

A SHY WILD DEER: The "True Self" in Thomas Merton's Poetry

by **George Kilcourse**

Every Thomas Merton devotee holds embedded in memory the fleeting glimpse (our last glance) of Thomas Merton at Bangkok. With a schoolboy's shyness he shrugged his shoulders, smiled broadly, and hid playfully behind his handful of text and books as Dutch television cameras reeled these final, unforgettable black-and-white frames. Merton self-consciously "mugged" for the cameras! A double irony resides in this parting cameo. First, the irony that the twentieth century's most celebrated contemplative hermit would submit to the media's "glass eye." Yet the playful personality is unmistakably revealed in this final footage. Second, the irony that this poet and spiritual writer, who sought solitude but let the world eavesdrop on the intimate self-revelation of his published journals, had any fibers of shyness in his constitution. Merton was a man who ostensibly avoided publicity, a man who sought the margins of society for his environs, but who offered the world the intimacy of his voluminous writing.

This seeming ambiguity of Merton's life — "celebrity" or "solitary"? — focuses the very spiritual enigma he explored in a variety of literary efforts: prose, poetry, journals and letters. At the center of his spirituality is the dialectic of the "true self" vs. "false self" dilemma. Much of the power of Merton's appeal to readers revolves around his autobiographical wrestling with the superficiality of an external persona, a seductive "false self"

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that paralyzes the authentic power of love and communion. The "true self" is easily chased into hiding or appears wearing a disguise. Merton frequently referred to his own quarrel with the "shadow" of the celebrity-seeking writer who followed him into the monastery. For himself and for every person, however, Merton developed a spirituality of the "true self," an inner person whose freedom was born in solitude and the contemplative experience of God's unconditional love, mercy, and grace at the heart of reality. Merton cultivated the capacity for unity and global dialogue among "true selves" once a person had experienced this transforming moment. This is the Thomas Merton we encounter in his *unself-conscious* spiritual classics. Anne Carr's masterful *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*¹ has systematically and critically traced the development and maturity of this theme in eight of the monk's major classics, including one journal, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.² Her careful work celebrates the creativity of the "true self" as "a desperately needed antidote to the poisons in contemporary life."

Merton's own creativity speaks through a quarter century's prose poems and poetic enterprises. Anthony Padovano has ventured the most sustained claim that Merton was by temperament the poet.³ He further suggests that his prose too often flounders and bogs down into turgid efforts like the contorted early study, *The Ascent to Truth*.⁴ The poet's narrative and metaphoric processes were more native to the symbolic-minded Merton.

Merton's confidence in the poet's metaphors as a unique way of knowing anchors even his essays and lengthier collections of articles that sometimes arbitrarily (and hastily) were collected and dubbed "books."⁵ One revealing example of the unique knowledge experienced through the poet's metaphors occurs in the very opening paragraphs of the much revised, unfinished important work, *The Inner Experience*. Merton opens his notes on contemplation with a familiar litany of warnings to recognize the seductions of the illusory and fictitious "I." The alienated or "false self"

1. Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966).

3. Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982), p. 136.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951).

5. See Merton's 1938 review of John Crowe Ransom's *The World's Body* in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 462-463. He speaks there of poetry as "a kind of knowledge, and a knowledge that cannot be gained by any other means."

masks a deeper, hidden, interior "I." Our Promethean false self, he cautioned, can wrongly ("slyly") manipulate the "true self" by making spiritual life into another "project" or "accomplishment." Merton's riveting metaphor wonderfully ambushes this compulsive false self.

The inner self is precisely that self which cannot be tricked or manipulated by anyone, even by the devil. He is like a very wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand, and comes out only when all is perfectly peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone. He cannot be lured by anyone or anything, because he responds to no lure except that of the divine freedom.⁶

It is this "true self" and the assaults on it by contemporary society which Merton develops throughout his spirituality. He prescribes no technique, but speaks in terms of "awakening" and "discovery" of the inner person beneath our superficial pursuits.

Merton's use of the "shy wild animal" metaphor captures my own imagination when I juxtapose it with his 1964-1965 journals, *A Vow of Conversation*. There he ten times narrates or alludes to the experiences of observing, sighting, and encountering the shy wild deer near and around the hermitage on the rising knoll at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The first entry records an especially dramatic episode:

Yesterday a small deer fell into the reservoir by the new waterworks and thrashed around trying to climb out. But the concrete wall was not negotiable. I was afraid it might drown, but it squeezed through the narrow joists of the footbridge and to the other end, where there was a foothold, and trotted off across the road into the woods, looking beat and confused.⁷

The descriptive details and emotional bearing of the narrated experience ("I was afraid") exemplify Merton's powers as a writer. What fascinates a close reader, however, is the recurring mention of the deer as Merton begins to spend more and more time at the hermitage in late 1964, and during 1965 before he took up permanent residence on August 20. In late December 1964, he recorded a frozen, moonlit morning walk down to the monastery, "with the hard diamond leaves crackling under my feet, a deer sprang up on the deep bushes of the hollow, perhaps two" (VOC, pp. 114-115). The encounters continued on the feast of the Epiphany 1965 with the description of "A lovely moment that stretched into ten minutes or more" as monk and deer "stood looking at me and I at them" in the evening light. "They did not run . . . but eventually they walked quietly away

6. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983), pp. 3-5.

7. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 90. Hereafter referred to in the text as VOC.

into the tall grasses and bushes, and, for all I know, they slept there." At this point he numbered as many as ten deer (VOC, p. 130). By mid-March the deer approached the hermitage porch, allowing him to walk "in the dim dusk and moonlight" only twenty feet away. "They remained peacefully, quietly, until finally I began moving about. Then they lifted up the white flag of their tails and started off in a wonderful, silent bounding flight," only to stop a hundred yards away (VOC, p. 162). A week later he discovered a dozen places where the deer had been sleeping in the thick bushes only thirty or forty yards from his own bed, exclaiming, "They are my nearest dormitory neighbors . . . How wonderful" (VOC, p. 165). We could celebrate these narratives, recall *The Inner Experience* metaphor of "a shy wild animal," and relax complacently in the monk's compassion and charm.

But the meaning of this symbol of the deer can be further teased out. To do so will necessitate an excursion into the 1000+ pages of the Merton poetry canon. For the creativity evidenced in his poetry's best efforts proves integral to Merton's spirituality. And I suggest that a constellation of poems and images, symbols, and metaphors connected with the best prose poems of Merton can initiate readers far more effectively than his prose to the "true self's" awakening and discovery of our own spirituality.⁸

Buried in the "Uncollected Poems" selections you will find a poetic reworking of the first deer incident, the episode of the deer's struggle in the reservoir and retreat to the woods from *A Vow of Conversation*. "Merlin and the Deer" speaks for itself, but I will situate the experience of this poem within Merton's "false self" - "true self" dialectic. The poem opens:

After thrashing in the water of the reservoir
The deer swims beautifully
And so escapes
Limping across the country road into the little cedars.

Followed by Merlin's eye
Bewitched, a simple spirit
Merlin awakes
He becomes a gentle savage
Dressed in leaves
He hums alone in the glade
Says only a few phrases to himself
Or a psalm to his companion
Light in the wood

8. George Kilcourse, "Personifications of the True Self in Thomas Merton's Poetry," *Cistercian Studies* 14 (1989), pp. 144-153. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Personifications." In this essay I analyze the poems "Elegy for the Monastery Barn" and "Elegy for a Trappist" as well as two Macarius poems along the lines of the "true self" vs. "false self" dialectic. A more comprehensive analysis of this interpretive key in a variety of poems is offered in George Kilcourse, "The Paradise Ear: Thomas Merton, Poet," *The Kenyon Review* 7 (1987), pp. 98-121. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Paradise Ear."

The poet interrupts to consider the intruding reality of hunters, who can kill both doe and deer "in and out of season." He constructs a parallel threat with:

And messengers also
Come to bring him back
To hours and offices of men

The poet returns to the trauma of the deer:

But he sees again
The curved and graceful deer
Fighting in the water
And then leaving

So he pulls out
Of all that icy water himself
And leaves the people

"Il revient a ses forets
Et cette fois pour toujours."

Now caught in many spells
Willing prisoners of trees and rain
And magic blossoms
The invisible people

Visit his jail
With forest stories
Tales without sound
And without conclusion
Clear fires without smoke
Fumbled prophecies
And Celtic fortunes.⁹

There are obvious baptismal symbols in the poem: the pool of water, the "light in the wood" and "Clear fires without smoke," all suggesting the imagery of the Easter Vigil. The images of threatened chaos and death, and the "awakening" of the persona of Merlin — a fable-name of the magician, remarkably and fancifully resembling Merton's own name! — sustain this baptismal motif. His metamorphosis ("He becomes a gentle savage") suggests a new innocence. He leaves the "icy water" and the people for a forest where he has been before ("And this time forever"). The time of the writing of this poem would coincide with Merton's 1964-1965 transition to fulltime life at the hermitage. The irony of his status as "willing prisoner of trees and rain" situates the poet's decision for freedom in the forest where he is "caught in many spells" of contemplative prayer and "invisible" visitors.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 736-737. Hereafter referred to in the text as CP.

There is subtle humor in exchanging a monastic cell for this ironic forest "jail." For all the preoccupation with Merton the autobiographer, it intrigues us to realize the neglect of such important poems which are a barometer of his quest to articulate a new consciousness. I am reminded of John Updike's recent observation in his memoirs: "A writer's self-consciousness, for which he is much scorned, is really a mode of interestedness, that inevitably turns outward."¹⁰

Earlier in 1964 Merton had recorded in his journal some enthused reflections on Bultmann's essay. "He has made clear to me," Merton writes, "the full limitations of all my early work, which is too naive, insufficient except *in what concerns my own experience*" (emphasis added). Merton seizes upon Bultmann's quotation: "Man comes in his present situation as in some way under constraint, so that real freedom can only be received as a gift." His sustained spirituality of the "true self" speaks directly to the point. "The dread of being oneself is the great obstacle of freedom," he surmises, "for freedom equals being oneself and acting accordingly." The entry is dated January 6, Epiphany — an apt feast for his starkly contrasting the "safety" of his own and society's past ("the familiar constraint") with the "freedom to respond to the new gift of grace in Christ" (VOC, p. 6). Epiphany is the feast of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the event of the fullness of salvation for all people. The freedom of *all* human persons to recognize and to respond to this mystery ("equals being oneself and acting accordingly") would become ever more critical in Merton's own more inclusive christological reflections, particularly in the hermitage years and the Asian journey.

Merton undoubtedly experienced the vocation of hermit in solitude as such an exercise of transcendental freedom. The identity of his "true self," indeed his salvation, was engaged in this "serious decision," as he described it: "no longer a question of desire but of decision."

I am not too sure just where the encounter [with the world] is except that my heart tells me that in this question of the solitary life there is for me a special truth to be embraced. A truth which is not capable of fully logical explanation. A truth which is not rooted in my own nature or in my own biography, but is something deeper and something that may also cut clean through the whole network of my own recent works, ideas, writing, experience and so forth
(VOC, p. 88)

The ultimate intention of this essay is to re-orient readers to what I identify as an overarching constellation of Merton poems which can be

10. John Updike, *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988).

experienced as epiphanies of the "true self" in Merton's spirituality. For a decade we have navigated with George Woodcock's compass leading us to either "poetry of the choir" or "poetry of the desert."¹¹ This is useful to a point, but like all dichotomies it can force misleading or labored readings. The romanticized Gethsemani poems of the earlier Merton persona, the "poetry of the choir," betray a *fuga mundi* world-denying mentality which Merton later disowned. Likewise, the prophet persona's lean and purgative "poetry of the desert" carried an apocalyptic note, too often unrelieved by the broader envelope of eschatological hope in the "hidden wholeness" of Merton. I would propose a third category which transcends each of these poles by a dialectical engagement: the "poetry of the forest" claims *both* a paradisaical consciousness reminiscent of the best "poetry of the choir" and the austere, ironic absences reminiscent of the best "poetry of the desert" ("Paradise Ear," pp. 109-114). Woodcock's analyses too tightly segregate these two categories.

The proviso that recommends this "poetry of the forest" category is a reminder that the forest of "trees and rain" spans Merton's entire Gethsemani career.¹² Nowhere is this more evident than in the airy frontispiece of his 1946-1952 journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, where Merton is photographically portrayed walking deeper into the woods, his back turned to the reader.¹³ The portrait should not be misinterpreted as flight, but as the invitation of Merton's "simple spirit" ("true self") that "escapes" only in the sense of finding authentic new life in the forest, like the "limping deer." A decade before the hermitage was built, Merton had been named the monastery's "fire watcher" at the Vineyard Knob tower. During his years as Novice Master (1955-1965) he frequently took the young monks to the woods for tree plantings in his forester's role. Merton's "poetry of the forest," therefore, transcends Woodcock's categories, both the cloister and the desert. Its solitude nurtures the ecology of the "true self," the "shy wild deer," Merlin's voice in the environs and habitat of glade and rain.

Let me suggest some vectors for the pursuit of this "poetry of the forest." First, it presupposes a healthy critical reading of the poems. And,

11. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978). A very impressive study of the literary Merton is Victor A. Kramer's *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1987) with its overview of more recent scholarly studies appraising Merton as poet.

12. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), pp. 228ff; 286ff, where Mott records Merton's attraction to the forest solitude, eventually being named the abbey's forester. In the early (1947) "Poem in the Rain and the Sun" (CP, pp. 741-742), he wrote: "Owning the view in the air of a hermit's weather . . ."

13. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953).

yes, this means Merton scholars must resist the kind of commentary that reduces the poems to paraphrase. It demands a careful exegesis, not the eisegesis that "geiger-counters" through the poetry with preconceived themes or conclusions. (For example, this tactic finds expression in those who excerpt the lines, "where the radiograms of hymnody/ Get lost in the fan" as a premonition of Merton's death (*CP*, p. 418); or those who might even find Merton's mention of "Sunday silence" as a prophetic utterance about the 1989 Kentucky Derby winner! (*VOC*, p. 79.). The poetry must be experienced on its own terms as poetry in terms of the metaphors, images, and symbolic elements ("Paradise Ear," pp. 99-101). Merton hints at the convergence of poetic and contemplative identity when he complains about the "cliche of 'meaningful' experience."

"Experience" is thought to be made "meaningful" by being referred to something else — a system, or perhaps a report of someone else's experience — and therefore its quality is diminished. So the ambiguity of "meaningfulness" is exposed. When experience becomes "meaningful," it also, in some sense, becomes unreal or less real. To live always outside of experience as if it were the fulness of experience! This is one of the basic ambiguities of Western thought. (VOC, p. 159)

The real experience of Merton's "poetry of the forest" is the encounter within the "true self" — of the poet, of the creature(s) he encounters, of one's own person as awakened by the experience of the poem. It is an immediate and innocent ontological intuition *recreated* by the experience of the poem. In this sense, the poetic experience is more real than a merely sensory experience because it is *interpreted* (and thus meaningful) experience. It is again Merton's confidence in poetry's unique way of knowing.

Merton once commented on Rilke's poetry that the "inwardness" of his technique of "inseeing" (*Einsehen*) "implies identification, in which . . . the subject is aware of itself as having penetrated by poetic empathy into the heart of the object and being united with it."¹⁴ This is the Zen consciousness, a pure consciousness, in which subject-object categories dissolve. Merton's own sense of this experience is reported in a journal entry on December 9, 1964, where he realized, "I was happy!"

I said the strange word, "happiness," and realized that it was there not as an "it" or object, it simply was and I was that . . .

The only response is to go out from one's self with all that one is (which is nothing), and pour out that nothingness in gratitude that He [Christ] is who He is.

14. Thomas Merton, "The Zen Koan," *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), pp. 245-246.

All speech is impertinent. It destroys the simplicity of that nothingness before God
(VOC, p. 112)

Only this "true self" can be happy. Or celebrated in the "poetry of the forest." I have recently detailed examples of such poems, "Elegy for the Monastery Barn" and "Elegy for a Trappist," and the two Macarius poems ("Personifications," pp. 147-152). Elsewhere I have traced the paradise consciousness of the "true self" in poems as diverse as "Night-Flowering Cactus," "Song for Nobody," "O Sweet Irrational Worship," "Grace's House," the Aubade poems, "Dirge for a Town in France," and others ("The Paradise Ear," pp. 109-112). I would find the same epiphany of Merton's "true self" spirituality in "And the Children of Birmingham," "A Picture of Lee Ying," "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll," and the many other elegies our monk-poet has wrought. "Hagia Sophia" (even though Michael Mott has referred to it as a flawed poem), despite its very structure around the monastic choir's Liturgy of the Hours, proffers particular insights for the spirituality of the "true self."

One particularly overlooked source of this "poetry of the forest" is the 1985 collection, *Eighteen Poems*, which were occasioned by Merton's love for a nurse, "S." They are not only fine lyric and ironic poems, but extraordinary, late poems by which to measure his sense of the "true self." The selection "Louisville Airport: May 5, 1966" especially deserves our attention. The imagery and symbols of the "poetry of the forest" converge with Merton's confidence in his own experience.

We with the gentle liturgy
Of shy children have permitted God
To make again His first world
Here on the foolish grass
After the spring rain has dried
And all the loneliness

Is for a moment lost in this simple
Liturgy of shy children permitting God
To make again that love
Which is His alone

His alone and terribly obscure and rare
Love walks gently as a deer
To where we sit on this green grass
In the marvel of this day's going down
Celebrated only

By all the poets since the world began¹⁵

15. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985) [no pagination], lines 5-20..

Michael Mott's biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, carefully reviewed the monk's intimate journal accounts of Merton's abandoned love affair. Nonetheless, the recurrence of the imagery of "spring rain" and the "green grass" along with the imagery of "Love walks gently as a deer" mark this as an important poem in the poetry of the forest genre. In particular, feminist commentators on Merton will find warrant for new affirmations of the "true self" in this and other selections from *Eighteen Poems*. Merton's overt reference to "shy children" in an Edenic context works effectively with "all the loneliness/ is for a moment lost" in a love "terribly obscure and rare." He has tethered it all to the symbol of the deer, the docile and vulnerable creatures who frequent the pages of his later journal. It is a graceful rendering of the true self's desire.

The prose poem "Rain and the Rhinoceros" (and to a lesser degree *Day of a Stranger*) affords a unique reflection by the poet from the forest hermitage. Merton reads the sixth-century desert father, Philoxenos, and quotes: "One who is not alone has not discovered his identity." Such "individuals" experience the illusion of "collective existence," he laments, having "no more identity than an unborn child in the womb He is not yet conscious. He is alien to his own truth He has life but not identity." Merton celebrates the freedom of the "true self": "The discovery of this inner self," he says, "is an act and affirmation of solitude." Otherwise, to "live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive. Our capacities for joy, peace, and truth are never liberated" in the night rains of the Nelson County forest. Merton celebrates the "uselessness" of rain and its "wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech" because, he says, "Here I am not alien."¹⁶ The "true self" seeks fulfillment in relationship, a communion of persons for Merton. In this sense, the hermit becomes the most social of creatures. So he writes on Shrove Tuesday, 1965: "One thing the hermitage is making me see is that the true universe is my home and I am nothing if not part of it. Destruction of the self that seems to stand outside the universe. Get free from the illusion of solipsism" (*VOC*, p. 156).

Rain in the forest ("the murmur of water in the buckets") again found Merton immersed in poetry, lines from Lancelot Andrewes.

The heart is deceitful above all things.
The heart is deep and full of windings.
The old man is covered up in a thousand wrappings.

He described them as "sad words" whose truth was felt because of so much

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 10.

solitude. "I cut wood behind the house and enjoy the faint smell of hickory smoke from the chimney," he narrated, preparatory to focusing on his true self's struggle, "while I taste and see that I am deceitful and that most of my troubles are rooted in my own bitterness." Merton refused to despair. "The heart is deceitful and does not want this [to bear solitude's rigors]," he confessed, "but God is greater than my heart" (VOC, p. 107).

These riveting declarations became the matrix of Merton's "poetry of the forest." It is the same voice, a forest's "true self," that speaks in the best of Merton's poetry. In this sense we can experience his poems as icons of a presence, the presence of the "true self." The question from "Night-Flowering Cactus" teases every reader:

Have you seen it? Then though my mirth has
 quickly ended
 You will live forever in its echo:
 You will never be the same again.
 (ll. 26-28, CP, p. 351)

The concluding entry of *A Vow of Conversation* returns to the shy wild deer outside the hermitage windows. The poet who had, like the deer, "trotted off/ across the road into the woods, looking beat and confused," now expresses himself in a graceful gesture of the "true self":

Last evening, when the moon was rising, I saw the warm burning soft red of a doe in the field. It was still light enough, so I got the field glasses and watched her. Presently a stag came out of the woods and then I saw a second doe and then, briefly, a second stag. They were not afraid. They looked at me from time to time. I watched their beautiful running, their grazing . . .

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 *montu* or the "spirit" is shown in the running of the deer. The "deerness" 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 profound. The face of which is both in the deer and in myself. The stags are much darker than the does. They are mouse-gray, or rather a warm gray-brown, like flying squirrels. I could sense the softness of their brown coat and longed to touch them.
 (VOC, pp. 207-208)

This pastiche integrates Merton's spirituality of the "true self" in a fitting climax to the journals of his earliest hermitage days. Four particular elements recapitulate the disclosure of his authentic voice in what I have proposed as the "poetry of the forest":

(1) ". . . they were not afraid" — Throughout Merton's spirituality, the ability of persons to encounter one another is pre-conditioned by the

capacity to claim a self-possessed contemplative center. If, for him, fear is the root of alienation, greed, and war, then this absence of fear proffered new possibilities. The symbolic expression of this truth in the “shy wild deer” metaphor opened for Merton wider paths of global spirituality and inculturation. The “true self” again and again overcomes fear, especially any timidity about our deepest identity, to claim the “freedom [which] equals being oneself and acting accordingly” (VOC, p. 6).

(2) “. . . the ‘spirit’ is shown in the running of the deer” — What Merton identified as “deerness” eludes photography (or any superficial copying) and demands immediate experience. The unique ontological essence of a creature could only be revealed through things in their true identity. A long debt to Duns Scotus’ *haecceitas*, the “this-ness” of individual created realities, had come to Merton through the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (on whom he had attempted a doctoral dissertation at Columbia University). Merton transformed that existential insight about God’s Christ who “plays in ten thousand places”¹⁷ with a fidelity to his own experience and his readers’ experience when he ventured the event of each new poem. This element reinforces the first (“ . . . they were not afraid”) in a “sacred” moment, the primitive religious instinct of simultaneous fear-and-attraction in the presence of the holy.

(3) “*The deer reveals to me something essential . . . also about myself*” — The poet’s ability to see likenesses where comparisons might seem inappropriate gives rise to metaphors. But the ultimate purpose of such unique poetic knowledge is a self-knowledge by both artist and reader. Merton’s spirituality of the “true self” imitates (*mimesis*) this dynamic by creatively experiencing the deer’s profound simplicity. For Merton, this meant entering the “subject of the object” (in Rilke’s sense), or claiming more deeply his own true identity as a contemplative. Therefore, Merton became more aware of the presence of God by love.

(4) “*I could sense the softness of their brown coat and longed to touch them*” — The mystic’s contemplative experience does not end, as Merton himself cautioned, in a solipsistic bubble of individualism. The mysticism of the unifying vision seeks the reconciliation and harmony of persons and

17. “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame,” Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*; selected & edited by W. H. Gardner (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 51.

creation. In this light, the final line of the journal climaxes Merton's spirituality of the "true self" in a longing for touch, a symbolic fullness of encounter. The gesture signals mutual acceptance. It incarnates the presence of true selves, one to another.

In the innocent poem of "Merlin and the Deer" we have identified a matrix for an understanding of Thomas Merton's "poetry of the forest," wherein the monk offers the dynamics of a spirituality of the "true self." T. S. Eliot wrote of "the hint half guessed, the gift half understood."¹⁸ In the Merton canon, such are the poems, the "poetry of the forest, wherein we encounter Merton's "true self" and our own. To use his own phrase, Merton has left us in the mythos of these poems "another legacy, more delicate, more rare" ("Elegy for a Trappist," *CP*, p. 631). But how poignantly he touches and summons a response from our own deepest "true self" through these verbal icons. Merton's own "true self" found a voice in such a poetry of the forest:

He hums alone in the glade
Says only a few phrases to himself
Or a psalm to his companion
Light in the wood.

("Merlin and the Deer," ll. 10-13, *CP*, pp. 736-737)

18. T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," l. 44, *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1943). In the case of Eliot's line, the ultimate reference is christological ("... is incarnation"). I suggest that Merton's poetry of the forest ultimately yields a christology which will be foundational for an adequate appreciation of Merton's spirituality.