Art and Being in Thomas Merton

By **Ross Labrie**

Although Thomas Merton had entered the monastery in 1941 with little expectation of being called to the life of a writer, he was given a number of writing assignments by his religious superiors that he saw as contributing to meeting the financial needs of the monastery. Nowhere was this more keenly felt than in the case of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which became a bestseller. Indeed, as he explained to Evelyn Waugh in a January 1950 letter, he turned gratefully towards teaching mystical theology as freeing him from what he called journalistic writing.[1] Merton felt divided between writing that issued from his vocation and that which didn't. His writing assignments were essentially designed to tell the story of the Trappists and the monastic life. This was a form of "intellectual drudgery," as he confided to Jacques Maritain in February 1949 (*CT* 24). A sticking point was that he believed his fellow Trappists lacked a credible understanding of art, including religious art, and yet felt free to render aesthetic judgments about his writings. At one point in 1967 he mentioned to Kentucky poet Guy Davenport that poetry was on a "very black blacklist" among his Trappist colleagues (*CT* 252). Merton accepted the writing tasks that he was given with mixed feelings, careful to distinguish between a routine writing of biographies and Trappist histories, and writing that called upon self-exploration and the use of the imagination. Based partly on his classes at Columbia University, Merton asserted that art belonged to a "different order" than other sources of knowledge about human beings such as history, ethics, psychology and science.[2]

In the years ahead Merton was to explore the distinctive character of art as a part of human culture, and his starting point was the subconscious. Indeed, for Merton the subconscious was an invaluable part of being. In fact he regretted that too many religious adherents ignored or viewed the subconscious with suspicion, mainly because of a distrust of Freud and those who would present the subconscious as a powerful, involuntary part of the self. This made it difficult to align the Freudian self with a theology of guilt and self-control. Merton perceived the subconscious as emblematic of the inner structure and meaning of reality, thereby connecting art and ontology. For Merton the subconscious transformed the actual world into what he thought of as the opening up of the dream. It is in the dream space where the transformation of experience into conscious and subconscious layers both drove and illuminated that experience. In an essay entitled "Why Alienation Is for Everybody," Merton described the artist as working through free association so as to reveal what was "hidden in our depths."[3] In this way, open to the subconscious, the artist avoided an abstract and too cerebral approach to

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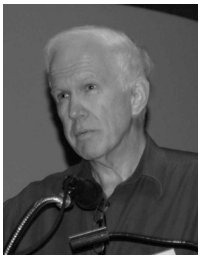

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experience by releasing the face that was "sweating under the mask" (*LE* 382). Merton linked the artist's drawing on the subconscious to the artist's freedom.[4] Merton was thus attracted to artists, such as García Lorca, for whom the subconscious dream space was a recognition of the self. This recognition involved surrealist elements that Merton projected freely into his writings, as in an early section of *The Geography of Lograire*, where his years on Long Island became the genesis of a surrealistic meditation on death.[5]

In his "Message to Poets" Merton suggested that the artist did not realize what such surrealism was about until the art object existed.[6] Here, he affirmed a link between creativity and cognitive ability, saying on one occasion that the artist could sometimes only understand the existential meaning of a particular subject after having created it in a work of art. Merton emphasized the dynamism of this process of making art, which he compared to the Heraklitean river whose immediacy flashed the truth of that particular moment, never to be repeated (see *RU* 161). In order to find fresh ground for the action of the subconscious beneath the surface of art, Merton adopted a view of the artist as Edenic, by which he meant that the artist drew on an inherent innocence. It is important to distinguish this view from a sentimentalizing of the artistic process. To isolate what he meant by the artist's innocence, the reader can turn to Merton's essay on Flannery O'Connor in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (*RU* 37-42), where O'Connor is said to search for the truth within her characters but then finally to suspend judgment about them. This approach to her characters allowed O'Connor to see into her characters without limiting them by imposing final judgments on them. In this way the artist could explore the mystery of his or her creations.

Merton was concerned that the artist's innocence not be at odds with its registering of reality. He insisted that art does not pit itself against knowledge but rather works with knowledge. Among other considerations, this would avoid a false innocence, an absence of knowledge without the presence of wisdom. An authentic innocence in the artist involved an openness to the artistic work that connected with Merton's fundamental inclusiveness. For Merton this meant what he characterized as final integration. In this way the artist became one with other creators, some distant centuries away, and with creativity itself.

As has been suggested, while Merton upheld the ontological windfall produced by art and by the imagination, he did not cut the imagination loose, and praised the Greeks for their durable belief in the solid reality of human nature. An example is Merton's poem "Elegy for the Monastery Barn."[7] On the surface the poem centers on Merton's startled look at the burning barn where he and his fellow monks labored over the years. Looking at the flames, Merton's imagination expanded:

> Let no man stay inside to look upon the Lord!
> Let no man wait within and see the Holy
> One sitting in the presence of disaster
> Thinking upon this barn His gentle doom! (ll. 38-41)

Beneath the surface of the poem with its whimsical tone, Merton's imagination, steadily expanding, is unexpectedly drawn to discover the presence of the transcendental. The face of God, suddenly visible to his imagination, reveals the subconscious underlay that joined the past

and present of his monastic vocation in a way that the poem exuberantly celebrates.

As has been suggested, for Merton the artist's subconscious provided a rich subsoil that fed into the creative process. As Merton thought about his art – his calligraphies, for example – he affirmed their ability to reveal their meaning without a conscious idea of that meaning, a meaning that was not one but several and which released more of itself in different dimensions of the poem (see *RU* 179-82). For this reason Merton said of his calligraphies that each time he saw them it was as if for the first time.[8] This sort of experience was not postmodern, since Merton felt that different meanings would frequently be seen and understood, adding to the total, as it were, rather than undercutting meaning itself. The emphasis was not postmodern but a kind of creative windfall.

From his early years at Columbia Merton saw in William Blake, the subject of his master's thesis, a poet who came to link the artistic and the mystical (see *LE* 445). In an October 1958 letter to Boris Pasternak, he rejected the division, as he put it, between art and spirituality (see *CT* 90). Both he viewed as an extension of the divine creation. The divine life was evoked in the act of creativity. The artist was thus not only a creator in imitation of the divine, but also a brother of other creators, as Merton indicated in a December 1958 letter to the Latin American poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra in the 1950s (see *CT* 182). Thus, contemplation is characterized by Merton as "not only compatible with poetic creation, but . . . stimulated by it."[9] Paradoxically, though, he emphasized the importance of the concreteness of art, insisting that this concreteness was a significant part of its value. Nonetheless, in spite of Merton's emphasis on the concreteness of art, he came to see art, and especially literary art, as bordering on the metaphysical, as he put it in an essay about the Latin American writer Alfonso Cortes (see *LE* 311). Moreover, aesthetic awareness, Merton observed, opened human beings to the "interior sanctuary of the soul" (*LE* 348). On the other hand the beauty of creation and of art led the onlooker to discover what Merton called ontologically the "latent perfection of things" (*LE* 347). Throughout his work he brought home the connection between art and being, emphasizing that the task of a Christian was to live in awareness of his own being and of the "world's being."[10] Merton's idea of the imagination, like Blake's, was ontological. In reading other writers Merton tended to focus on their ontological value, what he called the "nature" of their reality (*LE* 311). In a philosophical sense art was cognitive. The function of the artist's innocence, discussed earlier, was in Blake's terms to hold infinity in the palm of one's hand. Aesthetic perception allowed the artist to see being in its ultimate sense. In a letter to William Carlos Williams in July 1961, Merton connected Beat poetry, and indeed poetry itself, with ultimate reality (see *CT* 290). As has been suggested, he regarded aesthetic awareness as the beginning of ontological awareness. This ontological awareness Merton conceived of as a restoration, admittedly partial, of the divine image in human beings.

Merton distinguished between art and rationalist discourse in that the artist, while engaged by ultimate realities, nevertheless was attentive to the reality of the quotidian, what he called the "flowering of ordinary possibilities" (*RU* 159). This characteristic of art led the artist to take a holistic and detailed view of reality. In this way the richness of being is encountered where it might otherwise have been overlooked. The artist's detailed rendering of the richness of human experience, Merton believed, led to a rounded understanding of the "ontological sources of life"

which could not be reached through conceptual analysis (*LE* 30). In this connection Merton was particularly attracted to the poetry of Edwin Muir, and especially to Muir's "metaphysical concern" for "the roots of being" (*LE* 29).

Although in his M.A. thesis on Blake Merton appears to support Blake's Platonism and to reject any hint of Naturalism, Merton's own practice as a poet suggests a deep attachment to nature as an epitome of being. In this he was closer to Wordsworth than to Blake. Furthermore, he sidestepped the Darwinian view of nature in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz in May 1960, noting dismissively that although spiders killed flies, it was the spider, not he, that killed the fly (see *CT* 66). The rest, in Merton's view, was God's business. The moral neutrality of nature was accepted in part because of Merton's distancing of himself from Darwin and was consistent with his accepting of the blending of Darwin and religion in the writings of the Catholic paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. On the other hand he disliked Teilhard's visionary view of nature as placing it beyond the concreteness that Merton always held to be a necessary part of our view of being. This is apparent in poems like "Song for Nobody" (*CP* 337-38):

> Let no one touch this gentle sun
> In whose dark eye
> Someone is awake.
>
> (No light, no gold, no name, no color
> And no thought:
> O, wide awake !)
>
> A golden heaven
> Sings by itself
> A song to nobody. (ll. 9-17)

The wildflower, which is at the center of the poem, is not the subject of a pantheistic study, since its presence in the world, while conveying a kind of consciousness, is a consciousness provided by its creator and shared broadly with the rest of being. Part of this sharing is a sharing in beauty. The flower, linked here with the sun and thereby with the Creator, spurs a rush of perceived beauty, which in turn points to its divine ontological origin. The "nobody" in the poem's title acts as a release from the usual distractions and pursuits of life, allowing the reader to experience being in a contemplative ecstasy. Furthermore, the Creator is seen as no one and thus as a starting point for one's own need to lose and thus free oneself from self-consciousness. The artist, Merton announced conclusively, created for "love, for free, for nothing, unnecessary" (*LE* 131).

In addition, through myth, which relies heavily on symbol, the artist could travel beyond conventional language to create symbolic pictures that pointed to ultimate fundamental meaning. Merton not only recognized this use of myth in art but he created mythic stories himself as in *Raids on the Unspeakable*. In *The Wild Palms* he recognized William Faulkner's modern adaptation of the biblical story of the flood (see *LE* 110, 132). In an essay entitled "Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus" he observed that artists constructed myths embodying their struggle to cope with the fundamental realities of being (see *LE* 252).

At times the artist bridged different orders of reality, as in the case with the section of *The Geography of Lograire* entitled "Day Six O'Hare Telephane," which describes Merton's waiting for his flight in the Chicago airport in 1968:

> Comes a big slow fish with tailfins erect in light smog
> And one other leaves earth
> Go trains of insect machines . . . .
> A United leaves earth
> Square silver bug moves into shade under wing building
> Standby train three black bugs indifferent . . . .
> A long beetle called Shell
> On a firm United basis
> Long heavy-assed American dolphin touches earth (*GL* 119).

The symbols swivel back and forth between the animal and the machine, with insects and dolphins, for example, set against aircraft seen as parodies of marine mammals. There is more here than metaphor. It is not only that machines are metaphorically compared to insects, but Merton creates a symbolic aura in which human beings fashion themselves as uglier and more alienating than the machines they emulate. The one exception might be the dolphin symbol since it at least points to something organic. However, it is a degraded creature since it is called "heavy-assed." The effect is to suggest an attempt by human beings to better nature through an overlay of technological myth. The dolphin symbol recalls with a note of regret the freedom and power of this beautiful creature whose origin lies with and reflects its divine Creator. Merton did not reject technology itself but rather cautioned that creativity in both nature and art was being stifled by technology.

Because of Merton's emphasis on the subconscious in relation to art, one tends to think of his view of symbolism and myth as part of a continuum. Such is the effect of Merton's view of symbols as "basic archetypal forms anterior to any operation of the mind." These forms provide "patterns" for the myths in which human beings have tried to express the search for ultimate meaning (*LE* 98). The artists who make our symbols and our collective myths do so paradoxically from the solitude of their subconscious selves. The process, Merton believed, arose from the artist's imaginative grappling with ultimate questions of being. Eventually, in the case of those that became recognized as powerful myths, there arose a general recognition of a myth's universality. Through this imaginative externalization the artist created a paradigm of the essential nature of being.

Art and being formed a reciprocal union in Merton's thought. Art invited the imagination to participate in the perception of ultimate realities while the artist's newly perceived realities stimulated the further creation of art. Reflecting on the presence of the divine artist who created him, Merton arrived at an overarching theme of creativity as a celebration of being. Spurred by his imagination, he attempted through the inventiveness of art to extend the boundaries of experience and of being. For Merton being was not a fixed quantity but a dynamic one. The expansion in his perception of being brought about by the mutual stimulus of the imagination, art and being could be likened to a spiral which rotates without pause around a central point. That

point, for Merton, was God, a point that in ceaselessly turning constantly expanded.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 16; subsequent references will be cited as "*CT*" parenthetically in the text.
2. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 180.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 382; subsequent references will be cited as "*LE*" parenthetically in the text.
4. April 27, 1967 letter to Ludovico Silva (*CT* 230).
5. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) 43-60; subsequent references will be cited as "*GL*" parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 155; subsequent references will be cited as "*RU*" parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 288-89; subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text.
8. October 9, 1963 letter to Margaret Randall (*CT* 217).
9. See "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal" (*LE* 341-42).
10. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 293.