

THOMAS MERTON: FIREWATCHER

By **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

Exaudi me orantem, sicut exaudisti Jonam de ventre ceti. (St. Cyprian)

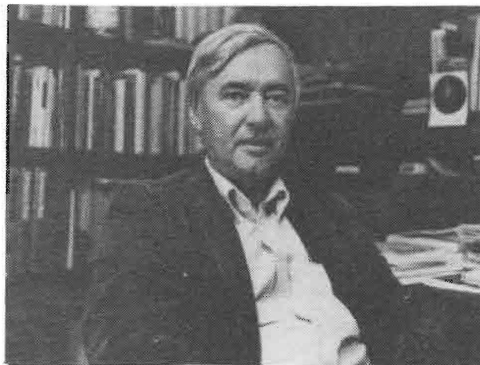
This paper begins with two strong convictions that will not be argued but simply stated. The first is that rarely did Thomas Merton ever write more powerfully than in those pages which make up the epilogue of *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) and that would include those massive pages which make up *The Collected Poems*. Secondly, one can look to those pages to see a kind of symbolic theology that combines, true to its monastic character, a polyvalent use of Biblical metaphor, a pitiless analysis of the self in relationship to the Christian mystery, and a kind of overarching vision of the Christian life, derived from the monastic experience, but the common destiny of all. With those convictions as background, our purpose here will be simply to tease out the meaning(s) of the epilogue to lend evidence to the convictions stated above.

The epilogue, dated July 4, 1952, combines a narrative line describing Merton's duty as a fire watcher for the monastery while the other monks slept. To that narrative line he adds a powerful meditation on the meaning of the monastery in general and his own life as a monk in particular. The careful blend of narration and self reflection turns the epilogue as a whole into a prose poem which is, at its finest places, a lyrical exercise which has its moments of ecstasy and a fall from ecstasy.

It is the kind of writing that demands, simultaneously, attention and response. In that spirit, this paper will confront the epilogue to tease out the multi-layered meanings of the piece as it is constructed in order to make — as Merton surely intended — his own meditation, our own.

We might begin by noting that, like the book as a whole, the Fire Watch epilogue is saturated with the imagery of the Book of Jonah. Merton indicates that in his description of the monastic church as a "great belly" which sets free the monks after the office of Compline and the community as a "holy monster" which contains the monks within it. In that sense, the epilogue stands as a symbolic coda to the work as a whole which, in its title, pays homage to the figure of Jonah: *The Sign of Jonas*. It is worthwhile noting in passing that the

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image of the monk in the belly of the sea monster is an apt one for it is in that context that the author of the *Book of Jonah* sets the prophet in prayer.

For Merton to choose the image of Jonah is hardly surprising. The prophetic figure of Jonah is invoked by Jesus (see: Matthew 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-31) as a “sign” of him. In Matthew’s account Jesus draws an explicit parallel between Jonah in the belly of the sea monster and his own sojourn in the tomb before the day of the resurrection. Interestingly enough, Luke’s account emphasizes the willingness of the people of Nineveh to hear Jonah as a contrast to those who will not hear the message of Jesus. Luke does not record the Jonah/resurrected Jesus parallel. Thus, even within the Biblical text we have two meanings assigned to the significance of Jonah: the Matthean emphasis on resurrection and the Lucan emphasis on the prophetic power of Jonah. While resurrection elements are in Merton’s epilogue, I will argue, later in this paper, that it is the mystical Jonah who gets special, and rather novel, emphasis as Merton joins together the Christian tradition’s meditation on that seminal *figura* in the church with his own drive for self-understanding as a Christian who is also a contemplative monk.

In the early church the symbolic depth of the Jonah story and the sanction of Christ’s example in seeing that symbolic depth is apparent. Jonah appears frequently in paleo-Christian art. In the period after Constantine we have a number of beautiful sarcophagi with narrative accounts of the Book of Jonah. The reasons for this are not hard to guess: every Christian saw in the resurrection of Christ a promise of his or her own resurrection. Thus there was an obvious linkage in these funereal settings: Jonah is a type of the risen Christ just as the risen Christ is a type — *the type* — of the hoped-for resurrection of all of the just. Yet, as any number of scholars point out, the significance of Jonah did not rest exclusively within that paradigm. Third century representations tended to depict, not the whole narrative, but specific instances of the Jonah story. Jonah standing in the ship may have some correlation to the Noah story just as Jonah at rest under the castor vine may echo the figure of Endymion and represent peace at the time of death. In some sarcophagi the figure of Noah releasing the dove from the ark is set into the Jonah narrative with the apparent iconographical logic that Noah and ark/ Jonah and the sea monster are both symbols of the believer in the church.¹

Given the many hued characterizations of Jonah it should not surprise us that the symbol of Jonah could be extended to stand for the life of the monk. In a kind of foreword to *The Sign of Jonas* Thomas Merton himself notes that the sign of Jonas dwells within him (and all Christians) who live within the hope of the resurrection. He then hastens to add that he feels that sign powerfully because “I find myself travelling towards my destiny in the belly of a paradox.”²

It should not surprise us that the monastic tradition would see Jonah isolated in the belly of the whale as a type of the monk. Jonah was in solitude and his occupation was prayer. In that solitary existence he uttered words which went straight to God. Thus the fourth century monk, Saint Ephrem the Syrian, could write: “Jonah prayed a prayer that had no sound: the herald was put to silence in the fish’s belly: out of the dumb creature, did his prayer creep forth, and God on high heard, for his silence served as a cry.”³

We need not speculate at length at the Jonah-like character of the monk in general and Thomas Merton in particular. Merton gives us a good picture of him in the epilogue. Like Jonah

1. A survey of the Jonah figure in early Christian art may be found in Graydon F. Snyder’s *Ante Pacem: Archeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985, pp. 45ff.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1953). Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

3. From “Hymns on Faith” in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*; ed. Sebastian Brock (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 34.

he travels alone in the viscera of the sea monster but his aloneness is in the midst of many others. He is a person called by God as the prophet is called. Unlike Jonah he does not know what his call will bring. There is no specific Nineveh to which he is being sent. He lives in the belly of the monastery (a microcosm of the world itself) waiting for the time when he will be spewed forth as Jonah was spewed forth. Finally we should be alert to what — for lack of a better word — we might call the absurd dimension of the life of Jonah who finds himself called to a life that, by the standards of both the sailors and the citizens of Nineveh, is an odd one.

The great question is: how does one spend one's time in that period where one is now (in the belly of the sea monster) and the time of one's expulsion/resurrection? To ask that question is to inquire into the issue of eschatology since the life of Jonah is a life pointing to an as yet unseen end or, as Merton calls it, a destiny.

At this point we might note two quite different movements in Merton's epilogue which I will call, for the sake of simplicity, the mode of descent and the mode of ascent. The former derives directly from the Jonah story while the latter owes much to the prophet Isaiah. The Biblical Book of Jonah has, as basic motif, the notion of descent (Hebrew *yarad*) captured in the repeated use of the term "went down" and its analogues. Jonah went down to Joppa, into the ship, and then, into the inner most part of the ship. Afterwards, he fell into a deep sleep and climactically into the belly of the great sea monster which, as James Ackerman has noted, is likened to a descent into the death regions of Sheol.⁴

The Firewatch epilogue makes much of the descent motif. Merton, sneaker shod with clock in hand, descends into the regions of the monastery marking the stations of the watchman's rounds. The firewatch, he writes, recapitulates the monastery in depth. He adds: "You hit strange caverns in the monastery's history, layers set down by the years, geological strata; you feel like an archeologist suddenly unearthing ancient civilizations . . . The lowest layer is at once in the catacombs under the south wing and in the church tower. Every other level of history is found in between" (*SJ*, p. 344). Merton ends his descent pattern with a rather solemn entrance note:

Now is the time to get up and go to the tower. Now is the time to meet you, God, where the night is wonderful, where the roof is almost without substance under my feet, where all the mysterious junk in the belfry considers the proximate coming of the three new bells, where the forest opens out under the moon and the living things sing terribly that only the present is eternal and that all things having a past and a future are doomed to pass away. (*SJ*, pp. 345-346)

Just for emphasis, let me underscore the tone of that passage with its insistent proclamation of "it is the time;" and the "time" is a time to ascend and, more specifically, to ascend "to meet you, God . . ."

To summarize, the Firewatch involves a twofold movement: down into the bowels of the monastery and then an ascent into the church tower which constitutes the passage towards God. We might note in passing that this movement of descent/ascent is one of the oldest paradigms in literature and spiritual writing. There is an entire tradition of symbolic theology which muses over that pattern ranging from Aeneas in his descent into the underworld (*Aeneid* — Book vi) to Christ's descent into hell affirmed in our creeds. Those twin descents/ascents would in time get framed into a symbolic whole in Dante's epic journey into hell and slow ascent of the mount of purgatory and on to the circles of the planets which reflect the structure of paradise. It could be argued, for instance, that the descent/ascent pattern, so common in spiritual literature, is a

4. James S. Ackerman, "Jonah," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*; ed. Robert Alter & Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 235. I am much indebted to Ackerman's reading of *Jonah* in this essay.

variation on the triple stages of the spiritual life with descent standing for the way of purification and ascent being the shorthand description of illumination and union with God. It would be time consuming to catalogue this pattern in the spiritual masters but we need only remind ourselves of the frequent use of such symbolic ascents in the classical works on spirituality: the ladder of John Climacus; the mind's ascent of Saint Bonaventure; the ascent of Mount Carmel in John of the Cross; etc. We might also note that the double movement of descent/ascent is closely aligned with the notion of death and rebirth. In fact, this idea is a primordial one that can be found across any number of religious traditions. It is sufficient for our needs simply to recall the Pauline metaphor of descent/ascent in his conviction that the death/burial and resurrection of Christ is symbolized by the going down into the waters of baptism and our rising as a new person in Christ. That baptismal rite, of course, in turn symbolizes the death and resurrection of every Christian in the eschatological age as each person goes down into the tomb of death to rise, finally, in Christ to a new life.

Interestingly enough, when Merton begins his ascent to the tower (where the notion of the firewatcher is most completely realized) he borrows his scriptural imagery, not explicitly from Jonah, but from the prophet Isaiah and, more explicitly, the phrase from Isaiah that serves as the epigram which heads the entire epilogue: "Watchman, what of the night?" One gets a deeper appreciation of what Thomas Merton is attempting to relate when we consider, not just the catch phrase from Isaiah, but a fuller citation of the text:

For thus said the Lord to me:
 Go set a watchman
 let him announce what he sees . . .
 Then he who saw cried:
 Upon a watch tower, I stand, O Lord.
 Continually by day,
 and at my post I am stationed
 whole nights.
 And behold, here come riders,
 horsemen in pairs!
 And he answered:
 Fallen, fallen in Babylon
 And all the images of her gods
 he has shattered to the ground.
 O my threshed and winnowed one.
 What I have heard from the Lord of Hosts,
 the God of Israel,
 I announce to you. (Isaiah 21:6-10; slightly abbreviated)

It is worth noting, even if as a parenthesis, that shortly after the publication of *The Sign of Jonas* Merton had an opportunity to become a full time watchman. The state of Kentucky wanted someone to man a firetower in the area and Merton wanted a more eremitical life. The abbot general's suggestion to Gethsemani's abbot was that Merton (who was already the monastery's "forester") be given the task. That would solve the practical problem of having someone watch for the fires which could rage in the area while supplying Merton's need for solitude. The saga ended with a rather comic denouement: Merton could not learn to drive the abbey Jeep which would take him to the tower; he did not fancy the long hike; and, providentially, he was able instead to fill the abbey's need for a novice master.⁵

5. This entire episode is recounted in Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 286ff. There is a photograph of the fire tower in the book.

It would be tempting but facile to compare the watchman's motif in Isaiah or the fire warden's job at Gethsemani as a kind of modern replaying of the story of Simon Stylites: the monk perched, like an *axis mundi* between earth and heaven in silent contemplation and constant intercession. I say the comparison would be facile precisely because it leaves out one very important element. The person on the watchtower in Isaiah and in the Kentucky woods had a very precise assignment: to serve as a lookout for real or possible danger. Isaiah's watchman saw the first signs of the fall of pagan Babylon while the Gethsemani watchman looked for the destructive power of fire. To borrow a contemporary catch phrase: the watcher in the tower is an "early warning system." The watchman exists alone in his task but the reason for his solitude is not for his solitude but as a vanguard for the larger community that he represents. The firewatcher, in short, is both solitary and a cenobite. He acts alone but in the name of community.

The point is an important one because it sheds light on the essence of the monastic vocation. To be a monk is to enjoy a charism, which is to say, a grace that is given to one for the good of the whole believing community. That is what the fathers of the Second Vatican Council meant when they described the monastic life as *seminaria edificationis* "for the Christian people."⁶ I have a very strong suspicion that Walker Percy, in his wonderful futuristic novel *Love in the Ruins* (1971) has Merton's epilogue in mind when he described the sad state of the church, fractured into factions, sometime in a future which was uncannily like the mythical 1984. Curiously enough, Percy sets his novel on a Fourth of July weekend. He envisions a small remnant of faithful Catholics led by a long suffering priest who cannot be supported by his small flock. In the opening pages of the book Percy writes of him: "The one priest, an obscure curate who remained faithful to Rome, could not support himself and had to hire out as a fire watcher. It is his job to climb the fire tower by night and watch for brush fires below and for signs and portents in the skies."⁷ Percy's giveaway line, of course, is the reference to "signs and portents" which is a direct allusion to the eschatological sermon of Jesus on the end times and the injunction to "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42). That there are allusions to Isaiah in the Matthean account seems at least a reasonable supposition.

The vision of Thomas Merton on his tower is not that of "signs and portents" or even of "brushfires." His vision is the vision of the apophatic mystic. Here is what Merton the watchman sees and hears as he sits crosslegged in an opening of the abbey tower, *an imitation of death*: "The door swings out upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer. Will it come like this, the moment of my death?" (*SJ*, p. 349). The image is a striking one. The sudden black silence, outside the monastery, wraps Merton in the immense solitude of the night of nature. The world hints of the deep mystery of God and the keen awareness of the solitary self. Is that what death is like?

Like all true mystics, Merton posits the dialectic of God's presence and absence in a manner which plays on paradox and tension. Echoing the vocabulary of Martin Buber and the Johannine language of Jesus, Merton looks out over the silent landscape of the Kentucky night and writes: "You are found in communion: Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me: dispossession within dispossession: dispassion within dispassion, emptiness within emptiness, freedom within freedom. I am alone. Thou art alone. The Father and I are one" (*SJ*, p. 351).

It is a powerful visual image that we get at this point. The monk is, as it were, suspended between heaven and earth. The community is at rest beneath him. He is a monk (*monachus*

6. *Perfectae Caritatis* # 9: the phrase gets translated variously as "seedbeds of Christian growth" or "institutions of edification." The emphasis should be on "building up" which is the etymology of "aedificare."

7. Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Dell, 1972), p. 6. The same cleric, in the same occupation, reappears in the sequel to this novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1986).

means one who is alone) with roots in that community but now between them and the dark immensity of the sky which represents the silence and immensity of God. He expresses a sense of “going out” — a going out which is like death but also like the “going out” of the self who is ready to embrace, in that immense silence, the reality of God. This mystical exodus gives a new direction to the energy of the narrative: a descent which leads to an ascent which leads to a going out fairly describes the geography of this narrative. It finishes, as we shall see, with a going down/going back.

It is worthwhile to note the stylistic power of this moment in Merton’s narrative. During his rounds of the monastery we are treated to a visual picture of the cluttered nature of a house that is home to a large community. It is kaleidoscopic in its imagery with sounds, sights, and smells. As Merton ascends to the tower, the images become sparser until we are confronted with the silent immensity of the night. Images are now purged to give way to quiet and immediacy. The literary narrative, in short, tracks the experience of simple prayer itself as one moves from the state of cluttered imagery to the simplicity of presence. The narrative line of the epilogue replicates, in a subtle and studied way, the passage of a person who is a beginner in prayer to one who reaches the simple bond of presence and adoration.

Like all contemplative experiences, this ecstatic moment must end. The very last line of the epilogue heralds, not the night, but the inevitable return of the day and the end of the nightwatch: “There are drops of dew that show like sapphires in the grass as soon as the great sun appears, and leaves stir behind the hushed flight of an escaping dove” (*SJ*, p. 352). The circle is complete: from imagery to simplicity and back to imagery again just as night gives way, in the round of things, to the day.

There is an image of Thomas Merton in *The Sign of Jonas* that I have always loved: the young man (it was 1948) sitting in the sun reading from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (*SJ*, p. 98). I would not wish to suggest an analogy between Eliot’s long poem(s) and the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* but the two works have at least this in common, namely, that they are densely powerful in their attempt to capture the pattern of descent/ascent as it pertains to the the spiritual life. Eliot compresses a good number of spiritual writers (everyone from Augustine and Dante to John of the Cross and Dame Julian) while Merton’s meditation is more professedly scriptural with the alternating voices of Jonah and Isaiah. Eliot’s poem spans a year of seasons while Merton’s prose meditation telescopes his time into a night and a day. In both cases there is the juxtaposition of the cycles of time and the immensity of the eternity of God. Likewise, there are the recurring images of descent/ascent. In Eliot’s poem(s) it is the descent into the subway system of London and the ascent out of those earthy bowels while for Merton it is the ascent from the monastery itself to the firetower of silence after having traversed its corridors and cellars in the descent pattern.

It might be tempting to criticize the prologue as “early Merton” with its somewhat flushed enthusiasm for the traditional monastic life. Such a critique would seem to me misplaced. One must allow for the maturing of a person and for a change of accidental circumstance. The monastery of 1952 was not the monastery of 1968. That, however, is not the point. When one penetrates into the framework of Merton’s imagery it is not difficult to see that he has erected a classically perennial structure of the spiritual quest of descent and ascent. That is not a one way street until the pilgrim life is over. What we must hold onto is that the morning did come. The moment of ecstatic prayer was over. It was time to rejoin the community and life had to continue its ordinary round. This is the way life should be. That is the way life is.