

“THAT I SHOULD DIE UNDER LESSER TREES”

Review of
Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968
 by Thomas Merton

---by **David D. Cooper**

Woods, Shore, Desert is a welcome addition to Thomas Merton's journal canon, splendidly edited, footnoted, and introduced by Joel Weishaus and competently packaged by the Museum of New Mexico Press. It frames in two weeks in May, 1968 when Merton, freely foot-loose for the first time in twenty-six years, set off from Gethsemani with his notebook and camera for the redwoods of Northern California and the buff rocks and midget pinon pines of Abiquiu, New Mexico.

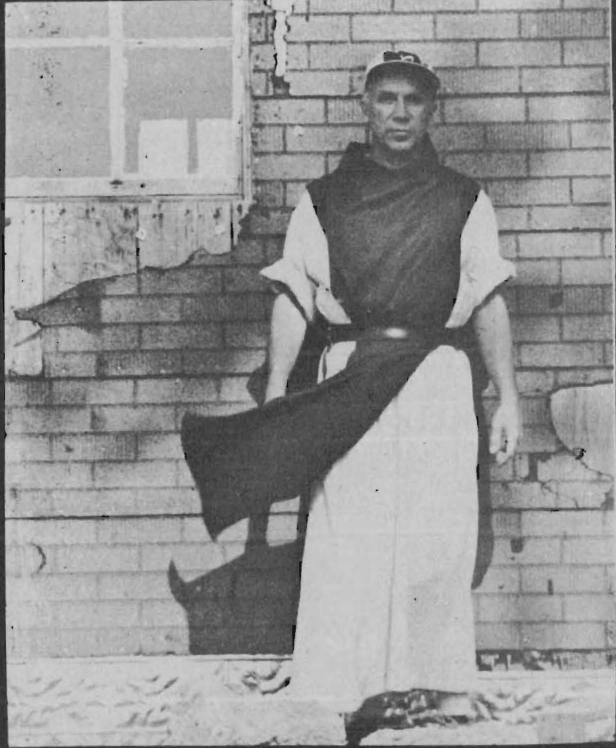
Merton's ostensible purpose for this trip west, as explained by Brother Patrick Hart in his Foreword, was to survey promising sites for a new hermitage. Inevitably, then, *Woods* may trigger excitement among Mertonians and journalists still in search of anecdotal evidence that Merton was bent on busting out of the monastery. I prefer to view this two week sequence more as a mental shake-down trip in anticipation of October of 1968 when Merton, "with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around," lifted off on his Asian journey. Of course plans for the Bangkok Conference hadn't yet been finalized in May. But still Merton was dreaming "every night of the west," noting on May 30th that "within a year, there will be some change." The excitement of the dream and the pull of destiny gives *Woods, Shore, Desert* the unmistakable feel of a Preface to Merton's final journey.

Woods also helps to back-fill slightly the only remaining chronological sequence as yet uncovered by Merton's published journal writings (excluding the unpublished *Vow of Conversation, 1964-mid-1965*): the period between May, 1965 (*Day of a Stranger*) and late 1968 (*The Asian Journal*). *Woods* adds, then, in its own small way, to the fascinating story of Merton's need to shape and tell his own story, a story that moves with Swiss precision from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, through *The Sign of Jonas* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, to *The Asian Journal*. Like all of these chapters in Merton's life, *Woods* is powered by the irony of a man who thirsted spiritually for a freedom from his own story and by-line, a man who nonetheless had a powerful literary appetite for telling that story. It is not surprising, then, to find Merton on May 14th scouting a hollow near Bear Harbor "where one could comfortably put a small trailer," discussing with a local landowner the possibility of renting his house, and noting that one of his pieces is soon to be published in *The Center Magazine*, while forty eight hours later he meditates on the necessity to renounce "all activity and attachment, all fear, greed, all care, without home, without roof, without place, without name,... without care for reputation, without being known." This is vintage Merton, shot through with the creative tensions that kept him so vital and alive.

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And so readable. While the writing in *Woods* may compare unfavorably to *Day of a Stranger*, with its greater narrative cohesion, there are still those stretches of pure poetry in the prose here. These entries show Merton's maturity as a writer who trusted his senses and used them in the service of his art, whether smelling orange peels in a wastebasket or seeing the backwash of foam on a beach "reaching for the sand, like hands for the keyboard of an instrument." Some readers, it is true, may be disappointed with the writing, as I was when first scanning the text. Merton culled these entries from a larger journal and clearly wished to create the spontaneous atmosphere of a working notebook. So *Woods* lacks a dramatic narrative line that might otherwise stitch together its prose blocks. Merton also merges recording and recollecting, especially in the last two entries completed back at Gethsemani, which makes time move discontinuously in the notebook. The compression of events and time may create the impression in the minds of some readers that Merton's clipped and fragmentary prose style calls too much attention to itself as a stylistic device.

In 1968, Thomas Merton left his Trappist Abbey for a memorable visit to the American West. Now, for the first time, in his own words, an account of that pilgrimage has been made public . . .



But consideration of the relationship between Merton's writing and photography (well represented in *Woods*) reveals a writer very much more in control. Much has been said of Merton's use of the camera as an instrument of contemplation. The camera also served a key role in his development as a writer and perhaps no other edition of Merton's prose writing reveals the influence of photography in his writing better than *Woods*. There is, simply, a photographic quality to the writing itself in the notebook: a snapshot rhetoric. When rereading *Woods*, I was struck with the way that the very jargon of photography could help me sort out and understand my impressions of Merton's prose. The narrow depth of field of many of the passages, for example. Or like a camera, the way Merton focused his rhetorical optics in two ways: out to the world to capture a moment in space and time and within to himself to preserve a fragment of memory and mind. A high contrast prose emulsion, with little use of half-tones — all of which help to explain the movement of the entries in *Woods*. Reading the notebook is like flipping slowly through a photo album, moving from one photographic impression to the next, with no need really — indeed, no expectation — of a narrative axis gluing it all together.

Maybe Merton used this photographic style to camouflage his wanderlust. *Woods* is punctuated throughout by Merton's geographic restlessness. "The country which is nowhere is the real home," Merton writes after returning to Gethsemani,

. . . only it seems that the Pacific shore at Needle Rock is more
nowhere than this, and Bear Harbor is more nowhere still.

"My desolate shore is Mendocino. I must return."

It would be a first-class mistake, however, to view Merton's wanderlust as a "problem" he had with his vocation or stability as a Cistercian monk. In his Foreword, Brother Patrick Hart situates Merton's trip to California and New Mexico into the broader monastic context of the new *aggiornamento* which freely permitted monks to seek the greater solitude of more isolated hermitages. Besides, Merton himself delighted in projecting the image of an unconventional, irascible, even testy monk — an image easily misappropriated as that of a monk in conflict with his vocation.

Merton used his geographic restlessness as a metaphor of a spirit in search of greater interior freedom and spontaneity. So the "problems" he wrestles with in *Woods* are not the problems of faith and vocation. They are the problems of convention, of role playing and conformity to roles, of "Ecclesiastical power" that "prevents renewal (and) real change," of mystiques and veneers of identity — in short, anything — from "the pseudomonastic experience" to the "Computer Karma of American civilization" — that chokes off "deepening, change and transformation." Anything that inhibits the free and spontaneous life of the "inner self" which Merton defines in *The Inner Experience* (now appearing serially in *Cistercian Studies*) as "first of all a spontaneity that is nothing if not free."

It is this inner self who speaks in the final entry of *Woods, Shore, Desert* and reminds Merton of "the immense silent redwoods" and that "It is not right that I should die under lesser trees."

