

Animated Outsiders: Echoes of Merton in Hampl, Norris, Dillard, and Ehrlich

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Among the characteristics of Thomas Merton's poetry that continue to engage audiences is a conversational style that pulls readers inside his most intimate dialogues with God. Merton's spiritual journals written from the Abbey of Gethsemani are also a familiar genre. The literary wilderness essay, perfected by Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, epitomized the nineteenth-century American philosophy of transcendentalism. As a philosophy, transcendentalism prized simplicity in "natural" religion and the idea of oratory and of writing as civic vocations, a suitable way to explain the idyllic thinker among the agrarian, utopian communities that flourished briefly in mid-nineteenth century New England. The word "natural" signified the spirituality of the "outsider" who left the village for a life outdoors. Detachment from the habits of village culture freed the observer to report on the illusions and reality of a seemingly eventless world and to seek community in a new way, through the patterns of the seasons and habitats of creatures. Above all, such a writer praised listening.

Thomas Merton's poetry and prose provide ample evidence of his reading the American transcendentalists and his regard for Emerson and Thoreau as writers, thinkers, and spiritual philosophers. Henry David Thoreau left Concord for Walden Pond because he "wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life," as Merton noted in *Sign of Jonas*, and to see, as a poet, if he could learn what nature "had to teach."¹ Emerson observed that most people had a very

superficial way of seeing themselves united with other humans and with nature as one community. He wrote that "nature never became a toy to a wise spirit." Only those whose "inward and outward" ways of seeing were "truly adjusted to each other" could understand the preaching of the stars and the powerful eloquence of the sun.² Emily Dickinson also sought refuge in her poetry from what Merton would call the "vain agitation of cities."³

Just as Merton sometimes mentioned the words of Thoreau and Emerson, a number of contemporary writers are turning to Merton's poetry and journals as "spiritual classics." Works by Patricia Hampl, Kathleen Norris, Annie Dillard, and Gretel Ehrlich provide some examples of a larger conversation going on in mass culture about popular religion, the perception of the beautiful in women, and the importance of integrating the feminine in achieving religious balance. What makes this curious and intriguing is the way in which women writers are using the themes of monastic simplicity to offer an alternative vision about religion to those traditions of orthodox, patriarchal culture. At the same time, one might conjecture from these works by women that there seems to be an insistence on reinventing women's religious culture as the literature of outsiders. Paradoxically, what once was weakness now is perceived as strength: being on the outside of biblical culture enables women to reinterpret the language of the scribes.

Among such contemporary women writers are those working within a genre of "spiritual journalism." Produced for the mass marketplace, the genre is a type of wilderness essay that is part prayer, part diary, part poetry—a narrative of the animated soul in an eventless, natural world. These writers have chosen to live in places off the beaten path where the mass media cannot penetrate, or is irrelevant—the plains, desert, forest. The common ground for their shared religious perspectives is that of the silence made holy by the act of their recording the silence, and the world made up of small, inconsequential lives caught up in daily ritual and routine transformed suddenly into events of vast consequence because they occur in an otherwise eventless landscape.

Four writers are discussed in this essay as contemporary practitioners of "spiritual journalism"; they seek to transcend psyche, or-

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953) 316.

2. *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1989) I, 904.

3. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1964) 14.

thodoxy, and culture in a way that Emerson, Thoreau, and Merton would have found congenial. In their search for a feminine spirit, for a "natural religion," these writers seek to discover and to describe for others what it means to be human. They write about natural religion—balanced, authentic, healthy, as well as ordinary and conversational—not as a matter for the intellect or even so much of the heart, but as matter for the artist's source of vision. With detachment from official religion, they bear witness to a natural order unrecognized by the secular world. The poetic dimension of "natural" religion (the "language of the spheres") provides the authentic way into the feminine soul and out of the dilemma of patriarchal culture. The purpose of prayer, for these women artists, is to listen and to observe what God is saying and doing in the world. The writers' vocation is to tell readers what they hear and see.

Among the contemporary writers working in the genre of spiritual journalism, several have created works about the geography of the soul. Each unravels the contradictions of her search for natural religion to help define what "feminine spirit" means. When Merton wrote that the "difference between the moral life and the mystical life is discovered in the presence of contradiction," he also observed that the role of discovery in the contemplative life is a process of "finding the Holy Spirit in new and unexpected places."⁴ He kidded his long-faced readers that one of those surprising places "might be in moral theology." "I thought," Merton wrote, "moral theology was just a set of rules by which one learned to keep imperfect Christians and sinners from getting mad at the Church and walking out altogether."⁵ For contemporary writers seeking a place in patriarchal religious culture for the feminine spirit, one of those surprises is not in moral theology but in their cultural memories of Catholicism. However, contemporary women are not revisiting Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.⁶ Instead, they create a bemused literary distance from the artifacts of their fathers' faith that is less nostalgic than comic. The press for relevance to the immediate moment overcomes the poignance of the past: for there is no question that the present moment is the one that counts, defines the importance of seeing things as they are,

4. Merton, *Jonas*, 188.

5. *Ibid.*, 280–282.

6. Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1957).

not as they are remembered. Ironic and comedic modes sustain the contemporary narrative and encourage a dubious reader to enter the world of orthodoxy without timidity.

Drawn to the aesthetic center of the Catholic religion, several of these writers have left the attic of their girlhood to enter a dialogue with feminism itself as a belief system, with those who regard feminism in a quasi-religious light, and with those who regard the feminine spirit as a threat to official religion. They do not retreat from the religious and moral dilemma posed by patriarchal culture and orthodox faith which relegates women to the periphery. Merton acknowledged that the "artificial" system of religious hierarchies which cast women as outsiders "needs to be changed," and that change in "the whole idea of priesthood" cannot come about by women "getting all fixed up in a chasuble and biretta," but by developing "a whole new style of worship in which there is no need for one hierarchical person to have a big central place," but a form of worship in which "everyone is involved."⁷

The four writers discussed here provide narrative evidence of their search to resolve an authentic religious dilemma. Merton wrote that the essence of the mystical prayer life was the way to resolve human dilemmas "in ease and mystery," choosing at the same time "both horns of the dilemma and no horn at all and always being perfectly right." In mystical activity, he concluded, "the dilemma suddenly ceases to matter."⁸ Evidence from the genre of spiritual journalism demonstrates how writers are spiritually freed by their lives as outsiders from both secular and official religious culture. Their search to understand what it means to be human in relation to an Other, not in relation to the self, is in that dimension of non-being weighted in eventlessness. It is this quality which separates these writers from the literature by eco-feminist women that is caught in its own resistance against inherited forms, its refusal to integrate spirit and culture, its "obstinacy" to borrow Martín-Barbero's phrase.⁹ The writers I recommend here as being congenial with the contemplative dimension are

7. Jane Marie Richardson, ed., Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 175–176.

8. Merton, *Jonas*, 280.

9. Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (London: Sage, 1993) i–iii.

engaged in a search for the transcendent, but they are not separatists. On the contrary, they use Merton, and especially his use of transcendentalism, in translating their search for a mass marketplace audience.

Eco-feminists construct political philosophy, building a goddess-system to compete with patriarchy, and treat Nature [capitalization mine] as part of a hierarchy of being. The spiritual journalists see nature as a source for instruction and conversation for humans about becoming. Further, eco-feminism is a distinct strain in American literary history, an outgrowth of the "confessional school of poetry" of the 1970s that included writers like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, many of whom ended their own lives after a great deal of torment and despair. Merton argued that the resolution to any interior problem as a psychological fact lay not in the resolution of selfhood or psychology, in "what I am or what I am not," but in the "mode in which I am tending to become what I really will be."¹⁰ In the opinion of the spiritual poet and literary critic Denise Levertov, who knew Thomas Merton and admired his writing, the confessional school produced "womb poetry," a literature of self-gestation from which emerged not a new self, but a more functional one.¹¹ Through contemplation, Merton might have argued, gender ceases to matter: prayer is both a "way out" of the gender-difference argument and a "way in" to unity with all people.

Patricia Hampl

Patricia Hampl is a professor of English literature at the University of Minnesota. She calls herself laughingly a "convent school ingenue who refused to convert to the secular faith of the real world." She points out in *Virgin Time* that her girlish Catholicism was an instinct about two things—the right to exercise the imagination and the need to travel. A child's interpretation of life as journey is about the freedom to move, to be "on the trail," she recalls, "I didn't know how to think about the past without going somewhere."¹² Her book is about

10. Merton, *Jonas*, 188.

11. Personal conversation with Denise Levertov at University of California at Berkeley, 1968. See also Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980).

12. Patricia Hampl, *Virgin Time* (New York: Ballantine, 1992) 206. See also, Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel, eds., *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Fawcett, 1994).

her journey toward becoming a writer of some spiritual depth and comic vision.

The journey she relates is a pilgrimage from Assisi, to Lourdes, and eventually to northern California, where she seeks definitions of mystery and connections with the human through a search for community in contemplative prayer. Along the way, her tale is imbued with an awareness of religious anachronism embodied by the human comedy. Though Hampl begins the book with the rather severe concept of journey, she discovers, having met a cast of characters in Chaucerian fashion along the route, the more complex dimensions of Merton's contemplative model as central to a reality that will take her beyond history and politics. Through the process of travelling she establishes an occasion for her spiritual conversations with the reader.

Hampl and her fellow travellers find Merton's definition of the contemplative life as "one's own time. But not dominated by one's own ego and its demands. Hence open to others—compassionate time, rooted in the sense of common illusion and in criticism of it."¹³ She calls this the "timeless time, the receptive temporal pivot when being hangs suspended, unadorned by will or intention," citing Merton as her source. He had written, she notes, "For the birds, there is not a time . . . but the virgin point between darkness and light, between nonbeing and being . . . when creation in its innocence asks permission to be once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was." Hampl interprets Merton's signature moment as the difference between daybreak and dawn, a paradigm of perpetual uncovering of a darkness that does not cease.¹⁴ The contemplative point of view, she notes, is a way of thinking about religion where "the day is a verse and the season is a stanza."¹⁵ Nature sets the rhythms for prayer in the writer's life.

According to Hampl, the contemplative life is not a way of limiting what can be seen; it is "a habit of attention brought to bear on all that is." The contemplative dimension provides the controlling metaphor for a life of observation. The nuns who taught in her Kennedy-era convent school asked, "Who sees the parade better?"—"the baton twirler strutting along the middle of the street? Or the person with a balcony view, looking down on it all?" The person in the

13. Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 224–225.

14. *Ibid.*, 206.

15. *Ibid.*, 220.

balcony, Sister argued, "unobserved and hidden," "possessed the entire event" not unlike the writer, while the twirler, Sister pointed out, was a "borderline ninny," despite the "kick" of being the center of attention. The elevated status of the observer shapes Hampl's narration as well as her concept of her vocation as a writer. Because of her Catholic training, Hampl says, "self-expression became my true faith." Her education gave her the freedom to stare out the window at nothing—which was excellent training for the imagination, she observes. Of the convent school, she recalls that "the whole place was an injunction to metaphor, to the endless noticing of detail that is rendered into transformation."¹⁶

Hampl discovers the model of Mary as an outsider who was really on the inside, at ease with her freedom to stand aside and "ponder" the mysteries of life. Pondering assumed a high place in her girlhood religious outlook on life. The "other, richer passion, rooted early," Hampl writes, "was for the mystery of a dedicated life."¹⁷ The very concept of vocation, a somewhat foreign notion in a consumer culture, forms her habit as a writer.

The Church offered a mature Hampl an opportunity for intimacy not afforded by the real culture and something different than the intimacy of her marriage. Beneath its theology, patriarchy, or history, Catholicism in its first state "was sheer poetry." The cultural memories Hampl transmits with *Virgin Time* are the right to observe, record, stare out the window at nothing, and the freedom to imagine the self, or to converse with God, to ponder as His mother had done the meaning of being human. "Somewhere along the years," Hampl writes, "religion passed beyond the allure of the consecration to the mystery of living itself. That mystery, elusive even in its presence in every breath we take, was represented to me as the life of contemplation. The monastery was a hive, the laboratory of life's mystery."¹⁸

Kathleen Norris

Kathleen Norris, a resident of a small town in South Dakota, is a poet, wife, Protestant, lay minister, and an oblate in a Benedictine

community of sixty-five monks in North Dakota. Norris's *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* is best considered in the light of the literary tradition of Emily Dickinson or Flannery O'Connor—it is about making room for the spirit despite the restrictions or confinements of a place. Preferring "music and story over systematic theology," Norris describes an inner landscape as being shaped by the natural conditions of the place she and her husband prefer to their earlier life in Manhattan. "The city no longer appeals to me for the cultural experiences and possessions I might acquire there," she writes, "holiness is to be found in being open to humanity in all its diversity. And the western plains now seem bountiful in their emptiness, offering solitude and room to grow." Norris's formation responds to the ancient order, the Desert Fathers' spirituality, "not taught but caught; it was a whole way of life."

The American way of life accepts consumption of material goods as a serious matter, while talk of time and God make her peers uncomfortable. For Norris, the idea of "God's ever present hospitality in both nature and other people" is an "invitation," and in deciding to live in a place "where nothing happens," the author discovers that she "can change." In a landscape where there are few people and long winters, Norris had to give up attachment to ideas of dominance or control. Rather, she had to wait. The place would "mold" her. Norris concludes that religion is to "be participated in and not consumed—one reason why Americans are as a culture in a deep conflict about the role religion ought to play in democratic life." The silence of the plains resembles the silence of the monastery. Norris writes, "All of this reflects a truth Thomas Merton once related about his life as a Trappist monk: 'It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and sister.'"

What makes monastic life interesting to her are the monks' extraordinary ideas about reality and their "relaxed attitude about the holy that can alarm the more rigidly pious." Like the monks, the small mid-western plains town is disappearing, but their responses to impending obsolescence differ. The townspeople see only that they are failing as a community, while the monks continue to care for one another and for strangers such as the author and those she brings with her to the monastery, as though time itself were irrelevant or simply part of the larger order of things, like the seasons.

The monks teach the author a lesson about natural balance in moderation. She cites the fourth-century desert nun Amma Syncle-

16. *Ibid.*, 224.

17. *Ibid.*, 14.

18. *Ibid.*

tia, who wrote that "lack of proportion always corrupts," and that the center of the ascetic way required balance among food, work, prayer, rest and play." The point of religion, Norris writes, is "not what one gets out of it, but the worship of God; the service takes place both because of and despite the needs, strengths, and frailties of the people present."

So that the penultimate balance for which nature serves as a metaphor is between life and death, one season and another, night and day, spirit and matter, reality and dream, being and non-being. What sets the monks apart, Norris concludes, is their "contemplative sense of fun." For as the Trappist Matthew Kelty writes, according to Norris, "You do not have to be holy to love God. You have only to be human. Nor do you have to be holy to see God in all things. You have only to play as a child with an unselfish heart."¹⁹

Gretel Ehrlich and Annie Dillard

Ehrlich's *Solace of Open Spaces*, published in 1985, is patterned on Dillard's prize-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, published in 1974. Though her voice is more mature than Dillard, Ehrlich is less defensive about her retreat from city life. In their early work, neither sees the organized Church to offer solace in religion that is comparable to that of the natural world, which offers both truth and comfort.

Ehrlich retreats to a sheep ranch in Colorado, where she recounts her life with the cowboys, hermits, and townspeople. Little happens but the revelations of nature. Like Dillard, she is more comfortable with natural science than with faith. For both women, contemplative realities in the Desert Fathers' tradition provide the counterpoint, the backdrop for what is available rather than sought. Ehrlich finds "exquisite paradox" in autumn's "double voice," the one that says everything is ripe, the other that everything is dying. Knowledge of the paradox is the center of what the Japanese monks call "awareness," according to Ehrlich, "an almost untranslatable word that means beauty tinged with sadness." Indeed, nothing seems to separate these two writers from religious maturity or transformation except time: neither historical nor political events offer interference. The focus on the present

19. All references to Kathleen Norris are from her *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1992).

elevates the absence of events, so that it, too, plays a role in the narrative about being.

Dillard is more pragmatic than not; she admits "I see what I expect." She cites Thoreau's return to nature as a way to escape mystery. Dillard describes herself as a writer who is like the man watching a baseball game in silence in an empty stadium, cheering over and over when the imaginary players lope off the field into the dugout. "But," Dillard protests, she will "fail" or "go mad" if she tries to comprehend mystery solely through the imagination. "The secret of seeing," Dillard writes "is the pearl of great price."²⁰

Dillard concludes that this secret cannot be sought. Rather, she reluctantly concludes, understanding mystery is a gift: "All I can do," she writes, "is to gag the commentator," or disbeliever, "to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing just as surely as a newspaper dangled before my eyes. The effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle; it marks the literature of saints and monks of every Order East and West, under every rule and no rule, discolored and shod." Dillard's narration is built through a meditative process that moves her beyond the "mind's muddy river." Though she is a meticulous observer of nature, she never enters the "deep light" but hovers on the perimeter, telling the reader about its value.²¹ Dillard ends her narrative "dancing to the twin silver trumpets of praise," her "left foot says 'Glory' and her right foot says 'Amen.'"²²

To have chosen a life of solitude, Ehrlich writes, is seen by the world as a sign of failure.²³ One of Ehrlich's neighbors is the granddaughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson: she ranches alone, admits that the life is hard, but achieves balance and perspective by focussing on all things rather than one. She acknowledges that "everything" is beautiful.²⁴ In this landscape, Ehrlich finds sacramental meaning, a text from which she can derive instruction.²⁵ Like Merton, Ehrlich "loves winter when the plant says nothing."²⁶ In the absence of anything but

20. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 15.

21. *Ibid.*, 32.

22. *Ibid.*, 271.

23. Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (New York: Viking, 1985) 21.

24. *Ibid.*, 43.

25. *Ibid.*, 71.

26. Thomas Merton, "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing," *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1967) 112.

whiteness, she gleans peripheral vision that leads her to the greater knowledge that "it is in the volume of life we learn life is good." Ehrlich finds the same invitation to be human in solitude that Thoreau found. He wrote that to be human is to be like the river, always in the same channel but a new water every instant.²⁷ In solitude Ehrlich finds the source for her renewed faith in life itself if not in any official religion. As autumn teaches her the paradox that ripeness is a form of decay and "leaves are verbs that conjugate the seasons," Ehrlich concludes that the whole of nature is a metaphor for a kind of transubstantiation: "Today the sky is a wafer. Placed on my tongue, it is a wholeness that has already disintegrated; placed under the tongue, it makes my heart beat strongly enough to stretch myself over the winter brilliance to come."²⁸

Conclusion

American women writers are playing an important and culturally significant role in the transmission of popular ideas about religion by producing literary works about their search for transformational community through solitude and through contemplation. As the communication scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero observed recently, he "still" needed to explain for himself the role women played in the "transmission of popular memory" and women's "obstinate rejection over centuries of the official religion and culture"²⁹ in Latin America. Meanwhile, North American women's resistance to "official" religion seems to have occurred primarily on an academic rather than a popular level. While there is ample evidence of examining biblical scholarship and the sociology of religion so that women are included, ideas about popular religion in America, where women are concerned, remain on the level of the enthusiastic, either eco-feminist or "new age." Writers of such recent enthusiasms intend to redistribute secular power, rather than reinterpret ancient traditions about belief. The latter, I suggest, is the work of the genre of spiritual journalists: they seek to connect with ancestral patterns of belief in order to both transcend and to reconnect their present day with the past. Perhaps women's "obstinate re-

fusal" cited by Martín-Barbero in Latin America, and the resistance to official religion in North America, suggests we might consider the genre of spiritual journalism as a public explanation for what they *do* accept, and as an attempt to bridge the private world of spirit and the material culture through an aesthetic construction for the authenticity they are seeking. This is a level of reality provided neither by the secular nor the religious culture these authors have inherited.

Hampl, Norris, Dillard, and Ehrlich integrate spiritual principles drawn from the transcendentalist tradition as part of their aesthetic vision. To varying degrees, each finds congenial the virtues of simplicity, detachment, non-being, eventlessness as means to enlightenment. Monastic aestheticism has been taken up as a model for transcendence as they search for a place for the feminine spirit in orthodoxy and in mass culture. During his lifetime, Thomas Merton opened up to a wide readership his experience of religious life in the monastery by drawing readers into what had previously been quite inaccessible to most of them. As the books by these women demonstrate, it is because of Merton's efforts to make the wisdom of the monastic way available to people in all walks of life that his writing continues to shape the cultural memory of those who try to express what the Catholic tradition means in contemporary life.

27. Ehrlich, *Solace*, 84.

28. *Ibid.*, 130.

29. Martín-Barbero, *Communication*, 91.