

"What I Wear Is Pants": Monasticism as "Lay" Spirituality in Merton's Later Life and Work

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In his correspondence with Rosemary Ruether, we find Thomas Merton making some rather disconcerting comments about his life as a hermit. The solitude he had sought for years as the fulfillment of his monastic vocation now seems to be presented virtually as a repudiation of that vocation. On February 14, 1967, he writes, "I am in a position where I am practically laicized and de-institutionalized, and living like all the other old bats who live alone in the hills in this part of the country and I feel like a human being again. My hermit life is expressly a *lay* life. I never wear the habit except when at the monastery and I try to be as much on my own as I can and like the people around the country."¹ Three weeks later, he refers again to his "'secularized' existence as a hermit" and explains, "I am not only leading a more 'worldly' life (me and the rabbits), but am subtly infecting the monastery with worldly ideas,"² through, he may mean, his weekly talks to the community on political and literary topics. Such remarks may be interpreted as an expression of Merton's disillusion with institutionalized monastic life in general and with the Gethsemani community in particular, or as a rather disingenuous, even somewhat duplicitous, attempt to justify his present vocation to a particularly fierce critic of

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 501; the same letter is also found in Mary Tardiff, OP, ed., *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 23.

2. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 505; *At Home in the World*, 38.

monasticism.³ Both of these motives are no doubt present to some extent. But I would like to propose that underlying the disillusion and/or the defensiveness there is a more complex, and ultimately more satisfying, explanation for Merton's use of this sort of language: his studies and his own experience had convinced him that a "lay" spirituality was not only compatible with monasticism but from a certain perspective was an integral part of monastic history and identity.

Such a proposal may initially strike one as illogical if not absurd: lay and monastic states would seem to be polar opposites, mutually exclusive, and in one sense they certainly are. By definition the vowed religious life is distinguished from the lay, secular state, and monks are religious par excellence. But "lay" can also be used to contrast with "clerical," a state which is by no means identical with "religious," though in popular perception they are easily confused. Merton himself makes note of the difference, and indicates its significance for a proper understanding of monastic life, in reflecting on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Prison Letters*, which he calls "very monastic in their own way." By this surprising statement he apparently means that Bonhoeffer's vision of "religionless Christianity," which does not publicly call attention to itself, has a dimension of hiddenness comparable to the "desert" quality of monasticism. "His 'worldliness,'" Merton continues, "can only be understood in the light of this 'monastic' seri-

3. Though Ruether's criticism of monastic "withdrawal" is intense, particularly in the early letters to Merton (see the letter of early March, 1967 [*At Home in the World*, 27–30]), in a generally overlooked article entitled "Monks and Marxists: A Look at the Catholic Left" (*Christianity and Crisis*, 33:7 [April 30, 1973] 75–9) she explicitly credits the "monastic spirituality of Thomas Merton" (along with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement) with being at the root of U.S. Catholic involvement in work for peace and justice; see particularly 76: "Here it was the probing mind of Thomas Merton that provided the hermeneutic for the spirituality taking place in Dan Berrigan, Jim Forest, Jim Douglas [sic] and others. In retreats at Gethsemane [sic], through his writings and voluminous correspondence, Merton helped to form a spirituality that transformed prayer into protest, contemplation into resistance to the powers and principalities of a murderous world. . . . Thus, in the monastic spirituality of Thomas Merton, traditional Christian rejection of 'this world' took on new and concrete meaning, not as a struggle against flesh and blood, but as a struggle against the powers and principalities of the great empires, with America as their most recent representative. Here monastic spirituality was reconnected with its apocalyptic root." Ruether goes on to compare this personalistic, "prophetic" stance with the more praxis-oriented, Marxist-influenced approach found in Latin America and elsewhere (what would come to be known as liberation theology), using each to critique what she perceives as the shortcomings of the other.

ousness, which is, however, not . . . a withdrawal, a denial. It is a mode of presence." He concludes his reflection by aligning monasticism with this stance rather than a more public, ecclesiastical witness: "Paradoxically, then, Bonhoeffer's mode of unnoticed presence in the world is basically monastic as opposed to the 'clerical' or 'priestly' presence, which is official, draws attention to itself and issues its formal message of institutional triumph."⁴ Thus if the term "lay" is contrasted not with "religious" but with "clerical," it would seem that Merton is locating monasticism on the "lay" side of the division, where it is well situated, not incidentally, to enter into dialogue not only with the "secular" Christianity of a Bonhoeffer but with persons of other faiths, or even of no religious faith at all.

I

The foundation for this position is not merely eccentric or idiosyncratic personal preference or practice on Merton's part. It is a conclusion grounded in his study of monastic origins. He notes, "The monk was originally a *layman* (priests were exceptional) who lived alone in the desert outside the framework of any institution, even of the Christian and Ecclesial institution."⁵ This statement should not be taken to imply

4. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964–1965* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 65–6; a slightly different version of this passage is found in Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage—Journals, Volume Five: 1963–1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 129. In *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), Merton relates this "monastic" dimension of Bonhoeffer's thought to his imprisonment: "Bonhoeffer, regarded as an opponent of all that monasticism stands for, himself realized the need for certain 'monastic' conditions in order to maintain a true perspective in and on the world. He developed these ideas when he was awaiting his execution in a Nazi prison" (7–8). Reflecting on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* in his *Working Notebook #16*, from the second half of 1965, Merton writes, "The monk originally broke out of the clerical 'space' of the Church. To roam in the desert, the ultimate of the world, the place relegated to the devil—to restore the desert to condition of paradise—by showing it is *not* a space belonging to the devil. This is the real spirit of Vatican II—as opposed to Vat I, etc., when this was not at all clear yet" (48).

5. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 239; see also *The Inner Experience* (VIII): "the first monks of all, the Egyptian desert Fathers, the pioneers of the monastic and contemplative lives, were *lay people*" (*Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 19:4 [1984] 338). In *A History of Christian Spirituality I: The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (1960; trans. Mary P. Ryan [London: Burns & Oates, 1963]), Louis Bouyer writes: "The monk was simply a Christian, and, more precisely, a devout layman, who limited

a separation from the wider Church, but simply that the monk's participation in the Church does not consist in fulfilling a specific organizational role.⁶ "Christian solitude," Merton emphasizes, is "essentially an expression of the mystery of the Church, even when in some sense it implies a certain freedom from institutional structures."⁷ But this "freedom is never a freedom from the Church but always a freedom in the Church and a contribution to the Church's own charismatic heritage."⁸

This charismatic dimension, the willingness to be led, like Jesus, by the Spirit into the desert, to allow all familiar roles and usual comforts and securities to be stripped away so that God alone might be one's sole protection and child of God one's only identity, was the hall-

himself to taking the most radical means to make his Christianity integral" (317). In his authoritative history of early monasticism, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), Derwas J. Chitty likewise refers to the lay character of early monasticism: about the first major figure of monasticism, he writes, "Antony was an illiterate layman, and the majority of the Egyptian monks were much the same" (86), and summarizes, "At the beginning of that period, the monastic movement was a new enterprise, a lay movement with no literature but Holy Scripture—a determination, in renunciation of the world, to live the full evangelical life, whether in solitude or community" (179). (Merton was familiar with both these works: Bouyer is cited in the 1961 novitiate lectures, *Notes on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, 23 and passim; Chitty is quoted on 135 of *Working Notebook #24*, from late May, 1967.)

6. See the opening words of the Preface to Louis Bouyer's *The Meaning of the Monastic Life*, trans. Kathleen Pond (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1955), a work that Merton himself called "fundamental" and "standard" (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990] 119, 145): "The purpose of this book is primarily to point out to monks that their vocation in the Church is not, and never has been, a special vocation. The vocation of the monk is, but is no more than, the vocation of the baptized man. But it is the vocation of the baptized man carried, I would say, to the farthest limits of its irresistible demands" (ix); see likewise the statements on page 13: "monastic life is nothing else, no more and no less, than a Christian life whose Christianity has penetrated every part of it. It is a Christian life which is completely open, without refusal or delay, to the Word, which opens itself and abandons itself to it"; and page 22: "To be a monk, then, is simply to be an integral Christian." Merton himself writes, "The monk is not defined by his task, his usefulness. In a certain sense he is supposed to be 'useless' because his mission is not to do this or that but to be a man of God. He does not live in order to exercise a specific function: his business is life itself" (*Contemplation in a World of Action*, 7).

7. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 251; for Merton, "to be called to a totally different mode of existence, outside of secular categories and outside of the religious establishment . . . is the very heart of monasticism" (23).

8. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 251.

mark of primitive monasticism. "In the earliest days of desert monasticism," Merton writes, "there were no vows, no written rules, and institutional structure was kept at a minimum. The monastic commitment was taken with extreme and passionate seriousness, but this commitment was not protected by judicial sanctions or by institutional control."⁹ Monastic formation depended on personal authority, "the charismatic authority of wisdom, experience and love,"¹⁰ rather than formal office, on relationships rather than regulations: "There was strict obedience on the part of the novice who sought to reproduce in his own life all the actions and thoughts of his spiritual master or 'spiritual father.' But the spiritual father had been chosen freely because of his own experience and his evident charism of renunciation and vision."¹¹

Of course such a situation could not continue indefinitely, and the institutionalization of monasticism was both inevitable and necessary, as Merton himself recognized, noting that "it must be admitted that communal structures have a value that must not be underestimated."¹² But he also consistently maintained that the structure was for the sake of the charism, not vice versa. To equate monasticism simply

9. *Ibid.*, 191–2; see also Merton's Introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960): "An Abbot was not then, as now, a canonically elected superior of a community, but any monk or hermit who had been tried by years in the desert and proved himself a servant of God" (15). In *A History of Christian Spirituality I*, Bouyer writes: "Later on, the canonists would tend to see [monasticism] only as a state of life, defined once for all by the vows. But at this stage, the vows were still unknown and the monastic life seemed, on the contrary, to be a commitment to detachments and correlative ascents which were to have no end here below" (308).

10. *The Wisdom of the Desert*, 5; in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton cites the teaching of Antony: "There was nothing to which they had to 'conform' except the secret, hidden, inscrutable will of God. . . . It is very significant that . . . the authority of St. Anthony is adduced for what is the basic principle of desert life: that God is the authority and that apart from His manifest will there are few or no principles" (6–7).

11. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 192 (see also 271); in *A History of Christian Spirituality I*, Bouyer writes: "In the beginning, . . . the superior, or more precisely, the 'abbot,' that is, the spiritual father, was not a personage endowed with an official function: he was simply the perfected spiritual man. The anchorite whose anchoritism had been fruitful, so to say, made no difficulties about allowing other men to join him and consented willingly to communicate to them everything he had received in solitude. The 'abbots,' whose sayings and the examples that illustrate them are collected in the *Apophthegms*, were precisely this" (321).

12. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (1969; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1971) 28; see also *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 17, 25.

with adherence to a rule is to confuse means with ends, for the purpose of monastic life is to serve as a solitary witness to the essentially paschal character of Christian discipleship, conformity not to a system or to an official function but to the person of Christ: "His loneliness had a prophetic and mysterious quality, something almost in the nature of a sacramental sign, because it was a particular charismatic way of participating in the death and resurrection of Christ. . . . To confront the emptiness, the void, the apparent hopelessness of this desert and to encounter there the miracle of new life in Christ, the joy of eschatological hope already fulfilled in mystery—this was the monastic vocation."¹³

As he considered the history of religious life, Merton discovered repeated instances of a return to this more charismatic, lay-oriented approach, typically associated with a more eremitic style of life. The tenth-century hermit movement is an impressive example of this renewal of the primitive monastic vision, which arose, as it would have to, outside the confines of institutional monasticism: "Lay people or secular clerics began to withdraw directly into solitude without passing through a period of monastic formation. Living in the woods and developing as best they could their own mode of life, they remained in rather close contact with the poor (that is, generally speaking, with their own class), with outlaws and outcasts and with the itinerants who were always numerous in the Middle Ages."¹⁴ By their very withdrawal from the accepted roles of society, whether civil or ecclesial, these solitaries were paradoxically united in solidarity with those marginalized by the prevailing social structure: "Closely identified as the hermits were with the underprivileged, the oppressed and those for whom the official institutions of society showed little real concern, the nonmonastic hermitage quickly became a place of refuge for the desperately perplexed who sought guidance and hope—if not also a hiding place and physical safety. Thus the nonmonastic hermit by the very fact of his isolation

13. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 239 (see also 10).

14. *Ibid.*, 261; Merton specifically mentions "the very significant lay-hermit movement in the eleventh-century-lay solitaries who were also itinerant preachers to the poor and to the outcasts who had no one to preach to them" in his March 9, 1967 letter to Ruether (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 504; *At Home in the World*, 37). Paradoxically, Merton notes in a February 26, 1966 entry in his *Reading Notebook #17*, the hermit movement eventually became a catalyst for monastic ordination: "Historical point—ordination of monks to priesthood became very common in 11th–12th centuries precisely in view of hermit life. Priest-hermit considered his mass primarily as the perfect means of uniting his sacrifice-passion with the Passion of Christ" (88).

from the world became open to the world in a new and special way."¹⁵ Though the movement was "tamed," as it were, by the thirteenth century,¹⁶ and "absorbed back into monasticism," its spirit continued to remain alive in such forms as the early Cistercian lay brotherhood, which "had something of an eremitical as well as a distinctly 'lay' character,"¹⁷ especially for those brothers who spent long periods of time in solitude on monastic lands outside the enclosure. But the most significant heirs of this charism were the early Franciscans, "nonmonastic and completely open to the world of the poor and outcast,"¹⁸ who were nevertheless, in Merton's judgement, the genuine exemplars in the Middle Ages of "the authentic freedom of early monasticism."¹⁹ Merton suggests "that actually the ideal of St. Francis was more purely *monastic* in the true original primitive sense than the life lived by the big Benedictine and Cistercian communities of the thirteenth century where everything was so highly organized behind walls."²⁰ It is worth noting in this connection that Francis and many of his first followers were never ordained priests, that they claimed no name but Christian and no status but *fratres minores*, lesser brothers.

Thus when Merton refers to himself offhandedly in a letter to Ruether as "a tramp and not much else"²¹ he is actually laying claim to a rich heritage of witness to the priority of Gospel to Law. When he tells the fellows at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, just before departing for Asia, that "the monk should not be a priest," and even says, "I should not be a priest," adding, "I didn't want to be a priest, but it was part of the system, so I became one,"²² this should

15. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 261.

16. But see Merton's comments on the non-monastic hermits of fourteenth-century England, of whom Richard Rolle is the most famous example (*Contemplation in a World of Action*, 302).

17. *Ibid.*, 262.

18. *Ibid.*, 263.

19. *Ibid.*, 358.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 501; *At Home in the World*, 24.

22. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 49; see also the reference in *Contemplation in a World of Action* to the "Primitive Benedictine" foundations that returned to "a community of simple monks in one class, only a few of whom were priests" (11). In *Working Notebook #14* (undated, but evidently from the mid-1960s since it includes drafts of poems that would be incorporated into *Cables to the Ace*), Merton quotes from an unpublished conference given by Edward Schillebeeckx: "Monasticism is not situ-

be interpreted, I think, not as a rejection or denigration of his own priesthood, which continued to be an integral and valued part of his spirituality throughout the hermitage years and right up to the time of his death, but as the recognition of a confusion of roles, an institutionalizing of the charismatic, a clericalizing of what was originally and essentially a lay movement.²³ As he explained during this dialogue, "The monk is a layperson in the desert, who is not incorporated into the hierarchy. The monk has nothing to do with the establishment."²⁴ In call-

ated on a functional level, either lay or priestly. It is solely a taking after God. And in the measure that monks lose sight of this & accept an apostolic ministry, in the measure that they seek to found a monastic life on the priesthood & to orient their spirituality in this way, then monks deviate from their state, deviate from monasticism. And so the Church is at the same time more & more deprived of a state of which she has great need—pure monasticism" (75).

23. In *The Meaning of the Monastic Life*, Bouyer writes: "If, in fact, at the present day, monks have become an important part of the clergy, such a circumstance, whatever proportions it may assume, remains accidental. All great monastic legislators, from St Benedict downwards, pass it over" (5); he later refers to the "gibe" found in the apophthegms of the desert fathers: "the two kinds of persons whom the monk must flee more than all others, it is said humorously, are bishops and women" (133; Merton himself refers to "Desert Fathers" who "fled from bishops" in his correspondence with Ronald Roloff, O.S.B. in *The School of Charity* [155]); on a more serious note Bouyer cites the teaching of the great Eastern Fathers: "we have only to read St John Chrysostom's *De Sacerdote*, or, if you prefer, the correspondence and poems of St Gregory Nazianzen to discover how acute the conflict created by a priestly vocation superimposed upon a monastic vocation, appeared to them" (165). Chitty notes that "Both Antony and Pachomius avoided ordination" and cites Pachomius' custom of "call[ing] in a priest of one of the neighbouring churches, not wishing any of the brethren to seek ordination—for . . . 'the beginning of the thought of love of command is ordination'" (*The Desert a City*, 31, 23); see also the anecdotes of Macarius, who "moved to another village to escape enrol[ment] in the clergy," and of Peter of Iberia, who, "getting wind" of plans to ordain him, "jumped down from a roof . . . and escaped" (temporarily, as it turned out) (13, 87); Merton translates a slightly different version of the former story as the last of the sayings in *The Wisdom of the Desert* (79–81); see also the story of Abbot Isaac's efforts to avoid ordination (thwarted by an ass!) (65).

24. *Preview of the Asian Journey*, 49. Merton's most extensive consideration of early monasticism and ordination comes in *Reading Notebook #57*, in his notes on the sixth chapter of Adalbert de Vogüé's *La Communauté et l'Abbé dans la Règle de saint Benoît* (Paris-Brussels: Desclée-de-Brouwer, 1961); Merton summarizes de Vogüé's findings that both the Benedictine Rule and the earlier *Regula Magistri* are "suspicious of priests" within the monastery, and goes on to abstract eleven points drawn from the chapter, with extensive citation of primary sources, including: "Monks fly from priesthood as an honor . . . and as a distraction" (#5); "Refusals to cooperate in ordination or in exercise of priestly functions" (#6); "However—need of monastic

ing attention to the "lay" character of his life as a hermit, then, Merton was not expressing a simple rejection of monasticism but claiming the recovery of an important strand of authentic monastic and religious life.

II

To affirm the "lay" dimension of monasticism is therefore to resist the temptation to equate one's identity with one's role, one's worth with one's status, the meaning of one's life with one's office. It means the rejection of all idealized projections and socially acceptable images of oneself, including even the image of monk. "The monk does not come into the desert to reinforce his own ego-image, but to be deliv-

priests for sacramental life of community" (#8); "Hence monks wanted a holy Abba to be also ordained priest—since he already exercised spiritual authority" (#9); "Still—in west the priest-abbot not common; certainly still doubtful that St Benedict consented to ordination" (#10). De Vogüé's overall position, very similar to that of Bouyer in *The Meaning of the Monastic Life*, is that monasticism is essentially a lay rather than a clerical vocation: "Priesthood and monasticism are two different things. The former is ordained for the government of the people of God, the latter consists of a break with the present world. . . . Monasticism is therefore in line with baptism. It is nothing else but a supreme effort to die with Christ and live in him, in other words to realize daily the sacramental action of baptism. It can therefore be said that monasticism is in line with the function of the laity. Not only is it not confined to clerics, but the tendency to solitude, which defines its nature, runs counter in principle to the pastoral vocation of the priest" (Adalbert de Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of St Benedict*, trans. Charles Philippi & Ethel Rae Perkins, 2 vols., Cistercian Studies Series 5 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988] 2:294–5). De Vogüé concludes his chapter by noting the relevance of this distinction between cleric and monk for contemporary monastic renewal: "the Rule provides a place for priesthood only in cases of real necessity. The priest-monk, far from constituting the ideal type of monk, is conceived rather as an anomaly, fraught with danger, but inevitable, of which efforts are made to mitigate the inconveniences by means of severe warnings. In our day, in a completely changed situation, these inconveniences no longer make themselves felt, but if the practice of general ordination to the priesthood has brought about their cessation, it has also created new difficulties, which the Benedictine Rule was not able to foresee. So it is true that monasticism, on the whole, cannot renounce its lay character without casting a slur on one of the essential features of its vocation" (*Community and Abbot*, 2:303). Given Merton's extensive notes on this work, read in the early 1960s (*Reading Notebook #57* is undated, but the article cited immediately following the notes on de Vogüé was published in 1963), it is highly probable that it served as the principal source for Merton's comments on monasticism and priesthood, and indeed on the specifically lay character of monasticism in general.

ered from it."²⁵ Merton finds the truth of this insight exemplified in one of the stories of the Desert Fathers, in which a restless apprentice monk asks permission to go visit the sick, but is told by his spiritual father, his *abba*, to stay put in his cell. A clue to the meaning of the story, Merton notes, is the Greek word used for visiting the sick, *episkopein*, with its connotations of superiority and condescension: "'looking them over as if one were a bishop' we would be inclined to say."²⁶ It is a story about trying to find oneself, to affirm one's own worth, by adopting a conventionally approved role; the young man's motive for performing a work of charity, however admirable in itself, is to feel good about himself, but the wise elder refuses to allow his disciple to take refuge in this self-deception. Merton comments,

Afflicted with boredom and hardly knowing what to do with himself, the disciple represents to himself a more fruitful and familiar way of life, in which he appears to himself to "be someone" and to have a fully recognizable and acceptable identity, a "place in the Church," but the Elder tells him that his place in the Church will never be found by following these ideas and images of a plausible identity. Rather it is found by traveling a way that is new and disconcerting because it has never been imagined by us before, or at least we have never conceived it as useful or even credible for a true Christian—a way in which we seem to lose our identity and become nothing.²⁷

The truth, of course, is that the self constructed according to social norms is not the self created in the image of God, and that false self must die in order for the authentic self, the mysterious, hidden identity known only to its Creator, to emerge. To call a monk a "lay" Christian is to recognize that at least one essential aspect of the monastic vocation is to be a standing warning that the very notion of an "official" Christian, a "professional" Christian, is in grave danger of confusing outward function with inner identity; it risks substituting appearance for reality. Both the cleric and the non-monastic lay person need the monk as a salutary reminder that to be a Christian, a disciple, is not a matter of playing a role or of filling an office but of committing one's entire life to the person of Jesus.

This "lay" character also has a liberating aspect to it: the monk is not confined to a fixed role, a limited set of duties or obligations. The very

25. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 285.

26. *Ibid.*, 254.

27. *Ibid.*

nature of the monastic life, insofar as it is not "clerical," not provided with a definite niche in the ecclesial structure, testifies to the freedom of the Christian. Contrary to Luther's critique, however accurate it may have been in the historical circumstances of his time,²⁸ monasticism is intended to be a sign of sheer grace, of salvation by faith not works, by a person not a system. According to Merton, "The monastic vocation is traditionally regarded as a charism of liberty in which the monk does not simply turn his back on the world, but on the contrary becomes free with the perfect freedom of the sons of God by virtue of the fact that, having followed Christ into the wilderness and shared in His temptations and sufferings, he can also follow Him wherever else He may go."²⁹ Such freedom is risky, because it places the monk in the desert, "where the secure routines of man's city offer no support,"³⁰ but it is precisely from these "secure routines," which stifle vitality and creativity and try to domesticate the Spirit that blows where it wills, that one needs to be liberated: "The world needs men who are free from its demands, men who are not alienated by its servitudes in any way."³¹ The monk is, or should be, such a person. In his final talk in Bangkok, Merton goes so far as to define a monk as "essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures, . . . somebody who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent."³²

Here, of course, the prophetic, counter-cultural dimension of the monastic life is evident. The monk "retains the eschatological privilege and duty of smashing idols—worldly, ecclesiastical, secular and even monastic"³³ because his detachment from all that is provisional and secondary allows him "to gaze steadily at the whole truth of Christ"³⁴ and so to reject the absolute claims that any institution or structure or authority makes about itself. The monk is one "who at once loves the world yet stands apart from it with a critical objectivity which refuses to become involved in its transient fashions and its more manifest absurdities."³⁵ Hence Merton's description in Calcutta of the

28. See *Ibid.*, 181–6, and 360–1, for a discussion of Luther and monasticism.

29. *Ibid.*, 227 (see also 360–1).

30. *Contemplative Prayer*, 27.

31. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 227.

32. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 329.

33. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 189.

34. *Ibid.*, 188.

35. *Ibid.*, 227 (see also 8–9, 92–3).

monk as "a marginal person, . . . essentially outside of all establishments,"³⁶ at the periphery of contemporary "mass society" with its tendency to depersonalize and dehumanize, yet thereby in a unique position not simply to withdraw from society but to offer it a challenging and life-affirming critique—the vision of a new humanism rooted in the dignity of the person as image of God.

If from one perspective, that of status, efficiency, productivity, the monk is marginal, from another he is at the very heart of the human enterprise. "The monk," Merton said in Bangkok, "dwells in the center of society as one who has attained realization—he . . . has come to experience the ground of his own being in such a way that he knows the secret of liberation and can somehow communicate it to others."³⁷ In discovering his own true center he is in communion with all other human beings through compassionate identification. The monk affirms authentic human values by incarnating them himself and by recognizing and defending them in others, especially when they are threatened or violated. "The monastic life today stands over against the world with a mission to affirm not only the message of salvation but also those most basic human values which the world most desperately needs to regain: personal integrity, inner peace, authenticity, inner depth, spiritual joy, the capacity to love, the capacity to enjoy God's creation and give thanks."³⁸ For Merton there is no conflict between these common human aspirations and a specifically Christian and monastic identity and vocation because the central Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation and redemption are a repeated, ever deepening revelation and affirmation of human dignity. "Monastic spirituality today," Merton believes, "must be a personalistic and Christian humanism that seeks and saves man's intimate truth, his personal identity, in order to consecrate it entirely to God."³⁹ It is more essential, in other words, to focus on how monks can contribute to the full humanization, which is also the divinization, of all people, than to stress what differentiates the monk from "the laity." While the monk participates in the project of human transformation in a unique way, the way of solitude and inner exploration, he is nevertheless participating in a project common to the entire *laos*, all the people of God.

36. *Asian Journal*, 305.

37. *Ibid.*, 333.

38. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 81.

39. *Ibid.*, 82.

"What is essential in the monastic life," Merton declared on the last day of his life, "is not embedded in buildings, is not embedded in clothing, is not necessarily embedded even in a rule. It is . . . something deeper than a rule. It is concerned with this business of total inner transformation. All other things serve that end."⁴⁰

III

It is in this context that Merton's concern for monastic renewal must be situated. The perennial temptation of monasticism is to substitute an alternate set of "secure routines" for those of the world, to make institutional structures rather than charismatic freedom the defining characteristic of monastic life. Comparing the contemporary monk with the Desert Fathers, Merton notes: "With us it is often rather a case of men leaving the society of the 'world' in order to fit themselves into another kind of society, that of the religious family which they enter. . . . The social 'norms' of a monastic family are also apt to be conventional, and to live by them does not involve a leap into the void—only a radical change of customs and standards."⁴¹ When monastic life becomes a form of security rather than a challenge to risk, to grow, to die and rise with Christ, it betrays its essential meaning.

An even more serious danger is that "The institution is identified with God, and becomes an end in itself."⁴² This is, of course, a form of idolatry, in which the basic humanity of the individual is sacrificed to the requirements of the institution: "the monk is given to understand that there is *no alternative* for him but to regard this institutional life in all its detail, however arbitrary, however archaic, however meaningless to him, as the *only way* for him to be perfect in love and sincere in his quest for God."⁴³ The corollary of this approach is that the way of the nonmonastic world is often regarded as a corrupting system that must be rejected totally, as exemplified, for example, by "the rigid, authoritarian, self-righteous, ascetic" monk Ferrapont in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, "who delivers himself from the world by sheer effort, and then feels qualified to call down curses

40. *Asian Journal*, 340.

41. *The Wisdom of the Desert*, 9–10.

42. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 19.

43. *Ibid.*

upon it."⁴⁴ By denying and rejecting the human element outside the monastery, one ends by suppressing and rejecting the humanity in oneself and in the monastic community.

While this temptation to reduce monasticism to its formal components is a perennial one, its consequences are particularly harmful in the contemporary period when the structure and routine are in large part relics of a past era with very little connection to the monks' former, "lay" lives. The problem is merely compounded when "updating" consists in adopting structures and practices of secular society that are basically depersonalizing: "if the monastery comes to resemble a big business and a plant surrounded by noise and clatter, the monks . . . will tend to be more and more alienated, taking refuge from routines in which they cannot take a serious human interest because they are the same impersonal and organized routines they left in the world."⁴⁵ Renewal cannot consist merely in the substitution of one set of structures for another: it must "concentrate on the *charism of the monastic vocation* rather than on the *structure of monastic institutions or the patterns of monastic observance*."⁴⁶ The recollection and recovery of the "lay" dimension of monastic history and identity function as a check on the tendency of structure to replace charism; it counteracts the temptation to substitute for a life of authentic human freedom a closed, self-sufficient "societas perfecta" which replaces and judges life in "the world."

IV

Merton's hermitage is a response to the dilemma of contemporary monasticism, which is of course his own dilemma as well. "Doubtless," he writes, "this can be seen as a perfecting of my monastic life and also as a final disillusionment with monastic life."⁴⁷ Ironically, it is a perfecting precisely by its recovery of some degree of the primitive "lay" freedom from

44. *Contemplative Prayer*, 28 (Merton calls Dostoevsky's monk "Therapont" here); it is Ferrapont's opposite, the Staretz Zossima, "the kind, compassionate man of prayer who identifies himself with the sinful world in order to call down God's blessing upon it," and whose "monastic spirit is charismatic rather than institutional," whom Merton sees as the model "in the present era of monastic renewal" (28).

45. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 81.

46. *Ibid.*, 14.

47. *Vow of Conversation*, 190; for a slightly different version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 256.

the artificiality of structure and the tyranny of routine, which are of course the primary source of the disillusion.⁴⁸ His new life is an affirmation of his ordinariness: "'Solitude' becomes for me less and less of a specialty, more and more just 'life' itself. I do not seek to 'be a solitary' or anything else, for 'being' anything is a distraction. It is enough to 'be' in an ordinary human mode with one's hunger and sleep, one's cold and warmth, rising and going to bed, putting on blankets and taking them off."⁴⁹ The simplicity here may be somewhat misleading. Merton's words echo, perhaps deliberately, D. T. Suzuki's concluding words in his dialogue with Merton about the Desert Fathers: "Q. What is Tao? (We may take Tao as meaning the ultimate truth or reality.) A. It is one's everyday mind. Q. What is one's everyday mind? A. When tired, you sleep; when hungry, you eat."⁵⁰ Merton's response puts the Zen master's paradox in a Christian context:

Christianity moves in an essentially historical dimension toward the "restoration of all things in Christ." Yet with Christ's conquest of death and the sending of the Holy Spirit that restoration has already been accomplished. What remains is for it to be made manifest. . . . To one who has seen it, the most obvious thing is to do what Dr. Suzuki suggests: to live one's ordinary life. In the words of the first Christians, to praise God and to take one's food "in simplicity of heart." The simplicity referred to here is the complete absence of all legalistic preoccupation about right and wrong ways of living. "When tired you sleep, when hungry you eat."⁵¹

In this attentiveness to the ordinary, this mindfulness, revelation appears in the most unexpected places, as in the lovely final entry of *A Vow of Conversation*, the journal of Merton's entry into solitude, when Merton sees deer grazing near the hermitage:

48. In *Contemplation in a World of Action* Merton notes that Dom Jacques Winandy proposes a canonical separation of the eremitical life from the religious state, bringing it "closer to the lay state than to the status of religious or of monk" (295); while he himself is concerned, both theoretically and practically, "with the possibility of a renewal of eremitism within the religious state itself" (*Ibid.*), his recognition of the ambiguities of the hermit's position relative to the monastic community allows him both to define the hermit as "the monk par excellence" (296) and to call the "hermit life . . . expressly a lay life" (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 501; *At Home in the World*, 23).

49. *Vow of Conversation*, 192; for a slightly different version of this passage see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 257.

50. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 134.

51. *Ibid.*, 138.

The thing that struck me most—when you look at them directly and in movement, you see what the primitive cave painters saw. Something you never see in a photograph. It is most awe-inspiring. The *muntu* or the “spirit” is shown in the running of the deer. The “deeriness” that sums up everything and is sacred and marvelous. A contemplative intuition, yet this is perfectly ordinary, everyday seeing—what everybody ought to see all the time. The deer reveals to me something essential, not only in itself, but also in myself. Something beyond the trivialities of my everyday being, my individual existence. Something profound. The face of that which is both in the deer and in myself.⁵²

In this experience is the proof that the Tao is indeed one's everyday mind, that the mystery of reality is hidden in the depths of the ordinary, that the contemplative vision is available to all, though few will notice. The gift of the hermitage for Merton himself, and his gift to others, is this overcoming of the dichotomy between the everyday and the transcendent.

The voice of God is not clearly heard at every moment; and part of the “work of the cell” is *attention*, so that one may not miss any sound of that voice. What this means, therefore, is not only attention to inner grace but to external reality and to one's self as a completely integrated part of that reality. Hence, this implies also a forgetfulness of oneself as totally apart from outer objects, standing back from outer objects; it demands an integration of one's own life in the stream of natural and human and cultural life of the moment.⁵³

It demands a reappropriation of the fundamentally human capacity to encounter the sacred in the midst of the ordinary, which is authentically but not exclusively monastic. Far from isolating him from the rest of humanity, Merton's move to the hermitage had the effect of attuning him more sensitively and perceptively to the common needs and aspirations of every person, which he experienced in himself. The paradox of Merton's last years, which found him at once seeking and finding greater solitude and more in touch with the political, social and cultural crises of the time, is resolved in his existential awareness of this integration of self and world as complementary, interpenetrating signs and instruments of the divine presence, concealed in plain sight.

52. *Vow of Conversation*, 208; for a slightly different version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 291.

53. *Vow of Conversation*, 189; an earlier, less developed version of this passage is found in *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 255.

V

Probably the most appealing, and most revealing, description of the “lay” character of Merton's solitary life is found in his essay “Day of a Stranger,” originally written, he tells us, “in answer to a request from a South American editor to describe a ‘typical day’ in my life.”⁵⁴ The day chosen was in May 1965 when Merton was on the threshold of his permanent removal to the hermitage, and the essay reveals the essential elements of the life of solitude as Merton had already begun to experience it. In describing his day Merton clearly intends that the distinctions between lay and religious, monastic and nonmonastic be relativized and transcended. His life is presented as a unique way of experiencing a common humanity.

At least five dimensions of this life that integrate him with the world shared with the rest of humanity are interwoven throughout the essay. Most immediately apparent is the question of his own identity, evident even in the title, where the word “stranger” might initially suggest someone whose way of life is strange or exotic, but which eventually takes on the connotations of one who doesn't “fit in,” whose identity cannot be defined by a public role, a recognized place in society at large or monastic society in particular—cannot in fact be defined at all. Merton takes pains to dispel the impression of strangeness in the first sense by emphasizing that in fundamental ways his life is no different from anybody else's. He pointedly and humorously demythologizes any mystique of the monk as superior to or set apart from ordinary people: “This is not a hermitage—it is a house. (‘Who was that hermitage I seen you with last night? . . .’) What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe.”⁵⁵ But this very ordinariness protects

54. Quoted by Robert E. Daggy in his Introduction to Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 7; all references will be to this edition, but the essay can also be found in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, revised edition, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1974) 431–8, and in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist, 1992) 214–22. It should be noted that the final version of this essay, as found in these sources, is considerably revised and expanded from the initial draft, now available in *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 239–42 (for a helpful discussion of the successive drafts, see the Introduction to *Day of a Stranger*, 17–21). Much of the material quoted in the following discussion was added by Merton in the process of revision; exceptions will be cited in the notes.

55. *Day of a Stranger*, 41; see the similar language in Merton's March 9, 1967

and nurtures the mystery of identity.⁵⁶ As he had not yet been relieved of the office of novice master, he still had a "public" self, but this does not constitute his deepest, truest identity: "I have duties, obligations, since here I am a monk. When I have accomplished them, I return to the woods where I am nobody."⁵⁷ Like "all the silent Tzu's and Fu's" that surround him in spirit, he is a "[man] without office and without obligation,"⁵⁸ whose identity cannot be defined by what he does, or how society classifies him: "I live in the woods as a reminder that I am free not to be a number."⁵⁹ His deepest identity is hidden even from himself, and does not become available through introspective self-examination: "In an age when there is much talk about 'being yourself' I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself, since in any case there is little chance of my being anybody else. Rather it seems to me that when one is too intent on 'being himself' he runs the risk of impersonating a shadow."⁶⁰ His identity remains a mystery, but the mystery is constituted not by his being a hermit, but because he is a human being. His life is a reminder to others that they too are free not to be numbers, that they too risk impersonating shadows, but are not inevitably doomed to do so. His life is a sign that no one's life is, in essence, or should be, in practice, reduced to the function they perform or the role they play.

This rejection of a superior, esoteric existence is reinforced by the attention paid to the ordinary rhythms and routines of everyday life, from which the hermit is not exempt. Merton deliberately, and slyly, uses the term "rituals," with its associations with religious rites, to describe the most "secular" of activities, not excluding even a visit to the outdoor privy:

letter to Ruether: "All you do is breathe and look around and wash dishes, type, etc. Or just listen to the birds" (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 502-3; *At Home in the World*, 34).

56. See Merton's Introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert*: "These monks insisted on remaining human and 'ordinary.' This may seem to be a paradox, but it is very important. If we reflect a moment, we will see that to fly into the desert in order to be extraordinary is only to carry the world with you as an implicit standard of comparison. . . . The simple men who lived their lives out to a good old age among the rocks and sands only did so because they had come into the desert to be themselves, their *ordinary* selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves. There can be no other valid reason for seeking solitude" (22-3).

57. *Day of a Stranger*, 57; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 241.

58. *Day of a Stranger*, 63.

59. *Ibid.*, 31.

60. *Ibid.*

Rituals. Washing out the coffee pot in the rain bucket. Approaching the outhouse with circumspection on account of the king snake who likes to curl up on one of the beams inside. Addressing the possible king snake in the outhouse and informing him that he should not be in there. Asking the formal ritual question that is asked at this time every morning: "Are you in there, you bastard?" More rituals. Spray bedroom (cockroaches and mosquitoes). Close all the windows on south side (heat). Leave windows open on north and east sides (cool). Leave windows open on west side until maybe June when it gets very hot on all sides. Pull down shades. Get water bottle. Rosary. Watch. Library book to be returned.⁶¹

A passage such as this is a reminder that grace builds on nature but does not replace it. Human life is inescapably incarnate, fleshly, and part of the value of even the most ordinary activities is to keep one rooted in concrete actuality, to guard against the fatal self-deception that the "religious" person lives on a different plane of reality from everyone else.⁶² In performing his "rituals," Merton is attuned to the rhythms of the day—closing the south windows as the sun rises while leaving north and east windows open for cross-ventilation—and the rhythms of the season—leaving west windows open until the heats of June. There is a sense of correspondence with the natural patterns of time—the watch is picked up only when he is ready to make his daily trip down to the monastery. At the same time, the presence of cockroaches and mosquitoes (not to mention the king snake) makes clear that the hermitage is no idyllic, edenic, self-enclosed world; it is part of the normal, ambiguous environment in which all people find themselves, and so signifies an inevitable yet freely accepted solidarity with the human condition. Yet there is something different as well, at least from the standard middle-class experience and expectation. If the hermit participates in routines common to all, he is also a sign of contradiction to the busyness, the noise, the technological gadgetry taken for granted in contemporary society but in fact not necessary at all. "Washing out the coffee pot in the rain bucket" reminds those who rely on the dishwasher, or even on hot and cold running water, that full humanity does not depend on access to the latest conveniences. Both familiar and unfamiliar, the hermit's rituals are not a glorification of the primitive—Merton was quite grateful when modern plumbing and electricity arrived at the hermitage—but a subtle admonition not to

61. *Ibid.*, 53.

62. In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton writes, "Transformation is not a repudiation of ordinary life but its definitive recovery in Christ" (100).

absolutize the relative, not to confuse the natural with the artificial, the necessary with the optional.

This passage already suggests a third aspect of this "lay" existence, immersion in the natural world in all its concrete particularity. Merton locates himself in a setting that is not reducible to a set of mapmaker's coordinates: it is "in Kentucky" but that is not its essential defining characteristic: "Do I have a 'day'? Do I spend my 'day' in a 'place'? I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of 'place' a new configuration."⁶³ There is a sense of respect here, a recognition that the trees and birds were in this place before he was and will continue to be there when he is no more; therefore it is his responsibility not to impose his pattern on them but to become aware of and participate in their pattern, their harmony. This relationship is humorously expressed later in the essay in the delightful variation on St. Francis' sermon to the birds: "'Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: be what you are: be *birds*. Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!' Reply: 'even this is one sermon too many!'"⁶⁴ It is not the birds but the preacher who needs to hear and heed the instruction "be what you are," which could in fact be considered the sermon of the birds.

This appreciation of harmony does not exclude an awareness of dissonance in nature, a sense that it too participates in some way in the fallenness of creation. "As to the crows," Merton notes, "they form part of a different pattern. They are vociferous and self-justifying, like humans. They are not two, they are many. They fight each other and the other birds, in a constant state of war."⁶⁵ But if nature at times parallels the conflicts and confusion of the human world (and so serves as an object lesson undermining the pretensions and posturing of human arrogance), it also stands as a sign of contradiction to the getting and spending in which the great world looks to find its meaning. Birds and business are on different schedules: "The birds begin to wake. It will

63. *Day of a Stranger*, 33; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 239.

64. *Day of a Stranger*, 51.

65. *Ibid.*, 33; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 239.

soon be dawn. In an hour or two the towns will wake, and men will enjoy everywhere the great luminous smiles of production and business."⁶⁶ Like the birds, the hermit is attuned to other rhythms than those presented by the commercial world. He is sensitive not only to *chronos*, clock-time, but to *kairos*, the decisive moment of revelation and transfiguration: "It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to be dawn. It is necessary to be present alone at the resurrection of Day, in the black silence when the sun appears. In this completely neutral instant I receive from the Eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word 'DAY,' which is never the same. It is never spoken in any human language."⁶⁷ This responsiveness to nature is not intended to substitute for or to exclude human contact. Rather, in Merton's view, the ecological balance of his physical environment provides a pattern for "a mental ecology too, a living balance of spirits in this corner of the woods. There is room here for many other songs than those of birds," voices of poets singing in many languages, voices of eastern sages and western Church Fathers, voices of Hebrew prophets and "feminine voices from Angela of Foligno to Flannery O'Connor, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and, more personally and warmly still, Raissa Maritain."⁶⁸ The natural world provides a context in which the wisdom of the human world can be properly heard and appreciated: "It is good to choose the voices that will be heard in these woods, but they also choose themselves, and send themselves here to be present in this silence."⁶⁹

But the human world penetrates the hermit's existence not only through the insights of artists and visionaries. A fourth element of Merton's life in the hermitage that is shared with all humanity is the necessity to confront the dilemmas of social and political life. Merton frames his essay with references to airplanes. After a sardonic opening paragraph on the pseudo-mystical elevation of modern jets, in which

66. *Day of a Stranger*, 45.

67. *Ibid.*, 51; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 241. Merton writes to Ruether, "One of the things I love about my life, and, therefore, one of the reasons why I would not change it for anything, is the fact that I live in the woods and according to a tempo of sun and moon and season in which it is naturally easy and possible to walk in God's light, so to speak, in and through his creation" (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 502; *At Home in the World*, 34).

68. *Day of a Stranger*, 35; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 239-40.

69. *Day of a Stranger*, 35, 37.

passengers are suspended in a moving stillness "with timeless cocktails . . . contemplation that gets you somewhere!"⁷⁰ he turns to "Other jets, with other contemplations,"⁷¹ the grotesquely perverted mimicry of "the SAC plane, the metal bird with a scientific egg in its breast!"⁷² The essay, and the day, end with the same image: "Meanwhile the metal cherub of the apocalypse passes over me in the clouds, treasuring its egg and its message."⁷³ Merton permits himself and his reader no illusion that withdrawal into solitude means escape from the perils human society has created for itself: "like everyone else, I live in the shadow of the apocalyptic cherub."⁷⁴ If there were ever a time when the monk had the luxury of ignoring the problems of the wider world, that time is forever gone. Monks, and even hermits, live in the same world as everyone else, and therefore have the same obligations and responsibilities to defend life and resist the forces of death. The hermit is able to address the struggle between light and darkness in society because he has experienced that same struggle in his own heart, and he is able to articulate a word of hope because he knows that the darkness has not finally overcome the light:

In the formlessness of night and silence a word then pronounces itself: Mercy. It is surrounded by other words of lesser consequence: "destroy iniquity," "wash me," "purify," "I know my iniquity." *Peccavi*. Concepts without interest in the world of business, war, politics, culture, etc. Concepts also often without interest to ecclesiastics. Other words: Blood. Guile. Anger. The way that is not good. The way of blood, guile, anger, war. Out there the hills in the dark lie southward. The way over the hills is blood, guile, dark, anger, death. Selma, Birmingham, Mississippi. Nearer than these, the atomic city, from which each day a freight car of fissionable material is brought to be hid carefully beside the gold in the underground vault which is at the heart of this nation. "Their mouth is the opening of the grave; their tongues are set in motion by lies; their heart is void." Blood, lies, fire, hate, the opening of the grave, void. Mercy, great mercy.⁷⁵

70. *Ibid.*, 29.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*, 31; the original version of this passage does not use the bird/egg image: see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 239.

73. *Day of a Stranger*, 63.

74. *Ibid.*, 31.

75. *Ibid.*, 43, 45.

The final word is mercy, but its power is revealed not by refusing to hear the other words but by confronting them, knowing the full extent of their ugliness, and refusing to be overwhelmed by them because one has learned, through no merit of one's own, that there is a deeper, more lasting reality than hate and death.

Though the term is not used, this passage is of course a description of the divine office, as "psalms grow up silently by themselves without effort in this light which is favorable to them."⁷⁶ Throughout "Day of a Stranger" the explicitly spiritual, religious, Christian dimension discloses itself unobtrusively, woven into the pattern of personal identity, of ordinary routines, of natural harmonies, or as here, of social and political confusions and threats. It is the final integrating factor that unites the hermit with his brothers and sisters, but only because it has itself been integrated with the rest of life. It is the "one central tonic note that is unheard and unuttered" but which makes possible the harmony of all creation, "the *consonantia* of heat, fragrant pine, quiet wind, bird song."⁷⁷ Viewed in isolation, Merton "the stranger" comments, "Spiritual life is guilt," but when the artificial separation between worldly and spiritual aspects of life is overcome, when religion is not restricted to formal rituals at specified times, all life is recognized as holy: "Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it."⁷⁸ The divine presence, the *pneuma* that blows where it wills, is as "natural," and as essential, as breathing.

At the heart of the call to solitude is the invitation to recognize and embrace the Love hidden in the depth of all that is real. "One might say I had decided to marry the silence of the forest. The sweet dark warmth of the whole world will have to be my wife. Out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers in their beds all over the world."⁷⁹ The secret is that all particular loves, in so far as they are authentic, are participations in the one Love; that all particular surrenders are concrete ways of participating in the primal and primary surrender of self to Absolute Reality, the

76. *Ibid.*, 43.

77. *Ibid.*, 61; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 242.

78. *Day of a Stranger*, 41.

79. *Ibid.*, 49; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 240.

Fullness of Truth. It is the assurance of the unity that grounds all diversity, the One manifested in the many, the "hidden wholeness" of creation as the epiphany of the divine, what Merton calls Sophia, Holy Wisdom.⁸⁰ Merton's vocation to solitude is not exclusive but inclusive, not something to distinguish him from others but a sign of the easily overlooked significance of each life and all life. "So perhaps I have an obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness which is at the center of all other loves." This is not an obligation imposed by any institution or required by any rule. It is an expression of charismatic freedom, love responding to Love, heart speaking to Heart. "I attempt to cultivate this plant without comment in the middle of the night and water it with psalms and prophecies in silence. It becomes the most rare of all the trees in the garden, at once the primordial paradise tree, the *axis mundi*, the cosmic axle, and the Cross. *Nulla silva talem profert*. There is only one such tree. It cannot be multiplied."⁸¹ There are not, finally, many trees but one Tree, many loves but one Love, many lives but one Life. At this still point, the distinctions between secular and sacred, lay and monastic, are transcended in a contemplative intuition that is also ordinary, everyday awareness of a common humanity,⁸² sharing the same earth, revolving around the same center, redeemed by the same Cross in order to live the same freedom of the children of God.

80. See Merton's prose poem "Hagia Sophia" in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363-71; also in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, 506-11, and *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, 257-64. The phrase "hidden wholeness" is from the opening sentence of this work.

81. *Day of a Stranger*, 49; for an earlier version of this passage, see *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 240.

82. Merton writes to Ruether, "my own small concerns with monasticism may seem completely irrelevant. And I am not defending them. Because they are not just monastic concerns, they are human and universal. What makes it difficult to express this is the fact that, for instance, 'being a hermit' seems to mean trying to be a very peculiar and special kind of artificial man, whereas for me what it means is being nothing but man, or nothing but a mere man reduced to his simple condition as man, that is to say as a non-monk even, a non-layman, a non-categorized man, a plain simple man. . . . What would seem to others to be the final step into total alienation seems to me to be the beginning of the resolution of all alienation and the preparation for a real return without masks and without defenses into the world, as mere man" (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 508; *At Home in the World*, 46).