

Thomas Merton's Late Metaphors of the Self

John S. Porter

Thomas Merton's Cartesian formula in the early years was not only "I write, therefore, I am," but "I write about the self, therefore, I must have one."¹ Autobiography, which John Berger characterizes as an "orphan" form, is Merton's most frequently used literary genre, whether in poetry or journal.² Each of his works may be considered as a new "Book of the Self" in which Merton tries to find new metaphoric mirrors for his fluid and changing personality. Merton, the monk who lives without family, close relatives, possessions, and even social status—the total orphan who to a large measure invents himself out of language—chooses an "orphan" form for his fullest and richest literary expression.

In a 1939 journal entry he writes: "Anything I create is only a symbol for some completely interior preoccupation of my own." He realizes quite early in his writing vocation that the talent of the novelist, that of being able to inhabit and make real another person and identity, escapes him. Merton performs best when he is writing about himself and the things he loves: "ideas, places, certain persons—all very definite, individual, identifiable objects of love."³ And yet the

1. Ivan Illich, in his illuminating study co-authored with Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), reminds readers that "the idea of a self . . . cannot exist without the text. Where there is no alphabet, there can neither be a memory . . . nor the 'I' as its appointed watchman" 72.

2. John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991) 47.

3. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroads, 1992) 19.

mystery of Merton has always been, in sketching his own self-portrait, that he draws the faces of others who see themselves in his face. Personal statement evolves into communal statement. Readers are witnesses to a life, voyeurs of the tics and turns of a personal history, and privy to the unveiling of a self that, in its doubts and criticisms, resembles so many other questers for authenticity.

The philosopher Charles Taylor makes the point that the self develops "in relation to certain interlocutors." The self exists within what he calls "webs of interlocution."⁴ Merton's interlocutors were missing. To compensate for the lack of early and significant interlocutors—later in life he certainly does not lack correspondent-interlocutors—he carries on a lifelong conversation with himself about himself. He tells and retells his own inner story, for he has a strong need to hear it. He has few significant others to whom to tell his story, and the early memories he does have of significant others are charged with ambivalence: the memory of a critical mother and the memory of a father more interested at times in his art and girlfriend than in him.⁵ Merton is forced to work very hard at being the architect of his own identity; through writing he strives to project, in metaphor, the images of selfhood that are not reflected to him by his family, images that would otherwise be unaffirmed.⁶

One of the intriguing facts of Merton's life, however, is that he has no sooner achieved his hard-won sense of self than he is willing to abandon it. He no sooner finds himself as a writer when he wants to lose himself as a hermit; he is willing to return to spiritual orphanhood as a needy man rather than maintain the self-image of an important writer, a respected monk, and an ebullient *bon vivant*. In a lecture to fellow monks while master of novices, Merton disposes of his false images or idols with a recurrent metaphor: fire. "If I want my idols to go into the fire, I myself must go into the fire."⁷ Fire in this context

4. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 36.

5. I am indebted to Dr. R. E. Daggy for this point.

6. Elena Malits' *The Solitary Explorer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) undergirds my own metaphoric investigations. She has mapped Merton's mental geography so thoroughly that anyone writing on Mertonian metaphors owes her an immense debt.

7. AA2267, "The True and False Self," *The Merton Tapes* (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1990).

suggests cleansing, purification, perhaps even remodeling. But as Merton often reminded his readers, to lose the ego-self in the fire implies having one to lose. The ego-self has to be strong at first in order to be burned off later. In his final address in Bangkok, Merton advances the idea of having a strong self and then losing it in transformation from "self-centered love into an outgoing, other-centered love."⁸

One would expect Thomas Merton to construct interesting metaphors for the self simply because he had so much practice. But there are other reasons for his striking metaphor generation. He has two-eyed vision: the vision of a monk and the vision of a poet, the monk's meditative seriousness and the poet's ease with words. Who but a monk and a poet could define himself as neither "white-collared" nor "blue-collared" nor "Roman-collared," but rather a "Man without a Collar"?⁹

Merton also read voraciously. Vast reading deepened and broadened his sense of self. He is, after all, one of the great readers of the century, somewhat akin to Carl Jung in his subject range, from existentialism to psychoanalysis to Sufism, from poetry to Buddhism to theology. The poet, essayist, and storyteller Guy Davenport colorfully spells out Merton's uniqueness as a writer and reader: "When he wrote about the Shakers, he was a Shaker. He read with perfect empathy: he was Rilke for hours, Camus, Faulkner. . . . I wonder whether there has ever been as protean an imagination as Thomas Merton's."¹⁰

The number of works read, quoted, and commented on, for example in *The Asian Journal* alone, is simply staggering. In the thousands of volumes he read in his lifetime it would not be an exaggeration to say that he would have read hundreds that in some way or other commented on the self. At Columbia University where he studied the poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, about whom he planned to pursue a doctorate, he doubtless would have come upon the words "A self then will consist of a centre and a surrounding area or circumference, of a point of reference and a belonging field. . . ."¹¹

8. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 334.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 808.

10. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton*, ed. Barry Magrid (New York: Timken, 1991) 34.

11. John Pick, ed., *A Hopkins Reader* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1966) 402.

In studying his final years one may be tempted also to single out his ongoing dialogue with D. T. Suzuki's Zen essays and his encounter with the Sufi psychotherapist A. Reza Arasteh's *Final Integration in the Adult Personality* as enriching his understanding of the self. Important works on spirituality about the Indians of the Americas, reviewed in his *Ishi Means Man*, additionally played their part in his growth. In Native American thought Merton discovered "a conception of identity which is quite different from our subjective and psychological one, centered on the empirical ego regarded as distinct and separate from the rest of reality." In Native American thought "one's identity was the intersection of cords where one 'belonged.'" ¹² One was simply a branch on a tree with its roots in the ancestors and guardian spirits and its trunk connected to the family and tribe. The self, as Hopkins hinted, was always surrounded by something larger than itself.

T.R.V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, read on his Asian journey, proved to be a rich catalyst for Merton's final thoughts on the self. He frequently copies quotations into his notebooks, such as "to accept a permanent substantial self is for Buddhism the root of all attachment,"¹³ though Merton is also quick to record ". . . the Madhyamika does not deny the real; he only denies *doctrines* about the real. For him, the real as transcendent to thought can be reached only by the denial of the determinations which systems of philosophy ascribe to it."¹⁴ In the Buddhist dialectic the person presumably may be a part of what is real, but what we understand to be the self, as a permanently fixed identity, is an illusion. In the same way that there is no abiding "milkness," in Buddha's own analogy, since milk can become curds or cheese or ice cream, so there is no abiding self other than self-concepts that attempt to freeze it.¹⁵

Merton's readings, then, freshly define and explore the self. Arasteh's book, for example, which he reviewed in detail in his essay "Final Integration: 'Toward a Monastic Therapy,'" inspired him to write one of his most comprehensive summing-up statements of the transcultural self in general and his own transcultural self in particu-

12. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (Greensboro, N.C.: Unicorn, 1976) 58.

13. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 275.

14. *Ibid.*, 140.

15. Michael Carrithers, *The Buddha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 45.

lar: "He has a unified vision and experience of one truth shining out in all its various manifestations. . . . He does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other, but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity. . . ."16 Arasteh also gave Merton the confidence that he could pass through the tunnel of neurosis, despair, and personal crisis and come out the other side, stronger, healthier, and more integrated. His afflictions could be spurs, not inhibitors, to growth.

In his journey through metaphor making and metaphor reading, Merton does not so much invent new metaphors of the self as reshape old metaphors. He comes to know who he is and what he might be through his metaphor mirrors. And these metaphor mirrors—mountains, fire, seeds—remain remarkably consistent. Mountains, for example, figure prominently in his work from beginning to end, a fact his official biographer, Michael Mott, was quick to take advantage of in calling his biography *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. Merton wrote about mountains, and if one grants mountain-status to knolls, or knobs, he lived near them for most of his life.

In that haunting first sentence of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton lays claim to being "in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain," and in the very title of the book he sketches his first famous metaphor of the self in pilgrimage.¹⁷ The metaphor suggests an ongoing climb to new stations of awareness and realization. In the Western tradition, the mountain embodies one of the principal metaphors of verticality and hierarchy, presupposing a base, a summit, and frequently, a climber. The mountain in Merton's context is an aggressive metaphor; the mountain is something to be climbed, to be overcome, scaled, surmounted; each storey is to be left behind for a higher and better one until one reaches the top, which for Merton at the time was to be a monk in the Cistercian order. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is an aggressive book. Not only does Merton's young soul reach for new heights of spirituality, but he is willing to abandon those on lesser slopes—Protestants, Marxists, hedonists, and non-believers.¹⁸

16. Thomas Merton, "Final Integration: 'Toward A Monastic Therapy,'" *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1973) 117.

17. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, reprinted 1978) 3.

18. Professor Jacques Goulet develops this point with great clarity in his paper

Twenty years later in his Asian journey Merton has dramatically shifted metaphors. He no longer defines himself exclusively by what he is not, but inclusively by the breadth of his emotional and intellectual embrace. He is no longer the questing pilgrim, the aggressive climber; he is the marginal man, for the monk is "a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience."¹⁹ He has replaced a vertical metaphor with a horizontal one. His new metaphor of the self is not concerned with up or down, high or low, but with the concept of the circle. Far from conceiving himself as one triumphantly atop a mountain, Merton now sees himself as someone at the margins, occupying the furthest point from the center of the circle.

When he engages the mountain metaphorically at all in *The Asian Journal*, it is with the mountain disengaged from a conquering verticality. His mountain now is "the side that has never been photographed and turned into post cards"; the mountain with "another side," not susceptible to climbing or photography.²⁰ The many-sidedness of the mountain grips Merton's attention, but he again chooses to identify himself with the "margins"—the side of the mountain that is not seen, that cannot be seen.

In *The Asian Journal* Merton follows his brief meditation on the mountain with a meditation on doors, the three doors that are one door: "the door of emptiness," "which cannot be entered by a self"; "the door without sign," which is "without information"; and "the door without wish," which "does not respond to a key." These doors are "without a number" and have "no threshold, no step, no advance, no recession, no entry, no nonentry."²¹ As with the metaphor of the mountain, Merton starts with the familiar (a door) and proceeds to deconstruct the metaphor until it is strange and foreign; he denudes the metaphor of its usual connections and connotations. The door, which usually symbolizes a passageway to a new stage or beginning, in Merton's context, is freed from transformative successions and is simply something there without sign or wish. Merton, who so effortlessly slips from Buddhist metaphors—the mountain that is no-

"Thomas Merton's Journey toward World Religious Ecumenism" in *The Merton Annual* 4 (New York: AMS Press, 1992) 113-29.

19. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 305.

20. *Ibid.*, 152-53.

21. *Ibid.*, 154.

mountain, the door that is no-door—to Christian metaphors, closes the meditation with the thought that Christ is the “nailed door” (the crucifixion) and the no-door (the resurrection), which is “the door of light, the Light itself.”²²

Merton’s door, like his new mountain, is not something to be dominated or controlled or even sought. “When sought it fades. Recedes. Diminishes. Is nothing.”²³ The door “cannot be entered by a self” or opened by a key. Merton has come a long way, from aggressive Western metaphors of the self to more flexible Eastern metaphors in which the ego-self or false self must be abandoned in order for the true self to emerge. In both the biblical and Buddhist traditions freedom from the ego-self is a necessary stage in human growth. As Merton informs novice monks in his lecture “The True and False Self,” true freedom consists of “freedom from idolatry” in which sometimes “the real idol is me.”²⁴ While the Bible associates sin with self-idolatry, Buddhism also encourages detachment from the illusory self, the self as object. Both traditions compel adherents to shed the “everyday conception of ourselves as potential subjects for special and unique experiences or as candidates for realization, attainment and fulfillment.”²⁵

What happens to Merton in the intervening years between his first major autobiographical work (1948) and his last autobiographical notebook (1968) is a deepening experience of “selfhood” and a deepening understanding of Zen as a technique to lift the false veils covering one’s true face. In *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) Merton defines Zen as “the ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its ‘suchness’ and ‘thusness.’”²⁶ Zen, as he was to say repeatedly, formed neither a doctrine nor a body of knowledge nor a religion but provided a means whereby one might awaken and see. Zen’s great metaphors have to do with wakefulness and sight. To see, in a Zen context, implies that one is blind and to awaken implies that one is asleep.

22. *Ibid.*, 154–55.

23. *Ibid.*, 154.

24. “The True and False Self,” *The Merton Tapes*. See note 7 above.

25. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 76–77.

26. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York: New Directions, 1968) 14.

Zen seeks to awaken the somnolent person and to liberate him or her from the narcotic of self-ego. The master jars or shocks or disorients the novice by a koan or a kind of theater of the absurd, hence the crack of bamboo on one’s head or the spilling of tea in one’s lap, to unlock the ego-prison. As early as *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton recognizes himself as a “prisoner of [his] own violence and [his] own selfishness.”²⁷ Throughout his writings, and by means of his writings, he seeks “the awakening of the unknown ‘I’ that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself.”²⁸ This “Zen” way of looking at the self is perhaps best expressed in the journals of the early sixties, published in 1965 as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

The taste for Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism: the reification of concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness, flight from being into verbalism, mathematics, and rationalization. Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it.²⁹

The metaphors at work in Merton’s psyche in the last years of his life are often drawn from Zen or Zen-like sources. The sixties ferment his consciousness, but not so much from new seeds—another favorite Merton metaphor—but from the harvesting of old seeds planted in his Columbia years. In the late 1930s, for example, his exposure to Aldous Huxley’s *Ends and Means* had already propelled him toward Eastern philosophies. In his Columbia master’s thesis of 1939 on William Blake he prophetically quotes Chuang Tzu, the Chinese sage whose poems he will later reconstruct, and in his notes for the thesis he makes reference to D. T. Suzuki, the Zen authority with whom he will later spend a “rap” weekend in New York. In a letter to Aldous Huxley dated November 27, 1958, he pointedly writes: “May I add that I am interested in yoga and above all in Zen, which I find to be the finest example of a technique leading to the highest natural perfection of man’s contemplative liberty.”³⁰

27. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 3.

28. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 7.

29. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 285.

30. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience*

In his 1963 *Emblems of a Season of Fury* in poems such as "The Fall," "Song for Nobody," "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing," and in "Night-Flowering Cactus" one begins to see the influence of Zen reshaping his ways of seeing and understanding the self. In "The Fall," for example, he writes:

There is no where in you a paradise that is no place
and there
You do not enter except without a story.
To enter there is to become unnameable.
Whoever is there is homeless for he has no door and
no identity with which to go out and to come in.

The poem, in part, seems to prefigure what Merton will say in his meditation on doors in *The Asian Journal*. There Merton makes the point that no one "with a self can enter," and here, five years earlier, he asserts that "he who has an address is lost."³¹

In *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965) Merton continues with what I have chosen to call Zen metaphors, though one might as correctly say Taoist, or even Eastern, metaphors. In "The Man of Tao" he writes:

"No-Self"
Is "True-Self"
And the greatest man
Is Nobody.³²

In another poem in the same work, "The Empty Boat," Merton, through the mask of Chuang Tzu, says that the "perfect" man goes through life "like Life itself / With no name and no home. . . . His boat is empty."³³

One of the remarkable aspects of Merton's late metaphor generation is his tendency to take words to the limits of sense and to the ends of language. In his Zen metaphors, or perhaps more accurately his Zen paradoxes, visible in his poetry and in his Asian works, Mer-

and *Social Concern*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985) 439.

31. Merton, *The Collected Poems*, 334.

32. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 92.

33. *Ibid.*, 115.

ton speaks of the self as "nobody" found "nowhere" in "nothing." The meaning of these words eclipses their presence: they are and are not; they self-destruct. The self, for late Merton, is without name and address, even without attribute. It has no particular face and needs no concrete metaphor mirrors such as mountains or seeds in order to see itself. The self then sees the sham of separateness and specialness and comes to an appreciation of its own nakedness, aloneness, and utter dependency on the love of others. Notably, Merton's great epiphanies, early and late, from Our Lady of Cobre to Polonnaruwa, are epiphanies of love and solidarity. In such visions the mystery of the self is ceremonially honored, and the gap between the self and the other is successfully bridged.

The picture of the self Merton finally draws is akin to Kafka's K in its being without name and address, but the self in Merton differs from Kafka's K in being neither alienated nor isolated; rather, the self throws itself at Mercy and propels itself toward Love. As Merton himself puts it in his last notebook, "Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."³⁴ The self in such a journey is "merely a locus in which the dance of the universe is aware of itself. . . . Gladly. Praising, giving thanks, with all beings. Christ light—spirit—grace—gift. . . ."³⁵

34. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 296.

35. *Ibid.*, 68.