

# Beyond the Shadow and the Disguise: "Spots of Time" in Thomas Merton's Spiritual Development

By Monica Weis, SSJ

Thomas Merton's famous recountings of his experiences at Fourth and Walnut Streets and at the sculptures at Polonnaruwa have been cited frequently by writers as touchstone moments in Merton's spiritual journey. At the Fourth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in Olean, NY, Rich Fournier offered an interpretation of these experiences, in light of Merton's early study of Blake, as important moments of "seeing." William Shannon, among others, has labeled these two events significant moments of clarity that sharpened Merton's view of reality and reinforced the depth of his thinking and writing.

For sure, these two events in Merton's life are important to his self-knowledge and to his vocation. But one might ask: do we need to keep mining these events for hidden treasures? One answer is that by revisiting these events, that is, by turning them around and around to peer at, like so many facets of a gem, we can indeed see more of their beauty and significance for Merton's spiritual development. Or, to change the metaphor, if we look at these events through several different lenses, we can detect and appreciate in them even richer nuances as the lens adds to or subtracts from the scene.

I would like to consider both the Fourth and Walnut and the Polonnaruwa events through the lens of William Wordsworth's "spots of time." In his lengthy autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (written in two parts in 1799, published in thirteen books in 1805, and expanded into fourteen books by 1850),<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth recounts pivotal moments in his life as he tries to explore his growth as a poet. After leading the reader through significant memories of childhood, his brief time at Cambridge, fascination with the French Revolution, and his affair with a French Catholic, Annette Vallon, that resulted in a child, Wordsworth begins to wax more philosophical, trying to articulate the causes of his poetic vocation. In Book XII (1850 edition) he offers an explanation of how memory and imagination frequently interact to create an opening out of conscious-



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ness or what we might call an epiphany. Let me highlight a few salient phrases.

There are in our existence, spots of time,  
 That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
 A renovating virtue, whence, . . .  
     our minds  
 Are nourished and invisibly repaired;  
 A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,  
 That penetrates, enables us to mount,  
 When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.  
 This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
 Among those passages of life that give  
 Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,  
 The mind is lord and master . . .  
     Such moments  
 Are scattered everywhere, taking their date  
 From our first childhood.<sup>2</sup>

Spots of time—a curious phrase that fuses time and place into one intense, intimate explosion of meaning. Linguistically we would be more accurate to say a “time when” or a “place where” such and such happened. But Wordsworth says very emphatically that these events are something else: they are “places when”—indicating the intense power of a place to unleash the imagination—Wordsworth’s name for our highest spiritual faculty. According to Wordsworth, these highly charged events contain a “renovating virtue” by which we are “nourished and invisibly repaired.” The experience may have any of several results: it enhances pleasure; it penetrates to our core; it enables us to mount higher, or lifts us up when fallen. While there is no guarantee that such an epiphanic event will occur, nevertheless, the potential is always present because an “efficacious spirit” lurks in our experience. Being alert to this potential helps us go beyond insight to an experience of what Wordsworth calls the sublime.

Merton offers a similar reflection on this kind of epiphany in his Journal entry for April 9, 1941—during his Holy Week retreat at Gethsemani before his entrance into the monastery. “Sometimes,” he writes:

we see a kind of truth all at once, in a flash, in a whole. We grasp this truth at once, in its wholeness, as a block, but not in all its details. We see the whole perspective of its meaning at once, and easily. We get a vast, large, pleasing, happy general view of some truth that’s near to us. We contemplate it a while, from this standpoint—as long as the truth stands vividly before us: we hold this new, luminous whole figure of truth in our minds—we do not understand it thoroughly by any means, but anyway we possess it to some extent, and with a kind of certain knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

A few pages later, Merton applies his musings on this apprehension of whole and parts to

Wordsworth who, Merton says, tries to work out these features of “one big figure” in his poetry. Note that in each description—Wordsworth’s lyrical line and Merton’s stumbling prose—a spot of time expands one’s consciousness beyond recognition of the separate parts to some apprehension of a new whole.

You might now be ready to ask: this is nice, but why Wordsworth and Merton? We know about Merton’s fascination with the visionary William Blake. We know he wrote his master’s thesis on Blake, and that, because of his attraction to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, he intended to use Hopkins as the subject of his doctoral dissertation.

By perusing Merton’s Columbia University class notes and journals for this period, we can discover his fascination with yet another visionary poet: Wordsworth. Although he never engaged in a sustained inquiry into Wordsworth’s writing, I would hazard the opinion that Merton’s frequent reading of Wordsworth’s poetry for his graduate classes and his teaching at St. Bonaventure College kept alive a love-hate preoccupation with this Romantic poet. Indeed, I want to argue that Merton’s early introduction to Wordsworth’s poetry so influenced his thinking that it became a backdrop to his later writing. Certainly there was an autobiographical attraction which you have perhaps already detected from my carefully selected comments earlier. Both writers were orphaned at an early age, both sent away to school (Wordsworth to Hawkshead, Merton to Oakham), both were unruly in their adolescent years at Cambridge (Wordsworth at St. John’s, Merton at Clare College) and both had to be reprovved and reined in by guardians for financial excesses and sexual peccadilloes. I think it is a telling gesture that Merton’s class notes for a course on romanticism at Columbia (probably 1938) begin as follows:

B. 1770 at Cockermouth in Lake Country  
 His mother died when he was 8  
 He was sent to Hawkshead grammar school  
 Father died when he was 13  
 Left with Dorothy, his sister<sup>4</sup>

In his notes for a course on the Art of Poetry (1938), in which Merton was specifically studying *The Prelude*, there appears this remark:

London...Revolution...period of great difficulty...  
 Also chilling influence—birth of his French daughter. Legal and ethical problems, which intensely complicate his life. An embarrassing physical embodiment of his ardor.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the autobiographical resonance that Merton recognizes between Wordsworth and himself, there is also his respect for Wordsworth’s commitment to vision—that “most cherished” faculty. In his class notes about Wordsworth, Merton has scribbled:

Vision: Seeing what otherwise would not be seen. Claims to see more than others because he takes the trouble to look.... Vision so highly specialized it has now become prophetic. For W. a prophet definitely, a “seer”...he has learned to see not appearances, but “what is really there.”<sup>6</sup>

A quick survey of Merton's journals and letters for this period reveal just how much of a backdrop to Merton's reading and thinking Wordsworth had become. In between passages on Proust and memory, seeing by wholes and parts, Merton offers a spectrum of comments about Wordsworth. In the Perry Street Journal for May 2, 1939, he writes: "Berryman is right about Wordsworth being a good poet";<sup>7</sup> on June 1: "I like Wordsworth's later poetry more and more";<sup>8</sup> on Sunday, October 9, while reading Dante's *Paradiso*: "These are remote things Wordsworth *longs after*."<sup>9</sup> In an April 1940 letter to Bob Lax, expounding on the intricacies of flamenco songs in Cuba, Merton quips: "They make artificial attempts like the stuff Wordsworth tried look ridiculous."<sup>10</sup> In the St. Bonaventure Journal for December 4, 1940: "Today was another day for believing Wordsworth a madman";<sup>11</sup> December 10: "What to look for during vacation: Harper's Life of Wordsworth? Waste of time";<sup>12</sup> December 18: "Perhaps for the first time I am beginning to understand Wordsworth."<sup>13</sup>

But all these scattered references to Wordsworth do not make an argument. From looking at several of Wordsworth's "spots of time" chronicled in *The Prelude*, and Merton's description of his experience at Fourth and Walnut and later at Polonnaruwa, I detect several similarities worth noting. First, each occurs during a period when Wordsworth/Merton is metaphorically lost or searching, or somehow unsettled; second, after some vivid physical description, the writer switches to (let me use Wordsworth's language) "sensations sweet / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart";<sup>14</sup> third, the event evokes an experience of the sublime, some expansion of consciousness that reveals the ultimate unity of all things. Allow me to add a zoom lens to this examination for a closer look at specific details offered by these two visionaries.

In a brief episode in Book I of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes how one moonlit evening in his early orphaned days, he "borrowed" a boat on the lakeshore and struck out across the water, enjoying the freedom as his "elfin pinnacle" went "heaving through the water like a swan." Not understanding the scientific principle of perspective, Wordsworth perceived the mountain that became visible, the farther into the lake he rowed, as a menacing figure. He writes: a "huge peak, black and huge / As if with voluntary power instinct / Upreared its head." This "grim shape / Towered up between me and the stars, and... with a purpose of its own / And measured motion, like a living thing, / Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned..."<sup>15</sup> Your imagination can easily supply the rest. Little William quickly returned the boat to its proper mooring, but never forgot the lesson that Nature, his new mother, would not only guide him in life, but chide him as well. Wordsworth's initial feeling of being lost or abandoned moves to sensory delight in the water, the moonlight, the oars—and then the epiphany: he is indeed not alone, but connected to a larger unity that he would have to come to terms with.

Something of the same process—although not a negative experience—occurs in the famous Fourth and Walnut passage described by Merton in his 1958 journal and published later in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. As William Shannon has pointed out, 1958 was a pivotal year for Merton, one in which he discovered through contemplation that true solitude must blossom into compassion and an embrace of the world.<sup>16</sup> Soon he would be writing articles on social justice issues such as race, treatment of the Jews, nuclear war, and peace. But this was the time for living the questions, what Lawrence Cunningham aptly labels an axial moment.<sup>17</sup> Should Merton opt for the deeper challenges of the contemplative life or become a more vocal spokesperson for social justice? Was this an either/or choice? Could it be the both/and call of his vocation?

In the midst of this internal confusion, of feeling lost or unanchored, Merton walked into the external confusion of Louisville's downtown at Fourth and Walnut (now Fourth and Muhammad Ali Blvd.). His description of the event encapsulates the sensory detail in one phrase—"the center of the shopping district"—and moves immediately to the epiphanic event. "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers."<sup>18</sup> In this "waking from a dream of separateness," an illusion of being "a different species of being, pseudo-angels," Merton becomes intensely and overwhelmingly aware of belonging to God and belonging to everyone else. Once he sees his unity with all people, he is responsible for them. "There are no strangers."<sup>19</sup> In his "immense joy" he commits himself to a new degree of resolution: "Because I am one with them...I owe it to them to be alone"—that is, to be the best contemplative possible.

I see in this experience those same qualities of Wordsworth's "spots of time": first, a feeling of being lost, unsettled; second, an immersion in sensory experience, and then the realization of an even greater truth, or, to quote Merton's college notes about Wordsworth's vision: "to see not appearances, but 'what is really there.'" There is an additional parallel with Wordsworth important to note here, perhaps best summarized by Wordsworth's two definitions of poetry: "a spontaneous overflow of emotion" and "emotion recollected in tranquillity." The boat-stealing episode as described by Wordsworth in the *Two-Part Prelude* (1799) is a vivid "spontaneous overflow of emotion"; but by the 1805 version and the still later 1850 version, the recollected emotion has changed emphasis: it has lost some of its precise detail but gained the fruits of additional reflection. Merton often follows the same procedure: his account of the Fourth and Walnut experience in the later *Conjectures* version is much less detailed than his journal notation; the reflective comments more fully elaborated.

A similar process occurs in Wordsworth's account of crossing the Simplon Pass and Merton's visit to Polonnaruwa. First, Wordsworth: In Book VI of *The Prelude*, we read how Wordsworth and Robert Jones, a hiking buddy from Cambridge, are anticipating an experience of the sublime by crossing one of the highest points in the Alps into Italy—something new and daring for 18th-century college-age adventurers. Their expectation is thwarted by missing the path. Only when a passing peasant informs them that the road is down, not up, does Wordsworth realize they have already crossed the Alps. That realization allows Wordsworth fourteen years later to reflect on the visionary quality of this experience when "the light of sense / Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed the invisible world."<sup>20</sup> In a famous tribute to the power of the Imagination, Wordsworth celebrates an immersion in nature that is simultaneously static and dynamic, "the paradox of immensity confined, of motion motionless."<sup>21</sup> He catalogues what he experienced on that mountain descent: the "woods decaying, never to be decayed / The stationary blasts of waterfalls" and the "rocks that muttered." All were "like workings of one mind...the types and symbols of Eternity."<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Merton, by traveling long distances, had been looking for his own experience of the sublime: a location for a hermitage. In May of 1968 he had traveled to Redwoods, California, then to Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico on such a quest. In September he journeyed to Alaska; on October 15, as he notes in his *Asian Journal*, he left for the East with a "great sense of destiny."<sup>23</sup> His travels included meeting with the Dalai Lama that month, and by December 2 he was on his way to the great Buddhist sculptures at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). All this time, comments Cunningham, Merton had been wrestling with the "role of monasticism in a world that prized relevancy" as well as the need for dialogue among spiritual seekers.<sup>24</sup>

Here again, notice Merton's language in *The Asian Journal*. Even though the visit took place on Monday, December 2, he does not try to articulate it until Thursday, December 5. But notice too, how the passage abounds with sensory detail: "rain," "mustachioed guide," vicar general tagging behind to Dambulla; he remembers, at Polonnaruwa, the trees, fences, the absence of beggars, the dirt road, being lost, then a path, barefoot in the "wet grass," the "wet sand," "silence," the "great smiles." And suddenly the epiphany, the moment of "primal awareness"<sup>25</sup>: he writes that he is "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."<sup>26</sup> He realizes that all—the "rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion."<sup>27</sup>

Here again is the same sequence: being lost, vivid sensory description, and an overwhelming experience of the ultimate unity of all things. Merton is acutely aware of the power of this place: "I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise."<sup>28</sup>

While much more could be made of these complementary passages, I want to offer a tentative answer to the question "so what?" How can this insight into Wordsworth's and Merton's thinking enrich our own spiritual lives?

First, I think that both Wordsworth and Merton demonstrate the value of reflective solitude as a necessary condition for us to be in touch with our True Self, that "hidden ground of Love" that is God. Experience is important, but reflection on that experience is essential if we are to discover our shared call to compassion for the world. Second, Merton's early preoccupation with this secular visionary, Wordsworth (if I may use the word "secular" in this context), offers us comfort and encouragement. Some might like to think that Merton severed ties with secular learning when he opted for the cloister. But apparently Wordsworth came too, for this poet had more to teach Merton about spots of time, imagination, and the spiritual. (I think it is more than a Freudian slip that Merton, in the final weeks of his life, refers to the Windamer Hotel in Darjeeling, India as Windermere—one of Wordsworth's favorite boyhood lakes.)<sup>29</sup> Merton's preoccupation with Wordsworth models how we, too, can build on past knowledge, learn from those who have gone before us, and discover our identity in the silhouette of their wisdom.

And lastly, I think Merton and Wordsworth offer us important testimony about the holiness of place and the value of being aware—that all-important counsel of the Buddha. Wordsworth testifies that the "efficacious spirit...lurks" in our life waiting to burst forth; Merton illustrates this bursting forth in the description of his own spots of time—those places of holy ground that erupt into spiritual nourishment precisely because the sojourner is alert to the action of God.<sup>30</sup> That kind of clarity—a revelation of God and a revelation of ultimate reality—is not reserved to poets alone, for behind both Wordsworth and Merton—and certainly accessible to each of us—is the biblical experience of Moses before the burning bush: "The place whereon you stand is holy" (Exod. 3:5).

One final note: perhaps it is no small irony that Merton's growing affection for the East had its roots in Wordsworth, the poet laureate of England, and that a very recent analysis of Wordsworth's poetry is entitled *Wordsworth and the Zen Mind*. The author, John Rudy, even quotes both D.T. Suzuki and Merton on the importance of awareness and a recognition that identity is "to be sought not in...separation...but in oneness...with all that is."<sup>31</sup> This convergence of Wordsworth, Merton, and the East is no small irony indeed, for, as Merton so intimately knew, beyond the "shadow and the disguise" of Western thinking, there is only oneness, only unity.

## Notes

1. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979). All poem references are to the 1850 version.
2. Wordsworth XII.208–25.
3. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (San Francisco: Harper, 1995) 339.
4. Thomas Merton, Romanticism, Columbia Class Notes (1938?), Special Collections, St. Bonaventure U, Olean, NY, 53.
5. Thomas Merton, Art of Poetry, Columbia Class Notes (1938), Special Collections, St. Bonaventure U, Olean, NY, n. pag. Qtd. in Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton, 1984) 110.
6. Merton, Art of Poetry.
7. Merton, *Run to the Mountain* 3.
8. Merton, *Run to the Mountain* 12.
9. Merton, *Run to the Mountain* 45.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, 1989) 155.
11. Merton, *Run to the Mountain* 271.
12. Merton, *Run to the Mountain* 276.
13. Merton, *Run to the Mountain* 279.
14. Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” ll.27–28.
15. Wordsworth I.357–400 *passim*.
16. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 178.
17. Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed., *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 121.
18. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966; Garden City: Image-Doubleday, 1968) 156.
19. Merton, *Conjectures* 158.
20. Wordsworth VI.600–603.
21. John A. Rudy, *Wordsworth and the Zen Mind* (Albany: SUNY, 1996) 25.
22. Wordsworth VI.619–640 *passim*.
23. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, James Laughlin, and Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1973) 4.
24. Cunningham 223.
25. Cunningham 223.
26. Merton, *Asian Journal* 233, 235. Jonathon Montaldo is convinced that “half-tied” is a misreading of Merton’s often enigmatic handwriting; he suggests that “half-tired” is a more logical reading.
27. Merton, *Asian Journal* 235.
28. Merton, *Asian Journal* 236.
29. Merton, *Asian Journal* 134.
30. Merton, *Asian Journal* 233–36.
31. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Delta-Dell, 1961) 18. Qtd. in Rudy 111.