THE GEOGRAPHY OF SOLITUDE: Inner Space and the Sense of Place

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> We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
> With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand.[1]

The interplay between physical place and the "interior landscape" of the soul concerns the relationship between spirituality and geographic reality: how our physical surroundings express and influence our spirituality—who we are on the inside. It is therefore about the search for identity, for the "true self." It is about the search for sainthood, the path of holiness, the inner journey—an inner journey that finds expression in an outer journey. Potentially, this takes in questions of pilgrimage and why certain places are deemed *holy*. It also begs the fundamental question regarding the reason for the perennial search for *desert places*, for mountaintops and solitary wilderness places, places of solitude. It is about how contemplation opens our eyes to see the world around us as it is and to recognize it as *sacred space*.

Thomas Merton's journeys to northern California and Alaska in 1968 provide a focus for the exploration of this interplay between physical and spiritual, inner and outer, landscape and soulscape. These west coast trips were the first extensive travels away from the monastery in over 25 years, prior to his last great journey to Asia in search of *mahakaruna*, the great compassion and the settlement of the "great affair."[2] In his journal for that last year he writes about finding a suitable location for a hermitage, but what was it exactly Merton was looking for? More solitude, certainly, less interruption from correspondents and visitors, perhaps. But beyond this, why one place rather than another? What was Merton looking for that he could not have gained simply by moving a couple of miles further out from the monastery in the Kentucky backwoods? This paper is not an exercise in locational analysis but rather an exploration, a teasing out, of the role of place and how it connected with Merton's own inner journey. In turn,

this relates to the wider, or perhaps more specific, questions which face each of us as we seek to bring into harmony the place in which we dwell within our hearts and our place in the world.

This intersection, or even co-incidence, between *inner* and *outer* is epitomized in Merton's reaction to receiving back one of the photos he had taken during his visit to northern California in May 1968:

> John Griffin sent one of my pictures of Needle Rock, which he developed and enlarged. I also have the contact. The Agfa film brought out the great *Yang-Yin* of sea rock mist, diffused light and half hidden mountain . . . an interior landscape, yet there. In other words, what is written within me is there. "Thou art that."[3]

This comment succinctly articulates the intuition that what is "out there" reflects what is "in here," or perhaps more naturally, what is "in here" reflects what is "out there" in the sense of "tell me where you're from and I'll tell you who you are." There is a sense here of being formed by the environment in which we live, not in a deterministic way but in a dynamic way of interaction. But it works the other way too: what is "out there" reflects what is "in here" in the sense that the environment and the landscapes around us are experienced by us and interpreted according to our own constructs.

One person's "wasteland" is another person's "wilderness," and the same landscape may be both at different times for the same person. The idea is that the landscape is a "metaphor of the soul" or perhaps more strongly a "sacrament of the soul," an outward manifestation of an inward reality: "Thou art that." This is to say that our outward vision enables us to see something of our own true identity. It is about seeing in a new way, a contemplative vision that sees the inner reality of things with clarity. It is also about understanding our interconnectedness with the world in which we live.

There is also a Buddhist inference in Merton's identification of himself with, or in, the photograph of Needle Rock. In D. T. Suzuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism* we read:

> The world with its expansion of earth, its towering mountains, its surging waves, its meandering rivers, and with its infinitely variegated colours and forms is serenely reflected in the mind-

> mirror of the *Yogin*. The mirror accepts them all and yet there are no traces or stains left in it—just one Essence bright and illuminating.[4]

As Merton said, "In other words, what is written within me is there."

Thomas Merton was an intensely "geographical person" who was very conscious of the interrelationship between his physical location and his spiritual identity—the interplay between his inner space and his sense of place. It is perhaps significant that Merton's favorite book of his childhood was a "geography book."[5] The title of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is itself a geographical metaphor for his spiritual journey, drawn from Dante's *Purgatorio*. Moreover the book itself is very "geographical"—it is full of *places*. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* the reader is very conscious of the location in which particular events and phases of his life *take place*: St. Antonin, Montauban, Oakham, Rome, Cambridge, New York, Olean, Cuba, Gethsemani. One illustration of the vivid sense of place in Merton's story is given in his account of his return to France at the age of ten:

> When I went to France, in 1925, returning to the land of my birth, I was also returning to the fountains of the intellectual and spiritual life of the world to which I belonged....
> Even the countryside, even the landscape of France, whether in the low hills and lush meadows and apple orchards of Normandy or in the sharp and arid and vivid outline of the mountains of Provence, or in the vast, rolling red vineyards of Languedoc, seems to have been made full of a special perfection....
> That day, on that express, going into the south, into the Midi, I discovered France. I discovered that land which is really, as far as I can tell, the one to which I do belong, if I belong to any at all, by no documentary title but by geographical birth. We flew over the brown Loire, by a long, long bridge at Orléans, and from then on I was home, although I had never seen it before, and shall never see it again.[6]

After Merton entered the monastery of Gethsemani in 1941, this interplay between inner and outer for Merton gave rise to an increasing need for solitude and to years of agitation for permission to become a hermit. Yet, when he does finally become a hermit, it

is only a couple of years before he finds that he needs more solitude. To be sure, this is partly because he is a "famous monk" and everyone seems to want to have a piece of him; in addition, there is a tension here with his own need for other people (the monk of Times Square)[7]; but the overriding impression given in his journal for the early part of 1968 is of his need for more solitude—more space, more silence, less noise, fewer people—he needs to be alone exteriorly as he is interiorly.

When he comes to the Californian coast in May 1968 he is actively looking for a remote site for a hermitage and he falls in love with the place:

> Friday [May 10] I drove out with Gracie Jones...and this time climbed high upon the slope. It was a bright day and the sea was calm, and I looked out over the glittering blue water, realizing more and more that this was where I really belonged. I shall never forget it. I need the sound of those waves, that desolation, that emptiness.[8]

These are words charged with great emotion, conveying his yearning for a *place* where he really belonged, yet "desolation" and "emptiness" are far from unambiguously positive words—quite the reverse.

As a counterpoint to Merton's experience, I draw here on Jack Kerouac's experience as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the North Cascades in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, in 1956. There are many parallels and connections between Merton and Kerouac, perhaps best epitomized in Robert Inchausti's description of Merton as "Jack Kerouac's monastic elder brother."[9] In his various accounts of his solitary summer on top of Desolation, Kerouac gives a gruelling perspective on the negative, as well as the positive, aspects of solitude: "Desolation Adventure finds me finding at the bottom of myself abysmal nothingness worse than no illusion even—my minds in rags—"[10] but there is still, in all the desolation and nothingness, the sense of self-discovery: "*finds me finding* at the bottom of myself." But in this self-discovery, even comforting illusions are destroyed leaving "abysmal nothingness"—*emptiness*. One detects resonance here with the experience of the apophatic mystics such as John of the Cross, and the dark night of the soul. There is a sense of things being reduced to the raw essentials—echoes of transcendentalist Henry Thoreau:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life...to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world....[11]

Kerouac's encounter with himself was perhaps all the more horrifying because it was unexpected:

> For I'd thought, in June, hitch hiking up there to the Skagit Valley in northwest Washington for my fire lookout job "When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves on mules and I'm alone I will come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain" but instead I'd come face to face with myself....[12]

Yet for all the horror and loneliness and boredom, Kerouac did indeed receive a vision, not one perhaps that he expected but nonetheless "the vision of the freedom of eternity which I saw and which all wilderness hermitage saints have seen."[13] This is the experience of "the timeless, the mysterious, and the primordial,"[14] the awareness of a certain permanence underlying all the movements of world history and human lives—"the mountains lookt [*sic*] the same in 1935...as they do in 1956 so that the oldness of the earth strikes me recalling primordially that it was the same, they (the mountains) looked the same in 584 B.C."[15] There is a sense of timelessness here or, more accurately, a consciousness of a new sense of time within timelessness.

This sense of permanence and timelessness for Kerouac was most incarnated by the imposing presence of Mount Hozomeen towering to the north of Desolation Peak:

> The void is not disturbed by any kind of ups or downs, my God look at Hozomeen, is he worried or tearful? Does he bend before storms or snarl when the sun shines or sigh in the late day drowse?...Even Hozomeen'll crack and fall apart, nothing lasts, it is only a faring-in-that-which-everything-is, a passing through....[16]

Kerouac has been plunged into an awareness of his own illusoriness, not even that for illusions have been stripped away, rather his nothingness, emptiness in the void. He sees the mountains hanging in space held there only by gravity, and in this there is a *satori*, a kind of revelatory flash illuminating his place in time and space in the "freedom of eternity." As a metaphor of the soul, this is profoundly disturbing as well as liberating. But the insight is one of a dynamic interaction with the ground of all ground. Belden C. Lane in his book *Landscapes of the Sacred* draws a helpful distinction between space as *topos*—as in "topography," denoting an inert container, exerting no influence—and space as *chora*—as in "choreography," carrying its own energy and summoning participants to a dance.[17] It is a similar distinction to that between *chronos* time and *kairos* time and calls to mind Merton's passage at the end of *New Seeds of Contemplation* about being "invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance."[18] Sometimes, though, the dance can be dangerous, to which Kerouac's perilous experience on Desolation bears testimony. For Kerouac, Mount Hozomeen towering another 2000 feet over him on Desolation was a discomforting, threatening presence, by turns a bear and a tiger.

Merton also illustrates the powerful emotions elicited by imposing mountains when he describes his encounter with two volcanoes whilst flying over Alaska in a twin-engine plane in September 1968:

> Two volcanoes: *Iliamna*—graceful, mysterious, feminine, akin to the great Mexican volcanoes. A volcano to which one speaks with reverence, lovely in the distance, standing above the sea of clouds. Lovely near at hand with smaller attendant peaks. *Redoubt* (which surely has another name, a secret and true name) handsome and noble in the distance, but ugly, sinister as you get near it. A brute of a dirty busted mountain that has exploded too often. A bear of a mountain. A dog mountain with steam curling up out of the snow crater. As the plane drew near there was turbulence and we felt the plane might at any moment be suddenly pulled out of its course and hurled against the mountain. As if it would not pull itself away. But finally it did. *Redoubt*. A volcano to which one says nothing. Pictures from the plane.[19]

That last note, "Pictures from the plane," is intriguing—a note to himself perhaps that he has taken some pictures but also a comment on what he has just done in the previous lines: provided us with pictures from the plane. These are *contemplative* pictures which allow us to see the window between the inner and outer worlds, in much the same way Merton described his camera as a "Zen camera," a means of provoking an unmediated experience of reality—a photographic *haiku*—a contemplative window that allows us to see both ways and yet actually does neither but opens up a new view: our own view. The experience is analogous to that of an artist and a painting: the artist expresses herself through paint and some of that may be communicated to us as we view the painting but our experience of the picture is not that of the artist; it is our own. It is the essential non-communicability of experience—an insight common to both Zen and contemplation.

Merton takes more haiku-like pictures from the plane, this time conceived as "The new consciousness. Reading the calligraphy of snow and rock from the air," thirty-nine thousand feet over Idaho:

> Whorled dark profile of a river in snow. A cliff in the fog. And now a dark road straight through a long fresh snow field. Snaggy reaches of snow pattern. Claws of mountain and valley. Light shadow or breaking cloud on snow. Swing and reach of long, gaunt, black, white forks.[20]

Through contemplation of the world around us we both find and lose ourselves—we appear and disappear. Our senses heighten our awareness of being alive, of existing—we appear—and yet this very consciousness somehow exposes the fiction of ourselves—such that we disappear. It is the difference between the "false" self of the *cogito ergo sum* observing itself thinking and the mysterious, indefinable "true" self of pure being—though I am conscious here that I am trying to articulate the unspeakable. Kerouac expresses it like this:

> I saw that if it wasn't for the six senses, of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting and thinking, the self of that, which is non-existent, there would be no phenomena to perceive at all, in fact no six senses or self.[21]

The "six" senses Kerouac refers to here, rather than the customary five, again reflects Buddhist influence. Kerouac had spent much of the early 1950s studying the traditions and writings of Buddhism, and this is inevitably reflected in his own writings of this period. The six senses are the six *vijnanas* of Buddhist philosophy, which include mind (*manovijnana*) as a sense organ for the apprehension of *dharma*, or objects of thought as for example in the Shingyo Sutra.[22] So Kerouac disappears, whilst at the same time creating some vivid contemplative pictures of his own and so appearing again in the mirror of his own soul:

> The Skagit River at Marblemount was a rushing clear snowmelt of pure green . . . It was the work of the quiet mountains, this torrent of purity at my feet . . . . It was a river wonderland, the emptiness of the golden eternity, odors of moss and bark and twigs and mud, all ululating mysterious visionstuff before my eyes, tranquil and everlasting nevertheless, the hillhairing trees, the dancing sunlight. As I looked up the clouds assumed as I assumed, faces of hermits.[23]

The "emptiness" this time is not desolate but the "golden eternity" as Kerouac assumes here the face of a hermit, inwardly mirroring the clouds "out there." The "face of the hermit" appears once more in Kerouac's "Notes on the Author," part of the introduction to *Lonesome Traveler*:

> Am actually not "beat" but strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic . . . Final plans: hermitage in the woods, quiet writing of old age, mellow hopes of Paradise (which comes to everybody anyway) . . . .[24]

These are words that could almost have been written by the hermit of the Kentucky backwoods himself. But that last year at the hermitage had become increasingly difficult for Merton: "Traffic on the road. Kids at the lake. Guns. Machines, and Boone's dog yelling in the wood at night. And people coming all the time . . . . if I can find somewhere to *disappear* to, I will" (July 29, 1968).[25]

Merton thinks about northern California and speaks of it frequently with much affection and perhaps might have spent part of the year there, or even founded a colony of hermits.[26] In his

journal entry for May 24 we find the strongest statement of his desire to return to California and of his sense of alienation at Gethsemani:

> Lonely for the Pacific and the Redwoods. A sense that somehow when I was there I was unutterably happy—and maybe I was. Certainly, every minute I was there, especially by the sea, I felt I was at home—as if I had come a very long way to where I really belonged. Maybe it's absurd, I don't know. But that is the way it feels. I seem to be alienated and exiled here. As if there were really no reason whatever—except a few tenaciously fictitious ones—for being here. As if I were utterly cheating myself by staying where I am only a stranger—and will never be anything else.[27]

These words of alienation and exile poignantly articulate the disjuncture Merton experienced between where he was geographically and where he wanted to be spiritually. In order to get to where he wanted to be *spiritually* he felt the need for a *physical* move. On the Pacific shore, it seems he had found a place where he recognized himself—"Thou art that"—"I need the sound of those waves, that desolation, that emptiness."[28] But even the shore was becoming too populated—too many cars, visitors, hippies, development—one senses his sadness. He thought about Alaska and may well have returned there. He liked it better than Kentucky,[29] though one does not sense the same warmth that he had for California. Ultimately the question of where he might have settled is redundant—he went to Asia and among the Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa found what he was obscurely looking for[30] and ten days later he did, indeed, *disappear*. He had found his place of resurrection. The ultimate place: he was *home*.

It is the concept of "home" that is perhaps key in understanding the relationship between inner and outer, landscape and spirit, geography and solitude. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton referred to France as the land to which he belonged—the "home" that he had not seen before and would not see again; on the Pacific shoreline he felt he was "at home" having come a long way to where he "really belonged." At the beginning of *The Asian Journal*, he speaks with elation of "going home, to the home where I have never been in this body."[31] "Home" is usually understood in

terms of the place where one is from or has grown up or habitually resides over a long period and yet for Merton "home" seems to be a place that he has never been to or is unlikely to return to. In struggling to articulate this after his return from California in May 1968 he stated explicitly, "The country which is nowhere is the real home."[32]

This statement begins the entry for May 30th in *Woods, Shore, Desert* and immediately follows the entry that concludes, "Thou art that" (before adding, "I dream every night of the west"). Merton realises that true home lies beyond physical geography, but he then adds, "only it seems that the Pacific Shore at Needle Rock is more nowhere than this, and Bear Harbor is more nowhere still."[33] Apparently embarrassed, he immediately admits that he was tempted to cross that out but that in these notes he was leaving everything in. He clearly is aware of, and is struggling with, the paradox, if not contradiction, between these notions of home and identity being tied up with his interaction with the physical landscape, the world around him, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the insight that true identity and home lie beyond, or perhaps better, transcend, the physical and geographic. Merton's recognition of "home" at Needle Rock or Bear Harbor articulates his recognition of himself in what he sees. Like Suzuki's Yogin, he sees himself reflected in his "mind-mirror" as he looks upon "the world with its expansion of earth"[34] or, specifically, the "sea rock mist, diffused light and half hidden mountain."[35] But just as Kerouac finds through the experience of solitude on Desolation an empty self of "abysmal nothingness"—literally the nothingness of the abyss—"worse than no illusion even,"[36] so Merton perceives that his own identity lies beyond the reflection of the mind-mirror. His true identity, his real home, is the country that is nowhere. Merton is very much the exile-in-solitude "attending to the skies we cannot understand," skies which nonetheless assume faces of hermits.

Notes

1. From the poem "The Quickening of St. John The Baptist: On The Contemplative Vocation" in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1980), p. 201.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 4; entry for October 15, 1968. Also see: Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain* (Journals 7; 1967-1968; ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 205.

3. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1968), p. 42. This entry is dated May 22, 1968. Also see: Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, op. cit.* p. 110.

4. D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove, 1935), p. 72.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London, SPCK, 1990), p. 10.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain, op. cit.* pp. 30-31.

7. This alludes to psychologist Dr. Gregory Zilboorg's charge that Merton's desire for a hermitage was pathological, that he wanted a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying "Hermit." See: Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986) p. 297.

8. Entry for May 21, 1968 in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, op. cit.* p. 120.

9. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy.* New York: SUNY, 1998. p. 5. For a more detailed introduction to the parallels and connections between Merton and Kerouac, see Angus Stuart, 'Visions of Tom: Jack Kerouac's Monastic Elder Brother.' *The Merton Journal* 8:1 (2001), pp. 40-46. See also: http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/kerouac.htm

10. Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995 (1965)), p. 68.

11. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (London & Newcastle-on-Tyne: The Walter Scott Publishing Co. 1886), pp. 88-89.

12. Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels, op. cit.* p. 4.

13. *Ibid.* p. 73.

14. Robert Marshall who worked for the United States Forest Service in the 1930s argued for the establishment of "primitive areas" to be kept perpetually free of roads and logging, "To preserve a certain precious value of the timeless, the mysterious, and the primordial." See: John Suiter, *Poets on the Peaks* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 2002), p. 36.

15. Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels, op. cit.* p. 36 (the spelling is Kerouac's own).

16. *Ibid.* p. 5.

17. Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 39.

18. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1999 (1962)). p. 192.

19. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, op. cit.* pp. 195-196.

20. *Ibid*, p. 94.

21. Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler* (London: Penguin, 2000 (1960)), p. 116.

22. See D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism, op.cit.* pp. 26-30. For more on Kerouac, Merton and Buddhism see: Angus Stuart, 'Grace Beats Karma: Thomas Merton and the Dharma Bums' in *The World in My Bloodstream: Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace*, (ed. Angus Stuart; Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2004), pp. 92-105.

23. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums.* (London: Flamingo, 1994 (1959)), p. 188.

24. Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler* (London: Penguin, 2000 (1960)), p. 8.

25. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, op. cit.* p. 148.

26. *Ibid.* p.139. Merton's entry for July 5, 1968 reads: "[Fr. Flavian] is *very* interested in perhaps starting something out on the Coast. And today, in so many words, he asked me if I were willing to start it: i.e. to go out there and get some sort of small hermit colony going."

27. *Ibid.* p. 122.

28. *Ibid.* p. 120.

29. *Ibid.* p. 193. Merton's entry for September 27, 1968: "Whatever else I may say—it is clear I like Alaska much better than Kentucky and it seems to me that if I am to be a hermit in the U.S., Alaska is probably the place for it."

30. *Ibid.* p. 323. Merton's entry for December 4, 1968: "...I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains..."

31. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal, op. cit.* p. 5; entry for October 15, 1968. Also see: Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, op. cit.* pp. 205-206.

32. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968, op. cit.* p. 42. Also see: Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, op. cit.* p. 110.

33. *Ibid.*

34. D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism, op. cit.* p. 72.

35. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968, op. cit.* p. 42. Also see: Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, op. cit.* p. 110.

36. Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels, op. cit.* p. 68.