

Seeking God in the Forest: Thomas Merton and Emily Carr

By Paul Pynkoski

In the cycle of nature we have entered spring. In the liturgical year we have entered the season of Easter. Opportunities to reflect on themes of birth, new life, growth and resurrection abound. There are possibilities in this season to deepen faith and forge a spirituality that honors both nature and the possibility of human transformation. Are we able to find reliable voices to guide us, pilgrims who have witnessed to the possibilities that emerge if we are attentive to the presence of the divine in nature? Two who have caught my attention are Thomas Merton and Canadian artist Emily Carr (1871-1945). They speak to us in the example of their lives, writing and art.

On three occasions during the spring of 2015 I attended “From the Forest to the Sea: Emily Carr in British Columbia,” at the Art Gallery of Ontario.¹ Emily Carr’s paintings of the British Columbia forest called out for my attention, stirring something deep within me. The following autumn, several of her canvases were included in “Mystical Landscapes: Masterpieces from Monet, Van Gogh and More,”² an exhibition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings. The mysterious beckoning continued, drawing me back four times. Standing before Carr’s paintings – and standing before them alongside works by Van Gogh, Monet and Georgia O’Keeffe – was for me an experience of prayer. Light, color, beauty and line moved me to awe and silence; the sense of life and movement drew me towards praise. I could not view Carr’s paintings without thinking of Thomas Merton’s many poems linking nature and contemplative experience, or his often beautiful observations of the weather and landscape around his Kentucky monastery. What Merton witnessed to in language is, I believe, the same experience Emily Carr witnessed to on canvas – a direct apprehension of the divine presence in nature.

Merton’s literary output was significant, but his artistic interests extended beyond the written word to include print-making, calligraphy, line drawings and photography. Emily Carr is best known as a painter, but as her health failed and excursions into the forest became more difficult, she turned her attention to writing short stories chronicling her experiences, and for the last eighteen years of her life kept a journal.³ It is possible, then, to explore Merton’s and Carr’s spiritual seeking, side by side, in both word and image. Doing so allows for sketching the contours of a spirituality that starts in the woods, prayerfully moves towards artistic expression, and eventually, a critical view of the prevailing social order. It also suggests to me that Emily Carr is a living example of Merton’s intuition of the connection between artistic process and contemplation, and of his insistence that women and men could live a deeply contemplative life outside the walls of a monastery.

Merton had frequent contact with a wide range of intellectuals and artists.

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He wrote with the sensibility of a poet and the vocabulary of a theologian. Emily Carr was born into a wealthy Victoria, British Columbia family. Like Merton, she too was orphaned in her teens. She convinced her guardian to allow her to travel abroad to study art. Carr was a loner and struggled with depression. She had difficulty forming long-term friendships, and was more comfortable spending time with First Nations people in isolated coastal villages, or with the dogs, cats, a monkey and a rat that accompanied her on her painting excursions. She forged her own way as an artist, in both vision and technique, yet she struggled to find her writer's voice. She enrolled in a writer's workshop in her late fifties, but wrote and rewrote her stories endlessly before finally getting them published in 1941, winning the Governor General's Award for her work.⁴

Merton, as monk, might seem a likely candidate to provide insights into the Christian spiritual life. Carr seems less so.⁵ She left the church in her twenties, lost a position teaching art to young society women due to her smoking and swearing in the classroom, struggled with depression, and is portrayed by her biographer as a difficult and cantankerous person.⁶ Still, there are remarkable similarities in their experience and reflections. Merton, writing on contemplative experience, says, "It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. . . . Poetry, music and art have something in common with the contemplative experience."⁷ Emily Carr grasps this raw sense of "spiritual wonder" while viewing paintings by the Canadian artist Lawren Harris: "O God, what have I seen? Where have I been? Something has spoken to the very soul of me . . . something in me is trying to answer. . . . What language do they speak, those silent, awe-filled spaces. . . . Wait and listen . . . perhaps I shall find God here" (Carr, *Journals* 26-27).

Finding God in the Woods

Monica Weis writes that Merton was "intrigued by nature and allowed it to shape his spirituality and consciousness."⁸ This was evident from an early age, and after becoming a Trappist the intrigue intensified. He spent over twenty-five years on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani, surrounded by woods, creeks, ponds and rolling hills. He stands in the tradition of the psalmists, who were humbled and in awe when reflecting on creation. Merton's Benedictine vow of stability, which tied him to the abbey's grounds, allowed for a heightened attentiveness to the landscape and weather. Almost daily he writes of the impact of the weather and the change of the seasons. Merton notes in his journal for September 6, 1965: "Magenta mist outside the windows. A cock crows over at Boone's. Last evening when the moon was rising saw the warm burning soft red of a doe in the field. . . . Everything, every movement was completely lovely."⁹ He writes of rain: "What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech . . . the talk that rain makes by itself."¹⁰ After noting a temperature of eighteen degrees, he writes in his journal for February 27, 1963: "I have a real need to know these things because I myself am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place, and a day in which I have not shared truly in all this is no day at all. It is certainly part of my life of prayer."¹¹ He *sees* "magenta mist" and "soft burning red"; he *hears* a cock crow and *feels* the eighteen-degree cold. Rain *speaks*. What touches his senses becomes for him the stuff of prayer. Indeed, getting permission to leave the monastery enclosure and pray in the woods was a turning point in his spiritual development. He comments, "As soon as I get away from people the presence of God invades me."¹²

Emily Carr made regular trips along the coast of British Columbia to paint the totems and remnants of First Nations villages. She moved beyond abandoned villages and began to paint the forest, sensing

there was something more. She asks, “What is the vital thing the woods contain, possess, that you want? Why do you go back and back to the woods unsatisfied, longing to express something that is there and not finding it?” (Carr, *Journals* 54). Echoing Merton’s union with weather and landscape, she writes, “God is in them all. . . . Every living thing is God made manifest” (Carr, *Journals* 55). Carr, as artist, challenges herself, writing: “Search for the reality of each object, that is, its real and only beauty; recognize our relationship with all life; say to every animate and inanimate thing ‘brother’; be at one with all things, finding the divine in all” (Carr, *Journals* 55).

The search for the God she was unable to find in a church building led Carr into the woods and, after studying Theosophy, back into a Christ-centered spirituality.¹³ She writes, “a live Christ leads you to God” and then moves directly to nature, speaking of her heart as a garden, and says, “Down in my garden is neither creed, nor sex, nor nationality, nor age – no language even – there is just love” (Carr, *Journals* 135). During a 1935 sketching trip she quotes Psalm 132: “I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids, until I find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob. Lo . . . we found it in the fields of the wood. We will go into his tabernacle. . . . Arise, O Lord, into thy rest.” She continues, integrating the psalmist’s prayer with her own: “Surely the woods are God’s tabernacle. We will see him there. He will be in his place. It is God in his woods tabernacle I long to express. . . . Everyone has his own special tabernacle set aside for God in the place where He seems nearest” (Carr, *Journals* 275).

Monk and artist, spiritual master and seeking painter, follow their intuitions, move from being in the woods towards a sense of divine presence in the woods, and ultimately to a sense of communion with the divine in nature, and with nature itself. They strike different paths but as they journey, they continually echo each other’s experience.

Artists and Authors in the Woods

It is worth noting that the particularity of their respective landscapes played a role in both Merton’s and Carr’s artistic expressions. While Merton roams the expansive landscape of hills, trees and ponds, Carr views dense, coastal forest of towering firs, and sometimes needs to cut her way through masses of nettles to find a place to paint (Carr, *Klee Wyck* 66-67, 81). It is the direct experience of the divine in the forest that Carr seeks to express. It is not theoretical. She insists that love of the woods must be proven by a “entering it and breathing its life,” experiencing “the holiness and quiet” (Carr, *Journals* 282-83). Her active “entering” becomes a contemplative experience as she sits, smoking cigarettes, and waiting: “Everything is waiting and still. . . . Slowly things begin to move. . . . Colours you had not noticed come out. . . . Air moves between each leaf. Sunlight plays and dances. . . . Everything is alive. The air is alive. The silence is full of sound” (Carr, *Journals* 264).

Her forest studies from the mid-1930s pulse with life, allowing line, color and light to express the joy and awe she feels. In “Forest, British Columbia,” the trunks of cedars stand like the columns of a gothic church, while their foliage is represented as a living, swirling mass. The varied greens and shafts of light combine, forming church-like arches and aisles that draw us deep into the interior of the woods, and one has the sense that everything pulses with the force of divine life. “Logger’s Cull” depicts an area marred by logging. The forest has been cleared, pushed almost to the fringes. There are stumps of trees in the foreground, evidence of the human presence that has devastated the scene. Yet the movement of the remaining pines reaches upward, pulling the viewer’s vision

towards swirling white clouds, making even the blue sky seem alive. The remnant of the woods is almost defiant in its life-force and its praise.

Merton's photographs, in contrast, demonstrate simplicity and beauty in both landscape and everyday objects. Everything is reduced to black and white. It is almost as if his persistent longing for solitude and simplicity finds expression through the lens of the camera. A photo of the woods shows sparse trunks framing a snow-covered path. The bareness of the trees hints at the winter cold as the eye is drawn up the path. The most remarkable thing about it for me, though, is that at the particular instant the photo was taken the sun struck the trees, creating a pattern of stripes across the snow and leaving the impression of a moment of perfect stillness. It captures the moment. Slightly earlier or slightly later, that pattern would not exist in the same way. Another photo, of an old basket, creates through sunlight and shadow a perfect contrast between the basket and its silhouette on one side, and the upper and lower sections of the basket's interior. The basket seems almost to balance on its edge. Once again, stillness, and in that moment an old, worn implement becomes a thing of beauty.¹⁴

Merton has the spiritual and theological vocabulary to articulate the richness of his experience. His journals witness to hours of meditation in the woods, and his writings include entire books devoted to bringing contemplative experience from the monastery into the lives of non-monks. Carr, on the other hand, does not have that vocabulary. She reflects more the experience of the artist seeking truth, or the seeking of ordinary people. But there is no doubt that her experience was deeply contemplative. She writes that she desires "to be still enough to see and hear and know the glory of the sky and earth and sea" (Carr, *Journals* 95). She speaks of "intense striving to get in touch" (Carr, *Journals* 54). Merton and Carr both move, prayerfully, from merely being in the woods, towards a unifying contemplative experience. What they mediate through their art bears witness to a transformation of vision. But their experiences of communion, though different, are not ends in themselves. Communion leads to a heightened sense of those places in their particular worlds where there is brokenness and they are compelled to speak to it.

Moving beyond the Forest

Merton became critical of modern technology and its effect on humans and the environment. In a famous passage of poetic prose he contrasts dawn in the woods with our technological obsessions and illusion of control. The attentive questioning of the waking birds, waiting for the divine word that daily recreates the world, is set against humanity's obsession with time, technology and our illusion of control.¹⁵ He later employs a similar approach, contrasting his experience in the woods with that of passengers in a plane: "They are out of my world." In another plane, a "metal bird" with a mechanical womb, there is a "scientific egg." Merton lives under the shadow of this technological "bird" of destruction, but he does so in "an ecological balance" with the trees and the twenty pairs of birds in the area. The critique, in his narratives, emerges directly from his forest experience. The beauty and solitude of the woods becomes the framework through which the social order is evaluated.¹⁶

Carr lacked Merton's broad public platform. She was not an activist; however, we find in her writing the beginnings of critique and protest. Her journal shows her to be critical of the logging industry. She speaks of tree stumps in her paintings as "screamers" and comments, "It's a horrible sight to see a tree felled. . . . [A]s you pass among them you see their screamers sticking up. . . . [T]hey are their own tombstones and their own mourners" (Carr, *Journal* 186-87). Her stories of her trips to coastal villages to paint totems have a strong undercurrent of criticism of the effects of

colonialism and missionary endeavors on First Nations culture, and hint at the scandal of physical and sexual abuse in Canada's church-run residential schools.¹⁷ Carr's art demonstrates a sense of hope that the force of the forest can overcome and heal the damage done by humanity. Merton, in his essays, underscores the need for repentance and action, and demonstrates a cautious hope that the groundwork can be laid for a new vision for humanity.

Going to the woods and forest, staying in the woods, being attentive to what they experienced and making it part of their prayer were not accidents for Carr or Merton. It was part of an intentional seeking after God. Merton had an experience of solitude and wholeness that he witnessed to in his poetry and photography. Carr developed a sense of vibrant life and communion that is seen in her paintings and her journals. The technologies and social issues they critiqued were specific to their time, location and experience. I find myself asking if there is something in Merton and Carr, as shown in their art and writing, that we might imitate? Yet, even as the question is posed, I hesitate, for Merton says clearly that contemplative experience is gift and response (see *NSC* 3). We could, though, follow their paths of intentional seeking, attentiveness to surroundings and taking everything into prayer. And then, whether in the forest of the city, wait like Emily Carr until we know "Everything is alive. . . . The silence is full of sound," and respond in praise, art and compassionate action.

1. For a description of the exhibition and a sampling of the paintings on display see: <https://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/2014/nov/from-the-forest-to-the-sea-emily-carr-in-british-columbia>.
2. Carr's painting "Sky" is one of the artworks shown on the exhibition site: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/mystical-landscapes-brings-monet-van-gogh-masterpieces-to-toronto-1.3814343>.
3. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2006); subsequent references will be cited as "Carr, *Journals*" parenthetically in the text.
4. In her story "D'Sonoqua," Carr recalls three encounters with the D'Sonoqua totems (see Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck* [Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2003] 66-74; subsequent references will be cited as "Carr, *Klee Wyck*" parenthetically in the text). Her paintings of these three different totems date from 1929 to 1931. However, the *Journal* (217, 244, 326, 330, 334, 352) suggests that this story was likely started in September 1934, and constantly revised, edited and read to friends until late 1936. It was not published until it appeared in the original edition of *Klee Wyck* in 1941.
5. Carr opens her autobiography with these words: "My baptism is an unpleasant memory. . . . I was then given to Dr. Reid who presented me kicking furiously to God. . . . I tried to bolt" (Emily Carr, *Growing Pains* [Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2005] 19).
6. See Maria Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979). In her third chapter, Tippett discusses extensively Carr's conflicts with classmates, a broken love relationship and her eventual fifteen-month-long hospitalization for "hysteria" (35-64).
7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 1-2; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.
8. Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 1. See especially the detailed investigation into Merton's developing sense of place and interaction with his local geography in chapter 2.
9. 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) 291.
10. "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 10.
11. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 300.
12. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 328.

13. Carr recounts this conversion, or reaffirmation, of her Christian faith in her journal entries from January 16 to February 16, 1933 (Carr, *Journals* 134-42). It will be of interest to Merton readers that Carr's path back to Christ came through meeting a "Christian Hindu" who was in Victoria, BC lecturing on Gandhi.
14. See these photographs in John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) 6 and Deba Prasad Patnaik, ed., *Geography of Holiness: The Photography of Thomas Merton* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980) 72, respectively. When the landscape changes, however, we find Merton's observations much more like Carr's. When he first sees the redwood forests on the west coast of California from an airplane, similar in size and age to the forests of British Columbia, he comments, "the trees are huge . . . you can see where the hillsides have been slashed into, ravaged, sacked, stripped." Then, when actually in the redwood forest, he describes "Everything from the big ferns at the base of the trees, the dense undergrowth, the long enormous shafts towering endlessly in shadow penetrated here and there by light. A most moving place – like a cathedral" (Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*, ed. Joel Weishaus [Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982] 11-12. The accompanying photograph on the following page looks remarkably like an Emily Carr painting.
15. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 117-18.
16. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 29, 31, 33.
17. See her stories "Ucluelet" and "Martha's Joey" (*Klee Wyck* 31-42, 115-17). See also *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* at www.trc.ca. This report tells the story of Canada's legalized cultural genocide against its First Nations peoples, using as agents residential schools run by the Roman Catholic, Anglican and United Churches. First Nations children were removed from their homes and "educated" in an environment that forbade the use of native language, dress, customs and names. Many were subjected to physical and sexual abuse and some died trying to escape home from the schools.