

A Voice in the Postmodern Wilderness: Merton on Monastic Renewal

Thomas F. McKenna, C.M.

In a frequently cited scene from a Franz Kafka novel, one traveler stops another along a highway. He asks where the other is going. The second answers, "I don't know. Only away from here. Only by so doing can I reach my destination."¹

In this short exchange, the wanderer expresses something at the heart of the cultural mood referred to as postmodernism. There is a spreading fissure, it asserts, running down the center of all that makes up the world called "modern." If we are to be whole, we must distance ourselves from many of the tenets of this Enlightenment child. Its notion of progress, its pitting of individual against collectivity, its dominative attitude toward the earth, its commodifying compulsion, its reliance on shallowly empirical modes of knowing—these and other qualities have shown their destructive undersides in increasingly frightening ways. The Enlightenment confidence is unfounded. One cannot live as if the bankruptcies, spiritual and otherwise, of the twentieth century did not exist.² We have to get "away from here."

The problem, of course, is where to go. In large part postmodernism is a reaction, drawing most of its bearings and energy from what it rejects. What it proposes is another matter, and in fact it is near impossible to name any one course it sets down, so disparate are the coun-

1. Franz Kafka, "My Destination," *Parables and Paradoxes* (Berlin: Schocken, 1975) 189. Cited in Elizabeth Johnson, "Between the Times," *Review for Religious* 53 (January 1994) 18.

2. *Ibid.*

sels of its adherents.³ Postmodernism insists that the frames of reference of the modern world are skewed, poisonous, and are to be dismantled. But the frames for a renewed world?

The more hopeful adherents (constructionists) say there are world views to be constructed, but unlike previous frameworks these new ones will not have half the applicability or staying power. Such vehicles of meaning will be helpful in different places and times but will not be able to span the gap between experience and significance in any universal way nor for very long.

Less sanguine commentators (deconstructionists) contend that the day has passed of even arriving at structures which can trustworthily carry meaning. In place are a series of arbitrary prisms through which we look at reality, which themselves have been entirely molded from the self-interests of those who sit astride the social pyramid. The task is to expose and deconstruct. After that, one must be vigilant against the forces which want to slip in new worldviews which simply switch beneficiaries. In the end it is impossible to put together basic referents (e.g., self, truth as correspondence, God, etc.) which merit our trust.

Neither position offers much firm ground on which to stand. So many of the culture's taken-for-granted beliefs about what matters and what should be passed over have been exposed as empty and merely self-serving. More reliable ones either struggle in dark and untested ambiguity, or by definition cannot be born at all.

And thus the mood. Sensing things breaking apart more than coming together, feeling contingency rather than absoluteness, aware of the fragility of human existence more than its stability, focused more on the passing scene than the permanent one, the postmodern person is wary. The best he or she can hope for is some provisional expression in which meaning might find a home—for a while. Then will come the dis-ease, the need to dismantle the tent and once again to step off onto the shifting sands. A sense of impermanence, fragmentation, disruption, constant dissolution, precariousness, and unpredictability fills the air. Confidence wanes in the advent—and even the possibility—of some new order which will hold the center.

3. Steven Payne, "'Although It Is Night': A Carmelite Perspective on Spirituality at the Juncture of Modernity and Postmodernity," *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993) 140.

There have been a number of characteristic reactions to such a world. Certain individuals would distance themselves from all the precariousness by travelling to other times. They attempt to restore one golden age or other when things supposedly were simpler and clearer. They would create some zone of meaning outside the mainstream, using the blueprint of the earlier age, and assume their new habitation to be relatively untouched, at least on the inside, by the culture around them.

Others simply deny the postmodern temperament. Some do this by out and out rejection. Others push it aside by the more subtle stratagem of glorifying modernity. The postmoderns distort the picture, they argue, by downplaying the tremendous gains in freedom, prosperity, technology and education flowing from the Enlightenment. They make too much of the problems and conveniently overlook the many self-correcting mechanisms built into the system. They are the nay-sayers, they bite too hard at the hand that is feeding them, they show a failure of nerve in the face of the risks that life throws up at everyone. Difficulties have appeared in modern times, but not in such magnitude as to call the whole into doubt. The postmodern sensibility, stressing fragility and impermanence, simply does not mirror reality.

More explicitly religious issues also bob in these currents. While some believers do not sense the postmodern temper and others feel it mixed together with both premodern and modern moods,⁴ there are those who know it in their marrow. It is these individuals especially who have increasing difficulty conceiving a God who stands untouched above the sufferings of the millions on the underside of modernity. They struggle to discern God's intervening presence in a society which keeps breaking down and breaking apart. They trip over claims that there is an inexorable plan steadily unfolding itself in history and that justice and goodness are actually making inroads.

Rather than a hovering God, these pilgrims experience an absent one. The once familiar deity who reigned over the universe in power and who existed apart, unaffected by the finitude of His (sic) creatures, is hardly imaginable.⁵ And as this God recedes further and further away from lived existence, an undercurrent of loss and lost-

4. Payne, 142.

5. Michael Downey, *Worship at the Margins: Spirituality and Liturgy* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1994) 276.

ness seeps in. Depictions such as the "eclipse of God" (Buber), "a spirituality of bleaker times" (Rahner), and "A Cry of Absence" (Marty) probe the mood, a winter of the spirit where the comforting colors of summer and even fall have faded and trail-markers are far and few between. The tendency toward denial, restoration, despair, cynicism, and other destructive coping possibilities becomes more pronounced.

Into this unsure world, we introduce Thomas Merton. While it is anachronistic to call him a full-blown postmodern, Merton did concern himself with many of these same elements in modern life. He qualifies at least, in George Kilcourse's felicitous phrase, as "a role-model for engaging spirituality in dialogue with postmodernity."⁶ And at the most, his talent for finding paths through unexplored places invests him with impressive credentials for speaking a valuable word inside this ethos.

Merton is an especially astute guide for this bare time. Granting that some⁷ of the more explicitly postmodern language postdates him, Merton has clear affinities to postmodern concerns. The old maps wearing thin, the urge to move beyond established meanings, the wrestling with God's absence, the temptations to settle for an illusory stability and/or to fixate on the wrong questions, the suspicion of current methods of discourse—these issues not only caught his attention but were the fields on which he worked out his deepest questions.

It is a challenge to select a heading which draws together Merton's thought in order to focus it squarely on postmodern apprehensions. His whole corpus is about living honestly and religiously in shifting times. This essay pulls on just one thread in his writings, the renewal of monastic life in his time. In the mainlines of what he proposed are found not only some of his most telling cultural analyses but also a number of wisdoms to the late twentieth-century pilgrim.

6. "Spirituality After 'A Prayer Lip Stumbles,'" *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993) 2.

7. In a lucid treatment of Merton's late-appearing "anti-poetry," George Kilcourse traces Merton's deepening conviction about the fundamental role language plays in shaping consciousness and the catastrophic distortions modernity had inserted into much of contemporary discourse. In this respect, Merton does speak in postmodern language. *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1993) ch. 5.

Monastic Renewal

It is commonplace to say that Merton's appreciation of monastic life changed over the years. In earlier writings he lionizes the monastery as the hidden-away center of the world, the prime vantage point from which lasting truth can be seen. In his middle and later years, Merton is a good deal more reserved—even suspicious—in his assessment. Both his intensifying study of the movement's founders and his renewed contact with the wider society took him to another ledge from which to look back at Trappist life. That new height was the wilderness.

He experienced a growing unease with both assumptions in place at Gethsemani and more diffusely with attitudes in society at large.⁸ There was something smug and image-conscious, he felt, about each which rang hollow when heard against the experiences of those wanderers in the fourth-century deserts. These had a peril in them, a precariousness and an unpredictability. They were open-ended encounters and did not claim some insider-knowledge of a hidden trail through the wilderness.

By contrast, mid-twentieth-century America's sense of itself was sure and congratulatory, and this in spite of many indications that the country was unravelling at the edges and drying out at the center. Though many alarms were ringing warnings of rocks ahead, the culture spoke in self-assured tones that it knew just where it was going. Likewise in Cistercian life, Merton detected a wrong kind of certainty. He heard guarantees being furnished about the spiritual journey, subtle claims that "The Way" could be discovered by following certain prescriptions and techniques. Almost subliminally, a message was going out that the monastery could protect the monk. It could shield him from life's ambiguities and, more alarmingly, could flood with light the shadowy recesses of encounter with God.

Less and less for him did these outlooks square with the testimonies of the early monks. For them life was a wandering in the desert. Anything but predictable, existence was in large part unknown, much more beckoning than figured out.⁹ The task in faith was to grow more

8. "Letter to Dom Jean Leclercq, July 18, 1967," *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 337.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of The Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 6 [Hereafter cited as WD].

supple before life's promptings. These desert fathers and mothers followed their Lord through a wilderness, that is, a place that was wild. Their greatness was to have allowed themselves to be led far out beyond the conventional into a trackless land where reckoning came only from their desire for God. And their God too was wild, a deity who could not be managed or fathomed, who lived beyond the familiar, and who forever ran ahead of their abilities to comprehend.

Merton's unease was that the Orders spoke the words of solitary search but did not really go on it. They proclaimed adherence to the ultimate but in a thousand subtle ways shifted focus to the penultimate. Merton accuses the monastery of making a grand announcement that "I am going to walk to the North Pole and then proceeding to take a walk around the block."¹⁰

It was not simply that they had screened out the uncertainties of the founders' experiences. These communities had also insulated themselves against the ambiguity and struggle faced by contemporaries. Done supposedly to provide an uncluttered space within which the monk could pursue God, the removal had the effect of placing him inside a bubble which was simply one more layer between the monk and the wilderness his ancestors so blessedly roamed.¹¹ There still were wild places, and equally to the point, there still were people who travelled through them in faith and trust. To construct a barrier between the Trappist and his peers so as to wall him off from the tracklessness these outsiders faced was to deny the monk the grist for precisely the kind of experience that shaped his forbears. Domesticating, taming, controlling, over-institutionalizing—these were the deadening forces, thought Merton. They cut the heart out of monastic "foolishness"—the search for the Other in the other places.¹²

Merton's Renewal Formula

For Thomas Merton, the road to religious renewal stretched out clearly. The monastic orders will come alive to the extent they re-enter the mythic time and space of their beginnings. They will catch hold

10. *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Image Books, 1973) 204 [Hereafter cited as CWA].

11. WD 10.

12. "Letter to Dom Andre Louf, April 26, 1965," *The School of Charity*, 277.

again if they relearn what it is to be led by the Spirit into the wilderness. For Merton, this meant a simultaneous move along two fronts.

The first was toward the past. There had to be a sympathetic entrance into the founding events of the Order. Who were Anthony, Pachomius, and Benedict and what did they teach? What social world did they inhabit? Most importantly, along what inner paths did they walk with their God? This stage of inquiry needs assistance from the historians. The mostly unspoken assumptions of the age, the political and philosophical currents of the time, the way contemporaries reacted to the original communities—all these “facts” enter into getting a proper fix on the beginnings. But of greater importance is a more elusive type of knowing, the kind that comes from shared inner experience—of the self.

At the heart of Merton’s pursuit is the search for God through discovery of his authentic self. In his arresting imagery: “If we enter into ourselves, find our true self and then pass ‘beyond’ the inner ‘I,’ we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the ‘I AM’ of the Almighty.”¹³ At issue here is the manner in which this highly personal quest came to confirm Merton’s choice to be a monk. The further he followed it, the deeper his realization of how much his own path was cousin to the founders’. The more his own inner road opened up to him, the more he came to appreciate theirs. The more he learned about their spiritual experience, the more he could express his own. Merton’s life-journey was a trip back into the sacred spaces and times of monasticism. And that meant a walk into the wilderness, a trek into the wild places where his God dwelt.¹⁴ The early monks became his guides, not so much marking off clear highways but mentoring him about how to comport himself. Drawing close to them, he learned how to survive and prosper in the desert, how to develop an inner compass, and most of all, how to discern God’s fullness in the middle of all that emptiness. With them as soul-mates, he found a type of home in a seemingly homeless place.

Merton’s second movement was toward the present—and through it toward the future. He discovered that access to the privileged experiences of the founding events passed through the portals of con-

13. “The Inner Experience,” cited in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (New York: Paulist, 1992) 302.

14. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 241 [Hereafter cited as NSC].

temporary culture.¹⁵ While the East had its place, of itself it could not lead a person into the myth time. Only when touched to the struggles for meaning of real people in the twentieth century could knowledge about the founders reveal what of grace had happened in those Egyptian wastelands. And did not this process stand to reason since those desert mothers and fathers were seized by the Spirit precisely as they wrestled through nights with the strangers of their age?

Merton’s entry into the founding vision came through engagement with the faith struggles of his era. The ones thirsting for justice in a racist and militaristic society, those lining up with the poor in a materialist culture, the ones grappling with the terrible ambiguity of claims for a good and powerful God in a world so marked with evil and suffering—these were the contemporary desert-dwellers who unveiled for him the wisdom of the ancient ones. Only in sympathetic interchange with such future-oriented groups—in Merton’s phrasing, the “anonymous monks in the world”¹⁶—could today’s monk really touch into the spiritual elan of the founders.

And so his formula for refounding: Stand simultaneously in the two streams of originating event and emerging culture. It is only when the monastery is nourished by both that it can begin to feel again the promise of the desert, to view it once more as an oasis of hope and a place of encounter. The past is accessible only through the present, and yet the present loses its depth and bearings when not anchored in the primitive experience. When the one lives from the other, there is a way in the wilderness.

Short-Circuiting Renewal

While convinced of the truth of his approach, Merton was not naive about difficulties in pursuing it. He knew too well the cold anxieties that crept in when walking through uncharted territory. For one, there was loneliness. God lived here alright, but as experienced in a paradoxical feeling of absence. At times, fears haunted the traveller: he or she might just actually be alone, emptiness might well be the last word about desert life. Still further, there was confusion. Which direction to take, what course to follow? Precious little concrete guid-

15. CWA, 327.

16. CWA, 13.

ance was given in the wilderness, at least of the kind provided by tried-and-true conventional wisdoms about the next steps to take. So much of it was testing, weighing one thing against a plausible other. The temptations to step off the road were many, and they pressed hard.

One way to withdraw was to deny the emptiness. Out of fear, a person could feign certainty (even to self) and then attribute others' doubts to frail faith, morbidity, fixation on some authority issue, or whatever. Things are not half so bleak, they would counter, and it is a disservice to the rest of us to paint so stark a picture of the present mood. The assured ones assert that the bulk of practices and categories in use do bear the warmth and light of God. The proclaimers of God's absence, they continue, are simply wrongheaded and perhaps obsessed with death.¹⁷

Another escape route is a return to some previous world which (seemingly) embodied the divine in clear and comforting ways. If we recreate that golden time, the restorationists contend, the present loss of nerve will evaporate. Merton was quite explicit in naming the favored eras and the kind of people who proposed to lead the Trappists back there.¹⁸ His objection was not that those former ages were shallow or that they did not contain things which could be of help now. His unease came rather from the lulling allure such a deadening promise held out. Not only was it illusory, but it gloried in the claim that it insulated the monks from the very experience which attracted the best of them in the first place.¹⁹

Still one more evasion, in Merton's eyes, was to screen the voices in the wider culture which genuinely probe for the transcendent. These individuals could disturb, because from their future-sensitive stance they called present social arrangements into question. For Merton, the unpropertied intellectuals—the poets and the artists for instance—were among such searchers. Beneficiaries of the culture but not totally invested in it, they noticed parts of the society that many nearer to the center preferred to overlook.²⁰

But more relevant to our reflection is another group with whom Merton felt a special kinship: people who find themselves in crises of faith which have been set off by the various dysfunctions of moder-

17. CWA, 101–109.

18. CWA, 196.

19. WD, 10.

20. CWA, 235ff.

nity.²¹ These are the ones who struggle with the dimming of transcendence; in other words, with the felt withdrawal of God. They walk through the empty places of the world and from those locations are able to say something of hope to more conventional types about what it is to follow a savior who beckons from the future. Often such out-riders are critics of current structures of religion. But because their faith (just as was the early monks') is shaped in struggle with the culture, they are to be heeded. Strangers themselves, they know something of the approach of the God who lives out beyond the familiar.

To use another metaphor, Merton teaches that the healthier societies are the ones that do not close their gates too quickly on the barbarians. On the contrary, they entertain the outsiders because they carry precious things. This is Merton's monastic reprise of the recurring Christian wisdom that God comes in the form of the stranger. If the Orders are not to become shells of their original selves, they are going to have to pay special attention to the groups and individuals who "unofficially" search for God in solitude. For Merton these are the unnamed monks in the world. In his more vivid language: "The monastery is not a ghetto and will not profit by being kept as one."²² "The problem today is that there are no deserts, only dude ranches."²³ The Order will stay fresh to the extent it remains sympathetic with "what and who in the world is open to change."²⁴

Merton's bracing prescription for how monasticism should respond to crisis discloses a truth at the core of his overall message. Though life can seem a wandering search for God, God will find us in the wilderness if we stay honest in the search and resist the temptations to settle for less. If we surrender to the love being given us at our true center, and trust that God is leading us every step of the sometimes comforting and clear, but more often lonely and confusing, way, we will be found.²⁵

What might Merton, who approaches monastic renewal from such an angle, have to say to the postmodern traveler?

21. CWA, 178, 201.

22. CWA, 218.

23. Thomas Merton, *Zen and The Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 19.

24. CWA, 327.

25. Cf. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 241, 258.

Living in the Wilds with Hope

Thomas Merton would be a soul-mate to Kafka's pilgrim, save in one fundamental respect. The Trappist certainly desired to get "away from here," "here" understood as the shallowness in much in the modern ethos. He also would admit that he does not know where he is heading, "where" in the sense of an already mapped out line of march. But that there is really no place to head, and that at the deepest, most existential of levels there is no guidance being provided, Merton would not agree.²⁶ Though difficult, and at times terrifying, the wanderings in the wild are not pointless. They go somewhere, granting that both the somewhere and the way to it are not apparent.

The profound strangeness of the territory "away from here" is not the echo of a bottomless chaos, insists Merton, but the mark of the profound otherness of the God whose home turf the wilderness is. In other words, even though both pilgrims experience the road as precarious and frighteningly unfamiliar, the one regards it as a dead-end and the other as a beckoning path. For reasons ultimately unexplainable, yet not absurd, Merton finds meaning on the road, even though the meaning is mostly promise and is filtered through smokey glass. He travels through the wilds in hope. It is because of such trust that Merton both joins and parts company with certain postmoderns.

He is at home with a sensitivity which names and even glories in the indeterminate. He is kin to the spirit which challenges cherished views of reality because they are built on self-interest and resist whatever cannot be folded into their outlook. Merton was intensely aware of the gap between the bounded, smug wisdoms of the age and the vast horizons within which these actually exist. He bristled at the illusion that there were charts of the infinite ocean and of the snug harbors in it. Inasmuch as he took it as a project to spring some leaks in the boats of those who claimed to be so deft at sailing that they could stay dry and on course in all weather, he did deconstruct and undermine. His hope lit up the boundaries of the conventional and revealed its limits and biases.

But his hope illuminated something more. That same borderless ocean contained hints and foretastes of the ever-faithful God. That

26. Cf. Stephen Payne's (op. cit., 158) helpful discussion of parallels between John of the Cross and Merton on confidence that there is progress on the journey through the wilderness.

Merton would unmask illusions and call the present into question, yes; but only as prerequisite for approaching the ever-receding God. While his walk through the wilderness was solitary and his steps could indeed feel random, his deeper intuitions told him he was going somewhere. The pillar of cloud which led his desert ancestors, and the Spirit who drew Jesus into the wilds, expanded inside Merton too. To paraphrase his account of it, the trail through no-where was heading somewhere. In substance, Merton sympathizes with those who testify to the tracklessness of the landscape, but not with those who conclude to the aimlessness of a journey through it.

Such confidence in destination and clues toward it grounded Merton's outlook. The path of no-path is blessing, he insisted, even though its bountifulness can, at times, clothe itself in impenetrable disguise. It is grace for a number of reasons.

For one, the various false selves are scraped away along its track.²⁷ There is purification in a desert. The inadequacies of present self-images come to light: their limitation and their alien character, their solipsism and destructiveness, their unworthiness before the real thing.

Second, there is progress on this journey. There is headway which is not horizontal only but a stretching of capacities to discern the underlying purpose. The traveler's spirit deepens. That is, it is not as if she or he simply tries on a succession of socially constructed selves, each one as empty as the one before it. New representations go somewhere. They conform more and more to the word of the genuine self being spoken in the person's depths. But more fundamentally, the very process of shedding of old images enables the pilgrim to establish a clearer fix on that inner homing signal which draws him or her on past all images. Authentic struggling purifies the taste for the true and the good. Masks must be peeled away—deconstructed, if you will—but the act of doing so sensitizes the individual to the deeper currents of the journey and exposes false directions along the way.

The third point is a refinement of the second. The desert is blessing because it sharpens an individual's ability to hear the future. The wilderness disciplines the traveler to listen more acutely for "the more" embedded in present life. Like no other experience, it hones the individual's discrimination for which is the genuine article among the many values jostling for a place in the culture.

27. NSC, 258.

It is worthwhile to highlight this theme in Merton. Certain varieties of postmodernism are heavily skeptical about avowals to sense something of the world-to-come, about claims to have gained traction from some foot planted in the future. By contrast, Merton's eschatological grounding would have him look in exactly that direction. For him, desert emptiness is the very condition for heightening sensitivity to the special grain of this horizon. It is just this receptiveness to the still-to-come which is the basis for judging the worth of any current construction of reality.

The desert is grace because in it, one meets God. Crossing into it with trepidation, Merton also senses its great prospects, the cool of eternal springs lying just beneath its forbidding surface. In the "other" place (the trackless land of his own freedom), Merton encounters "the Other."

A wilderness guide not only points forward but warns about which paths to avoid. As we have seen, Merton identifies a number of trails which, though enticing, end in box canyons.

The first is denial that one is even *in* the wilderness. The traveler insists that he or she is marching through known territory and that assertions to the contrary are alarmist. Merton acknowledges the comfort such a stance brings, but he goes on to describe the subtle way it seals off travellers from their deepest bearings.

This particular caution speaks to those who not only deny postmodernism's warnings, but regard them simply as the excuses of the unsuccessful. Modernity's difficulties, they say, are the kind of irritating shortcomings that crop up in any great civilization. And in this present one, most all problems can be weeded out by greater efficiency. Merton contends that such breakdowns are more than passing glitches. They are fruits of poisonous roots which are planted in the heart of the age and are killing off the rest of the garden.

Merton shines an especially bright light on the epistemology such a denying spirit prefers; i.e., technique and managerial rationality. He returns again and again to the deceptive circularity of the approach. Within the scope of our focus, he refers to the monastery's confidence that the recruit cannot stray if he but follow this routine or that formula. But in other places, Merton makes the larger criticism. The left-brain stance offers what it proports to be a complete, self-grounding explanation of the world. Its unquestioned success as world-view since the seventeenth century is perhaps the most powerful contributor to its own blindness. The refined analytic tools, the tendency to equate

reality with its discoverable structures, the achievement itself of breaking the bonds of premodern thinking—all conspire to exalt technique and instrumentality at the expense of more holistic wisdoms. As Merton draws attention to the fathomless stretches of territory which bound this efficiency principle, he pinpoints the hubris of this managerial approach.

An especially beguiling form of denial is restoration. For the monks, it was the longing to reconstruct a favored age in order to experience again the vitality which that era supposedly provided. For the "modern," it is a wish to go back to early Enlightenment days when opponents were hard-pressed to contend against science's promised Third Age.

Merton was an irritant in this discussion. He did not believe there ever was such a secure time, and in fact was himself attracted to particular ages by their very precariousness. It was willingness to grapple with uncertainty at cultural stress-points which distinguished the truly great men and women. Even if a given era were more settled than the present one, the heroic individuals in it were those who felt the press of the unfamiliar up against the known and sought meaning at just that juncture. Excessive clarity and unassailable surety stifled Mystery. New life, thought Merton, rises from the primal waters—the chaotic primal waters. In shock from "too much future," many in the present call for return to some simpler, more purposeful age. Merton's counsel is to recognize such advice as short-sighted hunger for the safe place which, in the longer view, only builds a dangerous one.

Merton's skill for crossing the wilderness is risky art rather than sure method. Relying on intuition that is at once gift and hard-won achievement, and on candor about all he does not know, he is an exposed pilgrim in need of much sustenance. To be nourished, Merton listens inside himself for the increasingly audible voice of the Spirit working through his freedom. But the monk is also attentive to the outside.

He would capitalize on the savvy of other journeyers who have learned to walk in hope. The unpropertied intellectuals, the artists, the ones who struggle with God's absence, those thirsting for justice, his "anonymous monks"—they all know something crucial. They give powerful witness to the virtue of authentic and trusting perseverance.

Merton would alert the postmodern traveller to this mostly low-profile resource. Not everyone is without direction. For some on this road, the absence of God has not translated into the lack of experience

of God. Paradoxically, God's distance from the conventional channels carries God's presence. Like everyone else they proceed in darkness, but, in some flickering sense, have begun to see light within it. Merton encourages active solidarity with these comrades-in-hope. It behooves the rest of us, he advises, to watch for compatriots who have come upon something very practical—even though expressed in different ways—about divining water in the desert. They have fought off cynicism in just that place. In the face of contingency and frightening interruption, they have been able to keep their bearings there. In a time of heightened uncertainty, alliances with such "anonymous monks" are not luxury, says Merton, but essential travelling gear.

Mutatis mutandis, could we not say that Thomas Merton himself is among the most steadfast of postmodern wanderers? Feeling the insolvency of much in modernity, he did not withdraw from it nor cease probing for a way through its brambles. He embraced the central postmodern intuitions while refusing the ministrations of would-be consolers who sought to paper over modernity's problems. Certainly in action but most helpfully in word, he makes the case that wilderness travelling can be done—because it has been done. Merton's is a path in the dark along the way of honesty, attunement and trust. He is a sympathetic and useful ally to those who are convinced of postmodernism's criticisms but not of its nihilistic conclusions.

Merton's Legacy: Perspective

Though the worlds of the 1960s and the 1990s are disparate, they do connect in at least one important respect. The hollowing-out of cherished cultural symbols which registered in those earlier years has reached middle age in the more pervasive temperament of postmodernism. From his vanguard post, Merton not only felt its chill in his bones but thought hard about how to incorporate the mood into his own spiritual life. What he offered was perspective. Individually and corporately, one can walk purposefully through the wilderness. If the group names things as they most deeply are, if it does not succumb to the allures of escapism, if (most importantly) it allows itself time and space to experience the darkness as God's own light, that community can travel confidently through the trackless places. With this acute ear, Merton heard the opening chords of postmodernism, and from his own time

he continues to guide. He is not the expert whose self-assurance comes from having been there and back. He is rather the fellow-traveller who also tried to wrestle with the angel in the night and has left us a most encouraging account of how it is that the struggle is actually grace in our time. Merton moves away from "here," but helps us to believe in the reality of God's "there."