Jewels Upon His Forehead: Spiritual Vision in the Poetry and Photography of Thomas Merton

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Thomas Merton expressed his spiritual vision in a variety of ways. This study views the poetry and photography of Merton as artistic jewels, precious gems, which serve as mediums Merton employed to render his spiritual vision emerging from his numerous experiences. The essay examines spiritual insights embedded in the following topics in Merton's poetic corpus: Zen, nature, city-emptiness, and incarnation. It then explores Merton's spiritual vision through the lens of his photography and, within that context, depicts Ansel Adams and Thomas Merton as Zen-type photographers. In essence, this investigation seeks to shed light on Merton's in-depth encounters with God by means of his poetry and photography.

Central to Merton's spiritual vision is his belief that to find one's true self a person must become self-forgetting and, thus, aware that he or she *is* only in God. Merton asserts that in the ground of one's being, a person is one with God, others, and all of reality. In essence, for Merton, being authentically human entails waking up, that is, developing a growing awareness of the truth of one's *isness*.

Another fundamental aspect of Merton's spiritual vision is the tenet that all of creation in some way reflects God's beauty. Regarding this, Merton asserts: "One of the most important ... elements in the beginning of the interior life is the ability ... to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God."[1] This belief correlates with the Zen insight that the sacred is experienced in and through everyday reality.

In Merton's spirituality, Jesus Christ is the person who simultaneously reveals the nature of God and humanity. For Merton, the Incarnation represents the self-emptying of God in God's becoming human. Since Jesus embodies God's fullness in emptiness, those who desire to follow Him must enter unreservedly into

the process of self-emptying in order to become wholly "in Christ." Taking oneness in Christ seriously, Merton declares: "If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ."[2]

Merton's Artistic Vision

Merton inherited his interest in art from his parents, Owen and Ruth, who were both artists. For Merton, art is a window into the mystery of God. True art enables a person to come "alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which ... all living ... things come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him."[3] God, the Mystery behind the reality that art seeks to penetrate,[4] communicates in and through art.

According to Merton, the artist is a dervish who dances in the water of life.[5] Merton asserts that "[T]oday the artist has, whether he likes it or not, inherited the combined functions of hermit, pilgrim, prophet, priest, shaman, sorcerer, soothsayer, alchemist and bonze."[6] The artist, whose role is multifaceted, perceives the inner meaning and integral nature of life.

Poetry as an Expression of Merton's Artistic Vision

As a graduate student at Columbia University, Merton wrote poetry. Mark Van Doren, one of Merton's professors at the university, described him as a "poet of promise." Referring to his own poetic process, Merton observes: "The dawn is breaking outside the cold windows... whole blocks of imagery seem to crystallize out as it were naturally in the silence and the peace, and the lines almost write themselves."[7] Additionally, reflecting on writing poetry during 1940-41 when he was an English instructor at St. Bonaventure University, Merton notes that "as the months went on, I began to drink poems out of these hills."[8]

William Blake's poetry also played an important role in the development of Merton's poetic vision. During the early years of Merton's life, his father Owen introduced his son to Blake's poetry by reading 'Songs of Innocence' to him. Later, while studying at Oakham, Merton poured over Blake's poems and, at Columbia University, chose to write his master's thesis on them. In this thesis, Merton concurs with Blake that experiences of nature reveal something of the transcendent.

Early in his monastic life, Merton struggled with how the poet and contemplative could peacefully co-exist within his own person. Eventually, Merton resolved this conflict by viewing poetry as an "act of pursuing a listening silence."[9] According to him, poetic expressions emerge from one's awareness of and attentiveness to the sacred encountered in solitude.

Some of Merton's early poetry expresses a flight from a world mentality that was the consequence of his embracing a dualistic theology that separated the sacred and the profane. In contrast, in Merton's later poetry, the world became the very ground of the experience of the sacred. During 1965-66, Merton lectured on the poetry of Blake, Hopkins, and Rilke to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Merton believed that the study of such poetry provided a way for his students to enter into communion with God by experiencing creation's hidden wholeness.[10]

For Merton, poetry and theology are essentially related. Both plumb the fundamental questions of life in search of Truth. Both are attuned to God and God's activity in the world. Concerning this nexus, Merton asserts: "You cannot have a decent poem that is not in some way close to theology."[11] Merton maintains that, "To the Christian poet, the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments - signs of God, signs of His love working in the world."[12]

Zen Insights/ Christian Insights

Zen, a way of living and being fully awake, cuts across all religious denominations. Zen involves awe at the sacredness of being. It entails entering into a process of self-emptying in order to experience the reality of fullness being emptiness and vice versa. Zen teaches that to be nothing is to be everything. To do nothing is the highest activity.

Zen enlightenment refers to the transformation of human consciousness wherein one becomes aware that she or he is united with all that exists and learns to cherish each created thing. From a Christian perspective, Merton expanded this Zen insight to include a person's awakening to the realization that the beauty of created reality reflects God's unfathomable beauty. For Merton, Christian spiritual growth, rooted in Zen insights, involves learning to live life fully awake. Those awake or enlightened are emptied of self, since they have disappeared into God who is Love.

In Merton's life, a heightened sense of such Zen/Christian enlightenment occurred when he visited the statues of the Buddhas in Polonnaruwa. Merton reflected:

> Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.... All problems are resolved and everything is clear.... [E]verything is emptiness and everything is compassion.[13]

In Merton's poetic writings, there are many examples of Zen/Christian insights. What follows is a representative sampling. In his poem, 'All the Way Down', Merton writes: "I went down/Into the cavern/All the way down/To the bottom of the sea. / I went down lower/Than Jonas and the whale. /No one ever got so far down/ As me. /I went down lower/Than any diamond mine/Deeper than the lowest hole/In Kimberly/All the way down."[14] Here, the "diamond mine" is an image of the human journey inward that leads to the discovery of the jewel of one's true identity. Diamonds symbolize the treasure of self-knowledge available to those who engage in the Zen process of self-emptying and go 'All the way down' to the lowest level of the psyche.[15]

In 'Early Blizzard' the poem's speaker ploughs the snow drifts and is "knee deep in silence/Where the storm smokes and stings..."[16] Finally, the speaker admonishes self to "Sink in the hidden wood/And let the weather/Be what it is."[17] Here is a fine example of the Zen principle of acceptance of the *isness* of reality.

In various sections of his lengthy prose poem, 'Cables to the Ace', Merton offers further Zen reflections. In Cable 37, he writes: "The perfect act is empty.... [S]top seeking. Let it all happen. Let it come and go. What? Everything, i.e., nothing."[18] Cable 38 states: "The way that is most yours is no way."[19] In Cable 58, Merton argues that

> For each of us there is a point of nowhereness in the middle of movement, a point of nothingness in the midst of being the incomparable point, not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it, you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there. But you must not turn to it. Once you become aware of yourself as a seeker, you are lost. But if you are content to be lost you will be found without knowing it, precisely because you are lost, for you are, at last, nowhere.[20]

In Cable 84, Merton describes the essence of "Gelassenheit," which means to let go in order to enter into the fullness of emptiness.

> Gelassenheit. Desert and Void. The uncreated is waste and emptiness to the creature. Not even sand. Not even stone. Not even darkness and night.... But the uncreated is not something. Waste. Emptiness. Total poverty of the Creator; yet from this poverty springs everything. The waste is inexhaustible. Infinite zero. Everything comes from this desert Nothing.[21]

By piling cable upon cable in 'Cables to the Ace,' Merton conveys the Zen insight that no way is the way, i.e., that one must enter the void in order to experience everything in nothingness. One needs to stop seeking so that being lost, being nowhere, one can be found and be everywhere. Infinite zero is, in Merton's understanding, paradoxically everything!

In his poem, 'Elias—Variations on a Theme', Merton writes: "Listen, Elias, /... Listen to the woods, / Listen to the ground. / ... O listen, Elias/ ... Where passes One/ Who bends no blade, no fern. / Listen to His word. / 'Where the fields end, thou shalt be My friend. / Where the bird is gone/ Thou shalt be My son.'"[22] This poem develops the Zen/Christian insight that the human inward journey is one of waiting and listening for God in order to find one's true center in God. At the end of the poem, Elias, depicted as a "wild bird", is free because he has awakened to the fact that God, who is his friend, is in the center where the fields end, i.e., in the Void.

Merton's 'Grace's House' is a poem about the intersection of the sacred and the profane in the house that symbolizes Grace's center. One cannot find a map to Grace's house because the way to it, which is the inner journey to the true self, is unique to each person.

Merton's poem 'In Silence' includes: "Be still/ Listen to the stones of the wall/ Be silent, they try/ To speak your /Name. / Listen/ To the living walls. /Who are you? / Who/Are you? Whose /Silence are you?"[23] "Be still" is an imperative once again to enter into the timeless void wherein one discovers who one really is. By disappearing into the silence of God, one becomes one's truest self.

'Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing' is a poem Merton wrote about the dark night of the soul. Hidden in the snow and

barrenness, the Plant in this poem is the human soul that waits in creative darkness to experience the fullness of spiritual union with God. Merton's poem 'Night-Flowering Cactus' repeats the theme of 'Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing'. Instead of a plant, there is a cactus that blooms in the dark of night. The blooming cactus, like the Plant that says nothing, symbolizes the experience of mystical union with God in the Void. In Zen/Christian terms, both poems convey the essence of transformed consciousness: utter awake-ness in God.

In 'Song: If You Seek' Merton depicts Solitude as a teacher who leads one into emptiness wherein one "disappears into Love in order to 'be Love.'"[24] In this poem, Solitude, the speaker and director of the soul, declares: "I go before you into emptiness, / I am... / The forerunner of the Word of God. ... / Follow my ways.../To golden haired suns, /Logos and music.../For I, Solitude, am thine own self; / I, Nothingness, am thy All. / I, Silence, am thy Amen!"[25]

'Song for Nobody' is one of Merton's most concise, meaning-packed poems:

> A yellow flower/ (Light and spirit)/ Sings by itself/For nobody. /A golden spirit/ (Light and emptiness)/Sings without a word/By itself./ Let no one touch this gentle sun/In whose dark eyes/Someone is awake./ No light, no gold, no name, no color/ And no thought; /O, wide awake!/A golden heaven/ Sings by itself/A song to nobody.[26]

The "wide-awake" flower in this poem is self-accepting. It is content to simply be what it is. The flower, which has its existence in God, symbolizes the person who has shed ego-attachment in Zen/Christian self-emptiness and, thus, is able to enter into the fullness of God.

Nature

Thomas Merton, a lover of nature, soaked into his soul the beauty of God's creation. As an instructor at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York, he took long walks during which he gazed contemplatively at surrounding snow-covered hills.[27] During Holy Week in April, 1941, as a guest at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Merton journaled:

> Tulips in the front garden have already opened their chalices too wide and have gone blowsy. The bees were at work, one

> in each flower cup, although it is still only April. Apple trees are in blossom, and every day more and more buds come out on the branches of the tall trees of the avenue before the gatehouse.[28]

These words indicate how attuned Merton was to the details of nature in his surroundings.

Later, as a monk at Gethsemani, Merton mused:

> But my chief joy is to escape to the attic of the garden house and the little broken window that looks out over the valley. There in the silence I love the green grass. The tortured gestures of the apple trees have become part of my prayer. I look at the shining water under the willows and listen to the sweet songs of all the living things that are in our woods and fields. So much do I love this solitude that when I walk out along the road to the old barns that stand alone, far from the new buildings, delight begins to overpower me from head to foot and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones.[29]

This passage from *The Sign of Jonas* indicates Merton's realization of the utmost importance of silence and solitude for the contemplative consideration of nature's beauty.

In another entry from this journal, Merton writes: "[T]he whole world is charged with the glory of God and I find fire and music in the earth under my feet."[30] Thus, for Merton, nature explodes with the revelation that God is encounterable in all of reality for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear!

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* Merton contemplates the glory of the sunrise as "an event that calls forth solemn music in the very depths of man's nature, as if one's whole being had to attune itself to the cosmos and praise God for the new day, praise Him in the name of all the creatures that ever were or ever will be."[31] This reflection highlights Merton's attentiveness to the ingenuity of God who wakes up the world each day with the glory of the sunrise.

Viewing Merton as a nature mystic, Brother Patrick Hart writes: "He loved the woods and all of nature. He saw it as a sacrament of God's presence and was concerned about preserving it not only for our generation but for the generations to come."[32] Brother Patrick's comments point to the fact that eco-theological concerns are intrinsic to Merton's nature mysticism. Regarding this, Merton asserted: "[W]e Americans ought to love our land, our forests, our

plains and we ought to do everything we can to preserve it in its richness and beauty, by respect for our natural resources, for water, for land, for wild life."[33]

In poetry, Merton expressed the role nature played in his spiritual vision. What follows is a brief treatment of several of Merton's nature poems. In 'Trappists Working', Merton writes: "Now all our saws sing holy sonnets in the world of timber/Where oaks go off like guns, and fall like cataracts, / Pouring their roar into the wood's green well."[34] In this poem, the monks' physical labor that unites them with nature leads them to God. Merton continues: "Walk to us, Jesus, through the walls of trees./And find us still adorers in these airy churches,/Singing our other Office with our saws and axes./Still teach Your children in the busy forest,/ And let some little sunlight reach us, in our mental shades, and leafy studies."[35] For Merton, monks who draw close to nature by means of forestry work worship God, since closeness to nature is closeness to God.

In 'Stranger', Merton asserts: "When no one listens/To the quiet trees/When no one notices/the sun in the pool/When no one feels /The first drop of rain/Or sees the last star.../One bird sits still/ Watching the world of God:/One turning leaf,/Two falling blossoms,/Ten circles upon the pond."[36] Here, Merton stresses that whether or not anyone observes nature, it glorifies God by simply being what it is.

City-Emptiness

For Merton, city-emptiness imagery represents technological society that can make humankind more and more a "robot of its will."[37] The following description from Merton's writings depicts the technologically dependent city in a sterile and anti-spiritual way:

> One must move through noise, stink and general anger, through blocks of dilapidation, in order to get somewhere where anger and bewilderment are concentrated in a neon lit air- conditioned enclave, glittering with products, humming with piped in music and reeking of the nondescript, sterile...smell of the technologically functioning world.[38]

In his poem 'Dirge for the City of Miami,' Merton laments the materialism, selfishness and greed associated with life in such an urban environment. According to Merton, such city experience can

deaden people's spirits and sensibilities. To remedy this situation, Merton proposes the development of an urban renaissance of Christian humanism.

'In the Ruins of New York,' a section of Merton's longer poem, 'Figures for an Apocalypse', he describes New York as a city "that dressed herself in paper money. / She lived four hundred years/ With nickels running in her veins."[39] In this poem, out of the eventual ruins of this city, Merton describes nature as rising up to create a spiritual renaissance:

> Tomorrow and the day after/ Grasses and flowers will grow/
> Upon the bosom of Manhattan.../There shall be dove's nests
> And hives of bees/In the cliffs of the ancient apartments. /
> And birds shall sing in the sunny hawthorns/
> Where was once Park Ave. / And where Grand Central was,
> shall be a little hill/ Clustered with sweet, dark pine. /
> Will there be some farmer, think you, Clearing a place in the woods, /
> Planting an acre of bannering corn/ On the heights above Harlem forest?[40]

Merton paints a picture of a renewed New York City wherein humans experience peace and harmony in an Eden-like way.

Merton's 'Aubade - Harlem' describes some of Harlem's poor persons "trapped in desperation and abandoned by the more affluent, but perhaps equally hopeless, residents of their city."[41] Anguish, sorrow, and woe characterize life in Harlem where "Daylight has driven iron spikes/ Into the flesh of Jesus' hands and feet: Four flowers of blood have nailed Him to the walls..."[42] In a dehumanized Harlem, Christ is once again crucified.

Merton's 'Aubade - The City' describes urban life as alienation from meaningful human existence.[43] Inside buildings, people isolated from the natural world are spiritually numb, restless, and discontent. They opt for the death of disconnection from God, others, nature, and themselves.

City imagery is also found in Merton's 'The Tower of Babel,' a prose-poem morality play. In this work, erecting the tower represents humankind's efforts to build a city of ambition. The tower symbolizes human pride and worship of technology. In the last section of this poem, Merton outlines his vision of building an-

other kind of city, God's city, the city of love, which he contends is the true human vocation.

> Not the wisdom of men shall build this city, nor their machines, not their power. But the great city shall be built without hands, without labor, without money, and without plans. It will be a perfect city, built on eternal foundations and it shall stand forever because it is built by the thought and the silence and the wisdom and the power of God.[44]

In *The Geography of Lograire*, Merton employs city-emptiness imagery to depict the tyranny of Westerners' superimposition of their culture on the Mayan, Eskimo, Melanesian, and Native American peoples of the world. In the Cargo cults utilized in this poem, non-Westerners seek material goods not simply because they need them but because they have internalized the belief that such objects "will establish them as equal to the white man and give them an identity as respectable as his."[45] In the following poignant way in *The Geography of Lograire*, Merton describes the sterility of the city type commodity culture he believes the Western world has substituted for religious faith: "Please send tees, shutter, flaxens, needles, tocsins, suds, pumps, raglans, botanicals, turquoise acetate, tire valves, champagne crepe pantshifts. ... Send. Send. Send.... Send us all the whiskey."[46] In other words, seek to accumulate more and more possessions, regardless of need. That is the name of the Western game!

In essence, Merton's *The Geography of Lograire* communicates the profound moral truth that "in the process of defeating primitive peoples, toppling their gods and destroying their cultures,"[47] Westerners have lost their own belief in God, exhausted their culture, and defeated themselves. Instead of choosing to collaborate in constructing the city of God, they have opted to re-build the Tower of Babel.

Incarnation

As already mentioned in this essay, for Merton the Incarnation is the self-emptying of God. God became human so that, in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, human beings could become one in Christ. A number of Merton's poems treat the enfleshment of the eternal Logos.

In 'The Annunciation', Merton's speaker reflects: "Deeper than any nerve/ He enters flesh and bone/ Planting His truth, He puts

our substance on. / Air, earth and rain/ Rework the frame that fire has ruined. / What was dead is waiting for His Flame. / Sparks of His Spirit spend their seeds, and hide/ To grow like irises, born before summertime."[48] In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Incarnated Logos sets the world afire with love.

In 'The Quickening of St. John the Baptist,' the Virgin Mary, who has consented to God's desire to incarnate Godself in her flesh through the power of the Spirit, visits her cousin Elizabeth to share this news. In the following way, Merton addresses the yet unborn John in Elizabeth's womb: "Sing in your cell, small anchorite! / ...What secret syllable/ Woke your young faith to the mad truth/ That an unborn baby could be washed in the Spirit of God? /Oh burning joy!"[49] Truth finds a home in John who will announce, in future days, the arrival of the Messiah, the long awaited One, the incarnated Logos who is Truth: Jesus of Nazareth.

In 'Carol', Merton heralds the birth of Jesus with these words: "God's glory, now, is kindled gentler than low candlelight/ Under the rafters of a barn: / Eternal Peace is sleeping in the hay, / And Wisdom's born in secret in a straw-roofed stable."[50] The self-emptying Logos makes entry into the world in a lowly stable. In 'A Christmas Card', Merton describes the visitation of shepherds to the stable: "And one by one the shepherds, with their snowy feet, / Stamp and shake out their hats upon the stable dirt, / And one by one kneel down to look upon their Life."[51] Jesus, the incarnated One who is Life, reveals the nature of God whose triune life is abundant love.

Merton's prose poem 'Hagia Sophia' sheds still further light on Jesus as self-emptying Love. In this poem, the Virgin Mary "shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia"[52] by crowning the incarnated One, "not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory; the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty."[53] The following final lines of 'Hagia Sophia' poignantly portray the kenotic nature of the incarnation:

> A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.[54]

Here, Jesus' humble birth manifests His true identity as self-emptying Divinity.

Merton's Photography

Photography, like poetry, is a medium Merton often employed to render his spiritual vision. During the final years of Merton's life, it was John Howard Griffin who introduced his friend to the art of photography. Under Griffin's guidance, Merton honed his photographic skills.

Griffin reflected that Merton possessed a passion for photography and that this "passion was simply for another means for expressing his vision; the challenge to capture on film something of the solitude and silence and essence that preoccupied him."[55] During one of his visits with Griffin, Merton handled his friend's Alpa camera "as though it were a precious jewel."[56] When Griffin asked Merton if he would like to use the Alpa, Merton responded affirmatively. Griffin noted: "It was like placing a concert grand piano at the disposal of a gifted musician who had never played on anything but an upright."[57]

From 1964-68, Merton engaged in creative photography. During these years, he practiced the Zen principle of celebrating the world as it is by contemplating it through his camera lens. Merton's photos depict the spiritual core of whatever he filmed. In each photo, Merton captures a moment, as it will never be experienced again. Merton's photos represent his embrace of the immediate, of the here and now of the everyday world of the concrete. Merton's photos bespeak the truth that reality glorifies God by simply being what it is.

The range of what caught Merton's attention included the "movement of wheat in the wind, the textures of snow, paint-spattered cans, stones, crocuses blossoming through the weeds or... the woods in all their hours, from the first fog of morning through the noon-day stillness to evening quiet."[58]

Merton photographed with a "sense of childlike wonderment,"[59] wherein he sought to capture visually the sacredness of objects such as wooden stools, baskets, rocks, roots, chairs, rivers, oceans, statues of Buddhas and human faces and figures. Most of all, Merton desired to make manifest the inner essence of whatever he photographed. He wanted his photos to be self-revelatory, i.e., to express their object's hidden wholeness.

Merton's photographs testify to his keen observance of nature and his communion with reality beyond words and concepts. His photos are characteristically simple. In them, he juxtaposes oppo-

sites such as dark and light and black and white. This enables viewers to experience the meaning of fullness in emptiness and emptiness in fullness.

Figure 1 [60]

In order to enter more deeply into the spiritual vision evident in Merton's photography, let us now examine, in some detail, a sampling of them. In Figure 1, Merton draws the viewer into the solitude and silence of this space. One's eyes linger as one gazes at the natural beauty of a thicket of dark trees in vertical position in the background set against the lightness of the sky shining through the trees and a sea of winter snow in the middle and foreground of the photo. The focal point is a tree branch that stretches across the entire height, length, and width of the photo. Small leafy objects that appear on various parts of the branch serve as a poignant reminder that, though the branch seems dead, life past and present made it what it is and the future pulses in it.

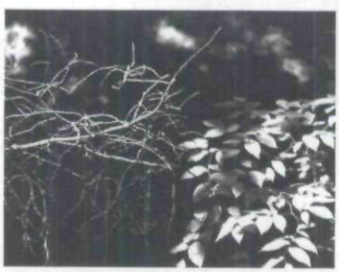

Figure 2

Merton's Figure 2 captures beauty in the twisted, complex pattern of the branches on the left juxtaposed to the rounded, cascading leaves on the right. A play of light and shadow on both the branches and the leaves accentuates the darkness of the background in the photo. In this figure, life and death coincide; they

exist harmoniously. Thus, this photo invites the viewer to reflect upon the paschal mystery at work in the world.

Figure 3

Figure 3 is Merton's photo of four water lilies in full, radiant bloom amidst a sea of leaves. Light almost translucent shines on the flowers. A single flower found in the lower left serves to balance the trinity of flowers in the center of the photo. Light and shadow appear in the flowers, whose multiple petals stand upright, as if at attention. The leaves are a kind of abstract configuration of grays and black that contrasts dramatically with the sheer whiteness of the flowers that signals a resurrection motif: the ever-abiding promise of new life. Furthermore, as the Zen principle indicates and Merton affirms, these flowers and their leaves are simply being what they are - beautiful examples of God's abundant creation.

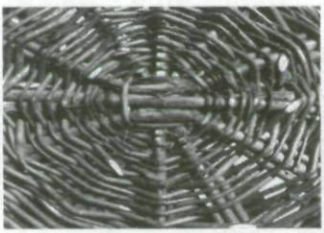

Figure 4

Merton's figure 4 focuses on the concentric circles of a woven, wooden basket. There is real wholeness found in the circularity of this basket, whose cross beams are like spokes in a wheel. The viewer of this photo is drawn inward to its center. From there, the eyes of the beholder move outward to experience circle upon circle upon circle that gives the impression of infinity. Thus, the circularity of this woven basket serves as a reminder of God's being without beginning or end.

Figure 5

In Figure 5, Merton depicts the embrace of two light, leafless trees by the branches and trunk of a single darker tree. The lighter trees sport a somewhat smooth bark, whereas a scale like bark covers the darker tree. Accentuating the stability of seemingly barren trees, this photo points to nature's stark beauty. The focal point of this photo is the two lighter trees with shadows and light dancing across their lower trunks. In this skeletal fall/winter scene, the trees point heavenward as darkness and light stand together. This seems to be a clarion call to the viewer to embrace both the light and dark dimensions of his or her life. The photo reminds one of Jesus' command to allow wheat and weeds to grow up together. Weeds and wheat symbolize the sin/grace, dark/light dialectic at work in individuals' lives. In the final analysis, the wheat of life will be harvested and the weeds will cease to exist.

Figure 6

Merton's Figure 6 highlights the pristine beauty of a smiling, little girl with dark, bushy hair who is bundled up in clothing of simple folds. In her fully exposed, small left hand, the girl holds onto a circular object, while her almost completely covered right hand

touches the edge of a sheet of metal, which she uses to balance herself in order to move forward. The vitality and softness of the girl contrast sharply with the inert, hard corrugated sheet metal and cracked concrete in the photo. The simple lines of the dark sheet metal stand out against the lightness of the concrete. To the right of the girl is a simple bowl (half-seen) that casts a large shadow on the concrete. Behind the girls stands an adult dressed in dark clothing. This person, whose face is invisible in the photo, seems to be watching over the movements of the girl. The adult figure and the little girl might be compared to God and each child of God. God, the giver and guardian of life, delights in the innocence and inquisitiveness of each little one.

Figure 7

Figure 7, a photo that Merton took in Polonnaruwa, highlights the serenity of the great silence of the Buddha. In the foreground of the photo is the massive, smooth line stone carving of the Buddha in a reclining position. The Buddha's head rests on stone. His left arm is positioned parallel to the length of his body. The ringlets of the Buddha's hair are a sea of small curls. His nose is slender and his eyes are closed. The Buddha's being exudes enlightenment and unending peace. The viewer of this photo has a sense of being in the eternal now.

Merton and Adams: Zen-type Photographers

Ansel Adams is considered one of the most admired American photographers of the twentieth century. He was a genius with the camera. His career as a photographer lasted seventy years during which time he produced more than 40,000 negatives, 10,000 fine prints, and 500 international exhibitions.

In 1980, at the ceremony during which President Carter presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Adams, the President declared:

> At one with the American landscape, and renowned for the patient skill and timeless beauty of his work, photographer Ansel Adams has been visionary in his efforts to preserve his country's wild and scenic areas, both on film and on earth. Drawn to the beauty of nature's monuments, he is regarded by environmentalists as a monument himself, and by photographers as a national institution. It is through his foresight and fortitude that so much of America has been saved for future Americans.[61]

Ansel Adams was basically a self-taught photographer. This was also the case with Merton, although (as previously noted) Merton's friend, John H. Griffin, oriented him to the basics of photography. Though Adams and Merton took some color photographs, both men also specialized in black and white photography.

During his lifetime, Adams published many books featuring his photography. Additionally, some of his writings deal with the Zone System[62] that he developed to enhance the craft of photography. Publications treating Merton's photography appeared only after his death. At the School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, Adams established the first academic department for the teaching of photography. He also became a lecturer in creative photography.

Merton never lectured on photography yet he and Adams can be characterized as Zen-type photographers. Both men were awake to the Zen insight that there is a spiritual core in all that exists. For both Adams and Merton, photography served as a vehicle for expressing the thoughts and emotions of the human soul. Regarding this, Adams wrote: "A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed."[63] Merton and Adams agreed on the necessity of silence and solitude for the appreciation of the sacred *vis a vis* the medium of photography.

Unlike Merton, Adams had an opportunity to photograph a wide range of the American landscape, including vistas in the states of California, Alaska, Arizona, New Mexico, Tennessee, Maine, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Washington. After photographing in the American Sierra High Country, Adams reflected:

> I saw more clearly than I have ever seen before or since the minute detail of the grasses, the clusters of sand shifting in the wind, the small flotsam of the forest, the motion of the high clouds streaming above the peaks. There are no words to convey the moods of these moments.[64]

Mountains, valleys and streams were fountains of life for Adams who had a keen sense of the redemptive beauty of the wilderness. Regarding his many American wilderness pilgrimages, Ansel wrote: "Sometimes I think I do get to places just when God's ready to have somebody click the shutter."[65] National parks and monuments and Native American people and lands interested Adams. He photographed Navajos as figures who belonged, in the most profound way, to the landscape.[66]

Adams' photographs include clusters of tall aspens, cascades of water in Yosemite Valley, rounded mountains in the Smokies, desert sands and brush, saguaro cactus, sprawling oak trees, rocks and limpets, hot springs in Yellowstone National Park, grounded icebergs in Alaska, wood grains, a moonrise in New Mexico, a Mormon temple, and cypress in the fog.

Unlike Adams, Merton did not often travel far to engage in his creative photography, though in his final year of life he journeyed to New Mexico, California, Alaska, and the Far East and, in these places, photographed mountains, the ocean, Native Americans, and Buddha statues. Like Adams, Merton had a great love of barns, trees, roots and rocks. Each one of these geniuses with the camera captured the beauty of these created objects in exquisite photographs marked by masterful attention to detail.

Photographing nature led both Merton and Adams to God. Merton wrote: "But the great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints. There is no other like it. It is alone in its character; nothing in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. And that is its sanctity."[67] Merton reiterated this message about the sacredness of nature when he penned the following thoughts from his hermitage:

> Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament.... The wind comes through the trees and you breathe it. ... One might say I had decided to marry the silence of the forest.... 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.[68]

Echoing Merton's euphoria with nature, Ansel Adams captured his experience of the Grand Canyon in America's Southwest in the following way: "It is all very beautiful and magical here - a quality which cannot be described. You have to live it and breathe it, let the sun bake it into you."[69]

In essence, Merton and Adams are Zen-type photographers whose black and white images provide a visual feast reflective of these artists' awake-ness to reality. On film, both men caught some of their moments of spiritual enlightenment. For these kindred spirits, photography served as a medium to communicate to others the grandeur of the jewel that is creation.

Photography provided a way for both Thomas Merton and Ansel Adams to search for and find the "hidden wholeness" of reality that testifies to the One who is the Sacred: God. Perhaps Alfred Stieglitz's comment about Adams sums some of this up best: "But it's good for me to know that there is Ansel Adams loose somewhere in this world of ours...."[70] The same can be said of Merton. How wonderful it is that both men sojourned this earth for some of their years with a camera in their creative hands.

Conclusion

This study has explored various facets of Thomas Merton's spiritual vision through reflections on some of his poetry, his photography in general, and a few of his photos in particular. It has demonstrated that, for Merton, each of these mediums served as a vehicle for and expression of his quest for God. Thomas Merton, the poet and Zen-type photographer, has gifted the human community with the jewels of his poems and black and white photographs.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, 'Art and Spirituality', in Thomas P. McDonnell (ed.), *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Double Day Image Books, 1996), pp. 386-415 (386).

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 269.

3. Thomas Merton, 'Reality, Art, Prayer,' *The Commonweal* LXI. 25(March 25, 1955), pp. 658-59.

4. See Thomas Merton, 'Notes on Sacred and Profane Art', *Jubilee* 4. 7(November 1956), pp. 25-32 (25).

5. See Thomas Merton, 'Message to Poets', in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 161.

6. Thomas Merton, 'Answers on Art and Freedom', in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 173.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), pp. 389-90.

8. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 304.

9. Lynn Szabo, 'The Sound of Sheer Silence: A Study in the Poetics of Thomas Merton', *The Merton Annual* 13(2000), pp. 208-22 (210).

10. See Gloria K. Lewis, 'Thomas Merton: Strategies of a Master Teacher of Poetry', *The Merton Seasonal* 22.3(Autumn 1977), pp. 17-20 (17).

11. Thomas Merton, Tape #54:6, 'Analysis of a Poem', 12.5.64, at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.

12. Thomas Merton, 'Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal', *The Commonweal* LXIX.4 (October 24, 1958), pp. 87-92 (89).

13. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (eds. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin; New York: New Directions, 1974), pp. 233-34.

14. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 669.

15. See Robert Waldron, 'Merton Bells: A Clarion Call to Wholeness', *The Merton Seasonal* 18.1(Winter, 1993), pp. 25-28 (26).

16. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 651.

17. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 651.

18. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 421.

19. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 421.

20. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 452.

21. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 452.

22. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 240.

23. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 280.

24. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (eds. Naomi B. Stone and Patrick Hart; New York: Harcourt and Brace and Co, 1985), p. 20.

25. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 340-41.

26. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 337-38.

27. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 47.

28. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), pp. 167-68.

29. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: New Directions, 1986), p. 215.

30. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 216.

31. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 280.

32. Patrick Hart, *Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories* (Bardstown, Ky.: Necessity, 1986), unpaged.

33. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), p. 330.

34. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 96.

35. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 96.

36. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 289-90.

37. Therese Lentfoehr, 'Social Concern in the Poetry of Thomas Merton', in Gerald S. Twomey (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 111-37 (114).

38. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 257.

39. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 144.

40. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 144-45.

41. Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Thomas Merton's Wake-Up Calls: Aubades and Monastic Dawn Poems from A *Man in the Divided Sea*', *The Merton Annual* 12 (1999), pp. 129-63 (131).

42. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 82.

43. O'Connell, 'Thomas Merton's Wake-Up Calls', p. 131.

44. Footnote 45 in Therese Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979) p. 96.

45. Thomas Merton, 'Arts and Letters', *Sewanee Review* 81(1973), p. 164.

46. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969), pp. 50-51.

47. Merton, 'Arts and Letters', p. 164.

48. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 284.

49. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 200.

50. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 89.

51. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 185.

52. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 369.

53. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 370.

54. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 371.

55. John Howard Griffin, 'Les grandes amities', *Continuum* 7(Summer 1969), pp. 286-94 (291).

56. Griffin, 'Les grandes amities', p. 291.

57. Griffin, 'Les grandes amities', p. 291.

58. Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Dunwoody, Ga.: Norman S. Berg Publisher, 1977), p. 49.

59. Deba Patnaik, *Geography of Holiness: The Photography of Thomas Merton* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980), p. ix.

60. The photos in this essay are used with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust. The Thomas Merton Center (Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.) catalogue numbers of these photos are as follows:

Figure 1: Photo 1171; Figure 2: Photo 56; Figure 3: Photo 0147; Figure 4: Photo 1227; Figure 5: Photo 0106; Figure 6: Photo 1007; Figure 7: Photo 1123.

61. Quoted in Basil Cannon, *Ansel Adams* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999), pp. 54-55.

62. This system divides the range of light into eleven different zones from total black to pure white, which a photographer can utilize to determine and create different tones in a final print.

63. Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adam's Guide: Basic Techniques of Photography* (ed. John P. Schaefer; Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1992), p. 3.

64. Quoted in Robert Turnage, 'Ansel Adams: The Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement', *The Living Wilderness*, 43.148(March 1980), pp. 4-31 (5).

65. Quoted in Erich Peter Nash (ed.), *Ansel Adams: The Spirit in Wild Places* (New York: Todtri Book Publishers, 1995), p. 13.

66. Nash, *Ansel Adams: The Spirit in Wild Places*, p. 35.

67. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949), pp. 25-26.

68. Thomas Merton, 'Day of a Stranger', *The Hudson Review* 20.2 (Summer 1967), pp. 211-18 (214-16).

69. Ansel Adams, 'Letter to Alfred Stieglitz, Ghost Ranch, Aliquiu, New Mexico, Sept. 21, 1937', in Andrea S. Stillman (ed.), *Ansel Adams: The Grand Canyon and the Southwest* (Boston, Ma.: Little Brown and Co., 2000), p. 107.

70. Quoted in Nash, *Ansel Adams: The Spirit in Wild Places*, p. 670.