

## “A Lifting of the Veil”: Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Heschel’s Radical Amazement

By **Mark Plaiss**

On Monday July 13, 1964, Thomas Merton, accompanied by Fr. Flavian Burns, traveled the fifty or so miles from the Abbey of Gethsemani to the airport in Louisville to pick up the Jewish rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel.<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Heschel was to spend some time at the abbey visiting with Merton. Among the topics of conversation between the monk and the rabbi was the issue of idolatry. Merton notes in his journal that Heschel thought that “To have a God other than the Lord is to be alienated” (*DWL* 126). Both Merton and Heschel lived their respective lives seeking to overcome alienation between God and humanity through their respective forms of worship and their respective writings. For Heschel, a fundamental component of this campaign was something he called “radical amazement.” What I propose in this discussion is that Merton experienced moments in his monastic life that smacked of radical amazement as defined by Heschel. I will first briefly review Heschel’s definition of radical amazement and will then offer two examples of incidents in Merton’s monastic life that illustrate this radical amazement.

In his book *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Heschel writes that radical amazement is an encounter with the ineffable, “to be stunned by that which is but cannot be put into words.”<sup>2</sup> All of humanity, according to Heschel, possesses the potential for this radical amazement. More importantly, says Heschel, all of humanity has the potential to sense this radical amazement “in every perception, every act of thinking and every enjoyment or valuation of reality” (Heschel 20). However, while it is true that one can experience radical amazement “in every perception,” it is equally true that the author of this radical amazement – God – very well may remain hidden to those who seek radical amazement. Indeed, these perceptions of God may be brief and far between. When that veil is lifted, though, the experience of the lifting of the veil is one of radical amazement. Heschel writes,

In every man’s life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once in his life experienced the momentous reality of God. Each of us has once caught a glimpse of the beauty, peace and power that flow through the souls of those who are devoted to Him. But such experiences or inspirations are rare events. To some people they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched. (Heschel 165)

Merton was one of those in whom a light was kindled. It is not that the veil was lifted more often for Merton than anyone else. Rather, it was that when the veil was lifted for him, Merton was able to see radical amazement, and it kindled in



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him a light he sought always to keep aflame. What follows are two examples that illustrate Merton's experience of radical amazement.

The first concerns Herman Hanekamp. "Herman," Merton wrote in his journal, "is one of the very few members . . . of the community that I have ever had any desire to imitate."<sup>3</sup> Hanekamp was a former monk of Gethsemani "in the days before the first world war" (SS 242). Though a simple professed monk, Hanekamp left the community upon the expiration of his temporary vows. The monastery gave him a parcel of land on monastery property, and Hanekamp lived the remainder of his days alone deep in the woods on monastery grounds (see SS 243). In his journal Merton mentions hikes taken back to Hanekamp's house in late 1952 and early 1953. Of the December 1952 hike Merton writes:

St. John's Day – Fr. Tarcisius and I walked all the way to Hanekamp's in the afternoon. Wonderful, quiet little valley! The silent house, the goats in the red sage grass, the dry creek and Hanekamp's vineyard. The beautiful silence of the woods on every side! Fr. Tarcisius looked about with such reverence you would have thought he was seeing angels. . . . And I could see how simple it is to find God in solitude. (SS 27-28)

Note the adjectives. The valley is "wonderful" and "quiet." Hanekamp's house is "silent." The silence of the woods is "beautiful." Furthermore, the house is ensconced in the silence of the woods "on every side." Merton may have smiled at Fr. Tarcisius' reverence at all this, but Merton shares Fr. Tarcisius' sense of wonder. It is precisely this "quiet little valley" that Merton desires to "imitate." Merton sees in Hanekamp what he – Merton – so desperately desires for himself: a solitary life, a simple life and a hidden life.

The subsequent March 1953 hike to Hanekamp's place shows, however, that Merton harbored no romantic illusions about a life such as Hanekamp's. This 1953 hike Merton makes alone:

I got into Hanekamp's valley and came to his house. He was spreading manure in his garden. . . . He has more dogs than you can believe. A whole pack of skinny pups. I called one and he said, "You'll never catch them." Inside the front gate were the kids, meaning goats. Very small and pathetic. To get through the gate, he picked them up by the neck and gently thrust them aside. (SS 39)

Though the March 1953 hike back to Hanekamp's place tempers the enthusiasm of the December 1952 visit, the sense of radical amazement still abides in March. If in the December hike Merton and Fr. Tarcisius were cavorting with angels, the March hike is far more earthy. Hanekamp's place in March is filled with dogs, goats and, most of all, manure. In fact, the manure is the first thing Merton records about his March approach to Hanekamp's place. Merton was two months into his thirty-ninth year upon this March hike, and a dozen years had passed since he had entered the monastery. He was solemnly professed, an ordained priest and master of scholastics. By the time of this March 1953 hike Merton was no wide-eyed innocent. His sense of radical amazement, however, was keen, and indeed had sharpened during the winter of 1952 and 1953. Merton's focus in his recording of the March hike is on the *man* Hanekamp, not on the valley in which Hanekamp lived, as had been his focus on the December hike.

Both of those hikes to Hanekamp's place point to the climax of the Hanekamp story. In late December 1958 Hanekamp was found dead in his house (see SS 242). Merton found great irony in

this, for when receiving the news that Hanekamp had been found dead, the choir monks were “sitting in chapter in a futile discussion of a point of moral theology – about absolving a dying man who is unconscious and has not expressed a desire for the sacraments. . . . While we argue wisely about administering the sacraments to the dying, someone depending on us for material and spiritual care has died without sacraments” (SS 242).

Hanekamp’s funeral was on January 2, 1959. Merton, a pallbearer, records the burial:

This morning went to the funeral of Herman Hanekamp in New Haven. . . . The body laid out in the funeral parlor was that of a millionaire, a great executive. I never before saw Herman shaven, in a suit, and, last of all in a collar and tie. He looked like one of the great of the earth. . . . When we came out of the church into the sun, carrying the coffin, the bright air seemed full of great joy and a huge freight train came barreling through the valley with a sound of power like an army. All the pride of the world of industry seemed, somehow, to be something that belonged to Herman. . . . And we drove back to bury him in the graveyard outside the monastery gate. (SS 245)

Then, as though to end the saga of Herman Hanekamp on the same note that dominated the description of the December 1952 hike back to Hanekamp’s place, Merton returns to the image of nature:

The bare woods stood wise and strong in the sun as if they were proud of some great success that had been achieved in secret with their connivance and consent. And as we carried the coffin through the sunlit yard I listened with exaltation, for it was hailed by the singing of skylarks, on the second day of January. What has triumphed here is not admired by anyone. . . . He had not taken seriously the world of business, so important to us all. And now behold – a captain of industry. (SS 245)

Despite his words to the contrary, someone had admired what had triumphed there: Merton. The very nature that teemed with angels now witnessed the holiness of the passing of a simple, but faithful, man. Merton is one with the “bare woods” in understanding what is actually happening. One senses a tinge of glee in Merton’s account here: Merton seems to revel that only he and the “bare woods” understand “in secret” what is actually happening. The veil had been lifted, and Merton beheld with radical amazement.

The second example of Merton encountering radical amazement takes place in early January 1965. As with the Hanekamp episode, this incident in 1965 takes place in the realm of nature. On Tuesday, January 5, 1965, the eve of the Epiphany, Merton spends the day exploring Edelin’s Hollow, a parcel of land near the monastery (see *DWL* 186-89). Merton leaves the monastery at 8:15 in the morning, hikes through fields and scrub and wood and valley, drinks from a spring, eats a boxed lunch, prays tierce, sext and first vespers for Epiphany in the quiet of the pastures, reads a letter, stumbles across an old collapsed house, and marvels at the sight of a SAC plane flying so low overhead that he can see the bomb-bay doors – all of this before returning to the monastery all agog with the events of the day.

If it was Fr. Tarcisius who was so enthralled with Hanekamp’s place that it was as though he were seeing angels, now it was Merton’s turn to feel the rapture. Three times in his 1340-word account of his excursion to Edelin’s Hollow Merton describes what he sees as “angelic.” The country he explores is “wonderful” and “wild,” and it all takes his “breath away.” The panorama he sees before him is full of bright sunlight. As Merton tramps the rolling hills, “the land and woods and spring

were all praising God through me.” As if that were not enough, Merton admits that “as time went on I was more and more under the spell of the place” (*DWL* 187). Finally, as the day draws to a close, and right before he returns to the monastery, Merton reads a blessing over the valley. “Never has a written prayer meant so much,” he notes. “Never was there such a day” (*DWL* 189).

What to make of this? It would be easy to dismiss Merton’s enthusiasm as maudlin. Indeed, Merton himself, in the January 8, 1965 entry of his journal, begins by writing, “When I got back and calmed down the other evening, I realized I was being enthusiastic and unreasonable” (*DWL* 189). However, at this point in time Merton is just eight months away from attaining a long-held dream: living full-time in solitude. He realizes that the possibility of living in the hermitage full-time is not only real, but at hand as well. Since 1960 he had been spending progressively more time in the hermitage; now, in January 1965, living there full-time is nearly in his grasp. In the excursion to Edelin’s Hollow Merton sees what is about to be his: solitude and silence. The veil was lifted, and what Merton experienced was precisely what Heschel defined as radical amazement. Indeed, during the day at Edelin’s Merton muses that “I know one day there will be hermits here, or men living alone” (*DWL* 189). Solitude and silence are so much on his mind that he can only fathom Edelin’s as an abode for hermits.

Both Merton and Heschel seemed to have found the sublime, the ineffable – radical amazement – in nature. They felt God’s presence there. Two more little stories illustrate this. Heschel’s biographer Edward K. Kaplan relates that once Heschel and a friend were walking in town. Just beyond the town was a stand of forest, and the two men proceeded to walk into the woods. Heschel and his friend had been hatless as they walked in town, but as soon as the two men entered the forest, Heschel donned his hat. Surprised at this, Heschel’s friend asked why Heschel had put on his hat as they entered the forest, yet all the while they were walking in town Heschel was content to carry his hat in his hand. Heschel replied, “For me a forest is a holy place. And a Jew, when he walks into a holy place, covers his head.”<sup>24</sup> Br. Maurice Flood tells the story of one Sunday when Merton took a group of monks at Gethsemani out into the nearby woods. Merton noticed that one of the monks had brought along a book. Seeing this Merton asked the monk, “Why did you ever bring that book with you, because ‘the book’ is all around you. . . . You shouldn’t have to bring one here.”<sup>25</sup>

The Hanekamp and Edelin experiences certainly do not exhaust the incidents in Merton’s life where he encountered a lifting of the veil and experienced radical amazement. I hope, however, that the examples show that the monk Thomas Merton and the rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel were akin in their relentless search for union with God.

1. See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 126; subsequent references will be cited as “*DWL*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951) 4; subsequent references will be cited as “Heschel” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 242; subsequent references will be cited as “*SS*” parenthetically in the text.
4. Edward R. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 88.
5. Morgan C. Atkinson with Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008) 82.