads one to an awareness of the truth about one's life.

As he rounds the corner to the next station, the novitiate, Merton comes face to face with his monastic past and with the mystery of his vocation (*SJ*, p. 352). This difficult and painful stage of individuation requires complete honesty and humility in recognizing and accepting the past along with its deceits, its errors, its sins — all of which Jung describes as "the shadow." Merton finds his past almost unreal. He barely recognizes his former self, but in scrutinizing his past, he realizes: "The things I thought important . . . have turned out to be of small value. And the things that I never thought about . . . were the things that mattered" (*SJ*, p. 353). Only a mature person, very much conscious of the inner journey, could make such an admission. Jung writes about this kind of individuation:

The difference between the "natural" individuation process, which runs its course unconsciously, and the one which is consciously realized, is tremendous. In the first case consciousness nowhere intervenes; the end remains as dark as the beginning. In the second case so much darkness comes to light that the personality is permeated with light, and conscious-

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12. Michael Serrano, *C. G. Jung & Hermann Hesse: A Record of Two Friendships* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966), p. 56.

ness necessarily gains in scope and insight. The encounter between conscious and unconscious has to ensure that the light which shines in the darkness is not only comprehended by the darkness, but comprehends it.  
(*Reflections*, p. 316)

Merton then enters into the first of his lovely, lyrical addresses to God: "God, my God Whom I meet in darkness" (*SJ*, p. 352). We hear a man comfortable and unafraid to engage his God, to express to Him his doubts, his fears, and his hopes. Such an encounter is characteristic of conscious individuation because the conscious ego creates an axis with the self, a state of being which leads to further enlightenment, further wholeness.<sup>13</sup>

Merton returns to the little cloister, a reminder of his novices, "souls entrusted to me." Here we observe Merton, who requested the position of novice master, moving outward to others in care and compassion (*Mott*, p. 288). This shift of gaze from the "I" to "others" is a natural and inevitable movement of the inner journey. He then advances to the door of the ceramic studio beyond which lie the burnt out kiln and the newly purchased kiln. As the furnace suggests purgation, the kiln suggests strengthening. Again we recall Merton before his entry into Gethsemani, a man disillusioned and "burnt out" by the values of the modern world. He tenderly recalls his young scholastic who "suddenly made a good crucifix." About this young novice and his other novices he is anxious: "I think of this simple and mysterious child, and of all my other scholastics. What is waiting to be born in all their hearts? Suffering? Deception? Heroism? Defeat? Peace? Betrayal? Sanctity? Death? Glory?" (*SJ*, p. 354). Obviously, Merton is aware of the possible costs and rewards of the inner journey. Elsewhere he writes that the inner journey is an "anguished and sometimes perilous exploration."<sup>14</sup> Jung also warns us about the cost of individuation:

Everything good is costly, and the development of personality is one of the most costly of all things. It is a matter of saying yes to oneself, of taking oneself as the most serious of tasks, of being conscious of everything one does, and keeping it constantly before one's eyes in all its dubious aspects — truly a task that taxes us to the utmost.  
(*Reflections*, p. 313)

At this juncture of the journey Merton recapitulates: he is amazed to have encountered such "strange caverns in the monastery's history, layers set down by years of geographical strata: you feel like an archeologist unearthing ancient civilizations" (*SJ*, p. 354). Merton's description of the substrata of the monastery parallels in astounding similarity Jung's dream in

13. Edward F. Edinger, *Ego & Archetype* (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 96.

14. Quotation on the cover of *A Thomas Merton Reader*; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962).

which Jung finds himself exploring the basement of his home which leads to a subcellar under which he discovers a cavern. This all served for Jung as a model of the human psyche that ultimately led him to his theory of the "Collective Unconscious." About that dream, he comments: "It obviously pointed to the foundation of cultural history — a history of successive layers of consciousness. My dream thus constituted a kind of structural diagram of the human psyche" (*Memories*, p. 161). Added to this remarkable coincidence is the fact that both Merton and Jung refer to themselves as archeologists — "archeologists" not of past civilizations but of the human psyche.

Thus far Merton's journey has rendered him aware of the history of the monastery, his own personal history, the history of humankind — all intertwined in one history: Merton's and everyone's. He also admits that the monastery has changed much since his entry ten years ago: ". . . ten years have as many meanings as ten Egyptian dynasties" (*SJ*, p. 356). Merton too has dramatically changed, yet he must continue to explore these meanings which apply not only to Gethsemani but also to himself: individuation is an ongoing process that ends only in death.

He now comes to the church. Here he learned to pray. Here he took his vows. Here he was ordained a priest. Here he celebrates the holy mystery of the Mass every day of his life. The church serves as the belly of Merton's holy monster, the monastery. It is a place of purification, assimilation, nourishment, and passage. Merton must pass through the church before he can reach the tower and, through the tower, God. "Now is the time to get up and go to the tower. Now is the time to meet God" (*SJ*, p. 356). Towers are often viewed as symbolic of yearning, of reaching out for the infinite, for God. For Jung, as for Yeats and for Jeffers, towers are mandalas, symbols of the integrated self (*Memories*, pp. 233-237). Merton realizes that he is not ready for the climb to the tower. He still must make rounds of the second and third floors of the monastery.

Continuing the fire watch, Merton arrives at the library, abode of collective wisdom, again bringing to mind Jung's collective unconscious along with its archetypes. He must also pass through the third room of the library, the one named "hell" — the storage room of condemned books, suggesting Jung's concept of the shadow or all that would be kept from the daylight of consciousness (*SJ*, p. 356). He then proceeds to the upper scriptorium: consider Merton's propensity for recording honestly all his life. Little, if anything, of Merton's life is forbidden or concealed.

On his way to the third floor, Merton walks softly through the dormitory, "perhaps the longest room in Kentucky." Here much is "shrouded in shadows." This room where all the monks of Gethsemani



sleep implies that much of the psyche remains in the dark of unconsciousness. However, sleep offers dreams, the primary key to the unconscious. Understanding the importance of dreams as a means toward deeper self knowledge, Merton recorded many of them in his journals. Jung encourages everyone to remember, to record, and to analyze his or her dreams. Of dreams he writes: "The dream is a little door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness extends" (*Reflections*, p. 53).

The fire watch journey now takes Merton to "a door hidden between two cells" — reminiscent of Dante's secret exit from the Inferno (*SJ*, p. 358). He enters the infirmary annex which leads to the infirmary. In the chapel there Merton made retreats before the important rites of passage in his life as a monk: clothing, professions, and ordination. The infirmary is the locus of regained health, of wholeness. At one point of the journey, Merton remarks that the monastery is "like a sick person who has recovered" (*SJ*, p. 352). In reality it is Merton who has recovered. Now the time is ripe. Merton is ready to climb the tower. "Now the business is done. Now I shall ascend to the top of this religious city, leaving its modern history behind" (*SJ*, p. 359).

Unlocking the padlock of the door to the tower "always makes a great noise." Merton now begins the climb up the stairs, a perilous climb: "You have to watch the third step or your feet go through the boards." The inner journey is fraught with danger: one must always be as conscious as possible of what one is doing. When Merton finally reaches the top, he opens the door which "swings open upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer." What follows is a poetic description of the surrounding valley with its moonlight, stars, hills, and great chorus of sounds.

Merton prepares himself to address his God by placing the clock on the belfry ledge and by sitting cross-legged against the tower. The clock is no longer needed for Merton has gone beyond time. He has arrived at the still center of the tower where heaven and earth and time and eternity intersect. His prayer commences with a litany of questions directed to God even though Merton recognizes that "there is a greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question." Subsequently, he realizes that it is God who initiates dialogue, as He always has. It is God who utters Merton's name, and it is Merton who listens to what he always knew: "The voice of God is heard in paradise" (*SJ*, pp. 359-360). Then follows Merton's loveliest language - language reserved for the Voice of God. He

eloquently expresses the paradoxical nature of the inner journey that both contains and is contained by the love, mercy and infinity of God, the "I am" of every inner journey of every person:

What was poor has become infinite. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin. (SJ, p. 362).

Perhaps the key to a Jungian understanding of Merton's journey is found in this one sentence of the epilogue: "The night contains values the day never dreamed of" (SJ, p. 355). With the night symbolic of the unconscious mind and the day symbolic of the conscious mind, Merton's insight summarizes succinctly and exactly Jung's own findings about the psyche: the individual psyche is a combination of light and shadow, of consciousness and unconsciousness, including what Jung describes as the "Collective Unconscious," the repository of humanity's psychic heritage, the abode of archetypes (*Memories*, pp. 158-162). The nocturnal fire watch leads Merton to the realization that to plunge into the night (the unconscious) is to embark on a journey to self-realization, to wholeness. To both Merton and Jung there is no more important journey than this inner one.