

MIND GUARDS AGAINST THE WHITE KNIGHT:

Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan

—by **Brother John Albert, O.C.S.O.**

For those who allow them more value than throw-away writings, for those who attribute to Thomas Merton the seriousness of intention he deserves, *Cables to the Ace* (1967) and *The Geography of Lograire* (1968) are disturbing. With *Raids on the Unspeakable* (collected essays from 1960-1965), *Original Child Bomb* (1962), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Day of a Stranger* (1965), they form and complete a cluster of poems and poems in prose which can hardly be called “bedside reading.” Though all of his previous work may be considered “provocative.” for whatever reasons, these works jar us. They tell us something about Merton we would rather not know.

Thomas Merton emerged in post-World War II society as a force of cohesion in an age of spiritual fragmentation. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was talked about as a modern *Confessions*, Merton forming with Saint Augustine an epiphoric bond that linked Christian antiquity and his times in a new community and providing a language and ascetic methods toward meaning and value in an uncertain future. Victor Hammer painted him as peaked and limp in brown camauro and magenta surround, a medieval mystic, another Aelred of Rievaulx who had abandoned the pleasures of the world for the “paradisus claustralis”. In an Arthurian myth he would be the White Knight who had glimpsed the Holy Grail.

In the final decade of his life Merton intentionally shifted from the stereotypical, settled form of his earlier poetics and prose writings to an alive, fluid form. His was the movement in language from traditional, discursive, logical, systematic modes of conceptualizing to a tensive, compressed language of signs, symbols, metaphors. Form reveals. The cluster of his works detail over and over again the reality of Merton’s central anguished concerns. The pain of life and human longing, alienation from one’s true self and the failure of human persons to love each other, dehumanization of life by modern technology and pseudo-salvation through social change: this constellation of themes circles round and round in ever changing configurations and Merton himself, his life his supreme artistic achievement, is the center of force and pull and energy expressed through them. Merton became more and more a monastic anomaly, threatening the security of the established order, of the religious society that had once provided full meaning to his life. Merton became a puzzle to others and to himself. In the last decade of his life, with more anguish than in any previous period of struggle, Merton was in crisis. Not only is there a discernable shift in style and marked concentration of content in Merton’s writings from 1958 to 1968 but a highly significant shift in role-models. In his Preface to *Thoughts in Solitude* Merton had written that the “murderous din of our materialism” must not be allowed to silence the independent voices which will never cease to speak. Along with Christian saints Merton mentioned Lao-Tse, the Zen Masters, Thoreau, Buber and Max Picard. At this time (1953-1954, Introduction 1956) the metaphor was epiphoric. Those he lists are, though in reaction against secular society, men with Merton on common ground, if not conventional religious, “religious” in their ultimate concerns. With Merton they were similarly “good men.” In *The Way of Chuang Tzu* Merton contended that there is a monastic outlook common to all who have elected to question the value of life entirely submitted to arbitrary secular presuppositions, social conventions and temporal satisfactions. Whatever may be the value of life in the world there have been those who have claimed to find something vastly preferable in solitude.

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But Merton did not reduce his understanding of solitude to space alone nor to spiritual macarisms. Solitude of spirit, for Merton, was freedom from alienation. In the last year of his life Merton confessed publicly to Louisville poets, in *Why Alienation is for Everybody*, his own alienation:

Alienation begins when culture divides me against myself, puts a mask on me, gives me a role I may or may not want to play. Alienation is complete when I become completely identified with my mask, totally satisfied with my role, and convince myself that any other identity or role is inconceivable. The man who sweats under the mask, whose role makes him itch with discomfort, who hates the division in himself, is already beginning to be free. But God help him if all he wants is the mask the other man is wearing, just because the other one does not seem to be sweating or itching. Maybe he is no longer human enough to itch. (Or else he pays a psychiatrist to scratch him.)¹

By the 1960s Merton's metaphor meeting with others in the solitude of alienation was diaphoric. No monk since Saint Bernard of Clairvaux has been more socially established and celebrated as a "spiritual master" than he, but as his own peeling of masks progressed Merton came more and more to consider himself an ecclesiastical and societal outcast. Merton identified with Philoxenos the 6th century Syrian exile-recluse whom he regarded as an "outlaw" like Christ and Saint Paul. Camus he called "an Algerian cenobite" who maintained a precariously conscientious and personal attitude which was critical of all doctrinaire positions, an attitude which earned him "a great deal of obloquy from all sides." Taoists and Zen Masters he admired as "men without office and without obligation."

In *Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus* (1966) Merton recognized, from the vantage of historical perspective, that minds like Baudelaire and Rimbaud were able to make explicit contradictions which were as yet only implicit in Milton, contradictions resulting from a theological ambivalence which has struck deep into the modern Christian consciousness: man seeking the solution to all human problems in man himself vs. man seeking redemption in Christ. In that same year Merton began a study of poet-musician Bob Dylan, calling him "the American Villon." Juxtaposing the familiar with the unfamiliar, Merton called *Cables to the Ace* "Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding." Merton was forming inverted mystical connections. Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*, Dylan's *Tarantula* and "Visions of Johanna," *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. Correspondence of moral opposites! Perversion and grace. Darkness and flashing colors.

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' BOB DYLAN



Words, mask and electricity! What do lawlessness and righteousness have in common? What fellowship between night and day, darkness and light, unbeliever and believer?

The life-story of Thomas Merton ended without express narrative closure. Did Merton attain his object (final integration, apotheosis)? Did Merton die losing his object (dissolution of the spirit, apostasy)? Did Merton in the end grasp the Holy Grail or prove himself to be the Black Knight after all?

...the intoxicating ghosts of dogma...telling horrid stories of yesterday's influence - may these voices join with agony & the bells & meet their thousand sonnets now...on this abandoned roof or pagoda they place you.. He wishes to die in the midst of cathedral bells...there is no drunken risk - I am an intimate Egyptian...now you're a plastic vein - you've vanished inside of a perfect message...curious tabernacles move slowly thru your mind...Ah wilderness! darkness! & Simply That...bombing out your young sensitive dignity just to see once & for all there are holes & music in the universe & you realize that nobody's told you about This & that life's not so simple after all...the artists live in the meantime - the meantime dies & in its place come the sometimes - there is never any real time...he takes out his shirt tail & begins to draw circles on the air - "there are magnets on this shirt tail & they all pick up pieces of minute"...& then there's two little boys playing & one says "if I owned the world, each man would have a million dollars" & one says "if I owned the world - each man would have the chance to save the world once in his lifetime"...

The above is not a conflation of texts from Rimbaud but a pastiche of verse lines from Bob Dylan's *Tarantula*,² self-conscious and stream-of-consciousness effusions hammered out during the years 1964 - 1966, Dylan's own "saison en enfer." Fantin-Latour would have drawn him up in charcoal had he lived one hundred years before. Degas could have captured him in chartreuse and vermilion and absinthe sipper, and Carjat on photographic plates his glassy eyes. In his "American Villon" Merton found a manner (hard, austere, acerbic) and matter (the bitter sweet stuff of life itself and the grandeur of gratuitous existence). Merton could certainly also have found something of Baudelaire in Bob Dylan, not the least element being the costume of black, "toujours le meme, a toute heure, en toute saison," a color at once a color and a negation of color, a costume austere, restrained, symbolizing spiritual aloofness if not participation of evil.³ Bob Dylan indeed cultivated the gallows look and croaking voice of Villon and the anti-dandy demeanor of Baudelaire, but it is primarily with Rimbaud that Dylan has most identified himself. "No one is free," he once said, "even the birds are chained to the sky...Rimbaud's where it's at. That's the kind of stuff means something. That is the kind of writing I'm gonna do."⁴ In "Phrases" from *Illuminations* we can almost hear Dylan sing: "I have steeched ropes from steeple to steeple; garlands from window to window; golden chains from star to star, and I dance." Or hear Rimbaud recite: "Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people, they're drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made" from Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free..." from "Mr. Tambourine Man." Rimbaud's "Tale" (*Conte*) and "Side Show" (*Parade*) become "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" and "Gates of Eden", a song which Dylan called "a sacrilegious lullaby in G minor," on *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) and "Ballad of A Thin Man," "Queen Jane Approximately," and "Desolation Row" on *Highway 61 Revisited*. Whether perfect or imperfect verbally, the literary allusions and parallels are so profuse, the metonymy and synecdoche so strong that the art of Dylan can be said to be saturated with that of Rimbaud. But it is his life itself that Dylan has most approximated the Parisian *Voyant*. Like Rimbaud Dylan had come up from the country (Hibbing, Minnesota) to center of artistic creation (New York) after dropping out of college. Highly developed visual imagination and native talent established him quickly at the focus of music and poetry. Maintaining his own principles of art against celebrated performers he offended the elder statesmen of his profession with his genius and his arrogance. Underdeveloped emotionally he fell victim to his own weakness. As author of "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'" Dylan was hailed as spokesman for the New American Spirit. But the traumas of the Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Viet Nam War, the straight-jacket of success caused Dylan to throw off any imagined prophetic mantle. The Bob Dylan Thomas Merton was just meeting was a 25 year old sensitive creative genius caught in a maelstrom of media enlargement and merchandising manipulation, his body, mind and heart

pomped to the point of extinction by the pressures of his situation and his own needs. His life a bombast of sex and electricity (guitar amplification and psychedelics), a carnival of masks and verbal barrage Dylan was restlessly free from social restrictions and slave to his own indulgences. "All at once," commented Theodore Roszak, "Dylan is somewhere beneath the rationalizing cerebrum of social discourse, probing the nightmare deeps, trying to get at the tangled roots of conduct and opinion."⁵ The paradisaical hopes of human progress and salvation through social change were doomed to failure on their own terms. Pseudo-mysticism and charlatan prophecy can only satisfy when genuine religious experience is wanting. Their shallowness and violence cause their death from within. Dylan had become one of the "horrible workers" who begin on the horizon where Rimbaud succumbed. The first study of a man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, *entire*, wrote Rimbaud. He searches his soul, he inspects it, he tests it, he learns it. On 13 May 1871 to George Izambard and on 15 May 1871 to Paul Demeny, Rimbaud wrote what have come to be called the "Letters of the Visionary Poet," explaining and describing his method:

The poet makes himself a visionary through a long, a prodigious and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, keeping only their quintessences. Ineffable torture in which he will need all his faith and super-human strength, the great criminal, the great sick-man, the accursed, and the supreme Savant! For he arrives at the unknown! Since he has cultivated his soul - richer to begin with than any other! He arrives at the unknown and even if, half crazed, in the end, he loses the understanding of his visions, he has seen them! Let him be destroyed in his leap by those unnamable, unutterable and innumerable things: there will come other horrible workers: they will begin at the horizons where he has succumbed.⁶

When asked if he himself had experienced this *dereglement* of all his senses Dylan responded: "Yes!" The Dylan Merton was just experiencing was at his artistic zenith and moral nadir. In an Arthurian myth Bob Dylan would be the Black Knight. Joan Baez, career-catalyst and confidant, now disaffected with Dylan because of his anti-political stance, called his new music "so beautiful and so destructive." She asked poets Michael McClure and Allen Ginsberg to be Dylan's "conscience" because he seemed so incapable of taking care of himself. Dylan gathered around himself a group of "mind guards" as protection. On July 26, 1966 he was felled by a motorcycle accident. Left bodily broken his mind passed from hell. Other "horrible workers" took up the poet-prophet's mantle as Dylan entered a seclusion to last eight years. In 1968 in "I Am A Lonesome Hobo," his quintessential outlaw song, Dylan could be heard declaring to the public: "Where another man's life might begin, that's exactly where mine ends." Dylan's identification with Rimbaud was complete. Rimbaud has "After the Deluge" in *Illuminations*. Dylan entitled the double-record album of his 1974 come-back tour *Before the Flood*. A song written during this period, "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," has Dylan connecting again: "...relationships have all been sad, kind of thin like Verlaine's and Rimbaud's." In the 1976 televised *Hard Rain Concert*, filmed during the "Rolling Thunder Revue" tour of 1975-1976 with other celebrated musicians of the 1960s, including Joan Baez, Rimbaud was listed among contributors with the credits at the end of the program. In 1978 Dylan commented:

I am interested in all aspects of life. Revelations and realizations. Lucid thoughts that can be translated into songs, analogies, new information. I am better at it now. Not really written yet anything to make me stop writing. Like, I haven't come to the place that Rimbaud came to when he decided to stop writing and run guns in Africa.⁷

In 1978 Bob Dylan, a Jew of Russian descent was converted to Christianity. *Christian Bookseller Magazine* dedicated August of 1980 as "Slow Train Coming Month," after the title song of a three-album Christian trilogy (*Saved* and *Shot of Love* followed in 1980 and 1981). Exquisite lyrics, some pure prayer forms, fill these albums. In 1983 Dylan was rumored to be recording a "totally secular" album after renouncing the apocalyptic preacher role he had endorsed for three years. To the press Dylan said Jesus had only preached for three years and he felt it was time for him to move on into other concerns. Returning once again to his Jewish roots Dylan stirred rumors that he was no longer Christian. But when *Infidels* was released in October of 1983 a close listening would prove a

phenomenal fusion of Old and New Testament images and symbols, Christ-figures and assaults on any presuppositions about him. In “Jokerman” he sings: —“Freedom, just around the corner for you, but with Truth so far off, what good will it do?” In “Sweet Heart Like You” do we see Dylan or ourselves?

You know, news of you has come down the line, even before ya came in the door. They say in your father’s house, there’s many mansions, each one of them got a fireproof floor. Snap out of it, baby, people are jealous of you. They smile to your face, but behind your back they hiss... They say that patriotism is the last refuge to which a scoundrel clings. Steal a little and they throw you in jail. Steal a lot and they make you King. There’s only one step down from here, baby. It’s called the land of permanent bliss. What’s a sweetheart like you doin’ in a dump like this?⁸

In 1970 Bob Dylan was granted an honorary Doctor of Music degree by Princeton University as one of “those who have conferred the greatest benefits either upon their country or upon mankind as a whole.” In a special Bicentennial publication *The Saturday Evening Post* hailed Dylan as both a “thermometer of the political climate and barometer of the cultural changes constantly going on around him and inside him.” In many ways, the tribute continued, Bob Dylan’s story is like an “American odyssey.” In 1979 Dylan was granted the Grammy Award for Best Male Vocalist of the Year. The song for which he was honored, “Serve Somebody,” a parade of humanity as all-inclusive as anything from his 1960s work, challenged:

But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed. You’re gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

In 1982 Dylan was inducted into the American Songwriters Hall of Fame. In a rare moment of self-disclosure, Dylan is as laconic and cryptic about himself as Rimbaud ever was. Dylan once described his self—understanding as artist:

I had just made up my mind very early that if there was anything you wanted, you really had to make an attempt to sacrifice everything, a lot of things. There was nothing I really wanted, you see, like money and things. I didn’t want anything like that. I knew whatever I did had to be something creative, something that was *me* that did it, something I could do just for me. And I made up my mind not to have anything. I was about seventeen, eighteen, and I knew there was nothing I ever wanted, materially, and I just made it from there, from that feeling.⁹

Elsewhere Dylan explained his effort was to do consciously what he had once been able to do unconsciously but in a way that had “drilled him down,”¹⁰ and:

You don’t have to starve to be a good artist. You just have to have love, insight and a strong point of view. And you have to fight off depravity. Uncompromising, that’s what makes a good artist...Well, certain truths I know. Not necessarily myself but certain accumulation of experience that has become real to me and a knowledge that I acquired on the road. One is that if you try to be anyone but yourself, you will fail; if you are not true to your own heart, you will fail. Then again, there’s no success like failure. We’re not looking to succeed. Just by our being and acting alive, we succeed. You fail only when you let death creep in and take over a part of your life that should be alive. Death don’t come knocking at the door. It’s there in the morning when you wake up. Did you ever clip your fingernails, cut your hair? Then you experience death.¹¹

In an interview in March 1984 Dylan answered to an inquiry about whether his three Christian albums were inspired by some sort of born-again religious experience:

I would never call it that. I’ve never said I’m born again. That’s just a media term. I don’t think I’ve ever been an agnostic. I’ve always thought there’s a superior power, that this is not the real world and that there’s a world to come. That no soul has died, every soul is alive, either in holiness or in flames. And there’s probably a lot of middle ground.¹²

In "Gates of Eden" (1965) Bob Dylan imaged solitude of spirit, peace, wisdom and transcendental realities:

With a time-rusted blade, Aladdin and his lamp, sits with Utopian hermit monks, side saddle on the Golden Calf, and on their promises of paradise, you will not hear a laugh, all except inside the Gates of Eden.

Had the Black Knight too glimpsed the Holy Grail? In death will he prove himself to be the White Knight after all.

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Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), a child of beauty and goodness, was sometime in his youth brutally initiated into the realities of sexuality, most likely by French soldiers with whom he stayed after running away from home to escape an oppressive mother. Negative affects from childhood exacerbated by this tragedy left him psycho-spiritually destroyed. "During his adolescence," wrote Caryl Houselander, "the gold-haired, blue-eyed boy suddenly became a fiend."¹³ All the dark symbols from his subconscious ran wild as Rimbaud ragged to make himself "monstrous":

I became an adept at simple hallucinations...Then I would explain my magic sophisms with the hallucination of words! Finally, I came to regard as sacred the disorder of my mind...At last, O happiness, O reason, I brushed from the sky the azure that is darkness, and I lived - gold spark of pure light...I became a fabulous opera.¹⁴

Rimbaud chose the way of perversity and strove to arrive at the "unknown" through a martyrdom of suffering in his senses. "The suffering will be tremendous," he told Izambard, "but one must be strong, to be a poet: it is not my fault. It is wrong to say I think. One should say: I am thought." Rimbaud received the religious symphony of his age as a cacophony. He scrawled obscenities against God across church doors. His was a war against God and man, blasphemous, sacrilegious, disgusting, sarcastic, indecent, scornful, vulgar and relentless. But the "all of his faith" was faith in himself as a poet and as his frustration increased his self-destruction mounted its counter-attack. Not being God Rimbaud could neither fully realize nor fully express his experience and he abandoned poetry, taking refuge in the flight to Abyssinia and solace in illegal commerce in the gun trade. The debauched visionary became an ascetic in action. At the time of his death, it seems, Rimbaud was reconciled to his family and to God through the sacraments. Some would condemn him, others canonize him. "The core of his being," wrote biographer Enid Starkie, "was purity and innocence with a yearning for absolute perfection."¹⁵

Thomas Merton nowhere confused religious experience and aesthetic experience. He knew the pits and the pergolas of his own fabulous opera and left librettoes in *My Argument with the Gestapo* and *The Seven Story Mountain*, in *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. He did not have to invent an imaginary Saturnalia to realize his "antithetical self."¹⁶ A logical and consistent contemplative appreciation of decadent aesthetics acquired through his study of poets such as Rimbaud and Bob Dylan can be deduced from Merton's writings.¹⁶ Merton's final writings indicate a confusion attempting to define itself in a time of crisis. Merton refused to accept holiness and docility as coordinates. He met Bob Dylan on the common ground of human suffering - psychological vulnerability, spiritual uncertainty, social insecurity - and together they enlightened and assaulted the sensibilities of their times. How we judge them - as anarchists ultimately, or as authentic poetic voices speaking in genuine prophecy will finally tell us more about ourselves than of Merton or Dylan. Should this actually happen their true service has been fulfilled. Both having had their own season in hell, Dylan and Merton met the real White Knight with his mask down and learned that man is but an enfleshment of him. And on *Infidels* Dylan sings:

"You know that sometimes Satan comes as a man of peace."

NOTES

¹*The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart. (New York : A New Directions Book, 1981), p. 381.

²Bob Dylan, *Tarantula*; first published in the United States by the Macmillan Company in 1971. (New York : Penquin Books, 1977), pp. 2, 17, 73, 74, 84, 118, 27, 3, 9, 136, 137.

³Ellen Moers, *The Dandy : Brummell to Beerbohm* (Lincoln, Nebraska : University of Nebraska Press, 1978), p. 272. Moers is quoting a friend of Baudelaire.

⁴Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan : An Intimate Biography* (New York : New American Library/Signet Books, 1973), pp. 196-197; comments about Dylan and Rimbaud, pp. 100, 175, 255.

⁵Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture : Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (New York : Doubleday & Company, Inc./Anchor Books, 1969), p. 63.

⁶Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations and Other Prose Poems* (New York : A New Directions Paperback, 1957), pp. xxx-xxxi.

⁷*Bob Dylan In His Own Words*; compiled by Barry Miles; edited by Pearce Marchbank (New York : Quick Fox Books/Book Sales Limited, 1978): Malibu Interview, January 1978, p. 121.

⁸Bob Dylan, "Sweetheart Like You," *Infidels* Songbook, Special Rider Music, 1983, p. 11.

⁹Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, pp. 142-143.

¹⁰*The Rolling Stone Interviews : Talking with the Legends of Rock & Roll*; (introduction by Ben Fong-Torres; edited by Peter Herbst. (New York : St. Martin's Press/Rolling Stone Magazine, 1981): Bob Dylan interviewed by Johathan Cott, September 1978, pp. 358-359; Interviews also on pp. 10ff; pp. 76ff.

¹¹*Bob Dylan In His Own Words*, Malibu Interview, p. 126.

¹²*Rolling Stone Magazine* Issue No. 424, June 21st, 1984, Bob Dylan interviewed by Kurt Loder, p. 17. Dylan in black coat on cover photograph.

¹³Caryll Houselander, *Guilt* (New York : Sheed & Ward, 1951), p. 264.

¹⁴Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell & The Drunken Boat* (New York : New Directions, 1961), pp. 55, 61, 65.

¹⁵Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud* (New York : New Directions, 1961), p. 86.

¹⁶*Literary Essays*, pp. 92-116, 333, 338-354, 360-361, 380. Also the Prologue to *Raids on the Unspeakeable*.