Samut Prakhan: The Zen Death of Thomas Merton

By **Donald E. Grayston**

This article, written by Donald Grayston in late 1975, has never previously been published.

In his tribute to Thomas Merton, British Benedictine monk Aldhelm Cameron-Brown describes the classical pattern of the Zen master's death, and then describes another kind of Zen death. "It occurs when a man stays in one monastery for over twenty-five years, hardly ever leaving it . . . and then at last travels half way round the world, to die suddenly on foreign soil. Merton himself would have laughed at the absurdity of such a death; indeed, he is probably laughing now."[1] Cameron-Brown takes absurdity as the prime mark of this type of Zen death; and the absurd, seen here in the interface between the stability of Merton's monastic life and the bizarre suddenness of his death, is indeed an element – acted out or spoken, as parable or *koan* – in the classical Zen death. Yet its accompanying elements – the master's sense of his approaching death, and the gathering of his disciples to witness it – are also observable in Merton's case. As we shall see, he gave expression, in writing and conversation, to his sense of death's approach, for years before the event; and his death, in Samut Prakhan, some thirty kilometers from Bangkok, on December 10, 1968, took place at an international conference of monastics, many of whom had been for years his disciples through their reading of his works on monastic renewal. "It was his presence here that drew us," they wrote to his abbot after his death, "and from the very moment of his arrival he was the center of all proceedings."[2]

Cameron-Brown need not have put Merton's death into a separate category; the category of accidental death suffices for the historic or medical facts. But Cameron-Brown was only one of many commentators on Merton's death who felt constrained to record their sense of its strangeness. Without doubt, the interval between the first news of Merton's sudden death and the later reports of its cause and circumstances accounts to some extent for these reactions. Yet even after these reports were published, friends and colleagues continued to react to the numinosity of his death by expressing their conviction of his foreknowledge of it; by a somewhat macabre linking of the manner of it to his remark in the last line of *The Seven Storey Mountain* about coming to know, in death, "the Christ of the burnt men"; and by confessing their desire, as well as their inability, to see it as part of a larger and divine design.[3]

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But from their comments no consensus, no design emerges. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to try to draw together into a coherent pattern, through a Jungian hermeneutic, the references, dreams and synchronicities which lead up to and follow Merton's death. I am attempting in so doing to establish the suitability of Merton as a subject for investigation under the rubric of biography as theology, an enterprise in which, I am convinced, unconscious as well as conscious and external evidence must be taken into account. On this foundation I then reflect on the "reshuffling effect"[4] on our understanding of Christian life and death in the Zen death of Thomas Merton.

Merton on Death

What were Merton's own thoughts on death? A good place to begin to look for these is in his personal and political journal, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,[5] which covers the period 1956-1965. It contains three dreams which speak clearly, in the language of the unconscious, of Merton's awareness of the approach of death; a close reading of these texts will constitute the central portion of this essay. The typescript of this journal (originally called "Barth's Dream and Other Conjectures"), sent to the publishers in 1965, contains a longish reflection on his death which was omitted from the published version. Headed "New Year's Eve," the date following ("Dec 31 1960") is crossed out by hand. By his references in this passage to 1973 and by inference to a time twelve years earlier (references crossed out by hand, as indicated below), Merton seems to have been casting his mind back to 1949, the year of his ordination, or perhaps 1948, the year of the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and then ahead a similar number of years into the future.

> I wonder if it will be given to me ~~to see another twelve years~~ to come to New Year's Day in 1973. It is an absurd but natural concern. To wonder if I might live to be fifty seven. Why fifty seven? Is there not a more interesting age than that? But after all, what makes us imagine that one age is better than another, or more meaningful[?] What foolish perspectives we get into by having faith in calendars, as if numbers were a great and solemn reality, profoundly significant, a sure thing, monitors along the road of life. Numbers, good old numbers, voiceless, faceless: they will surely be there with nothing to say. Their presence is no indication of *kairos*. But what is likely to happen in ~~twelve more~~ these next years? The question has a seeming importance, at least relative. Is the final war so feared and so expected that our fears and expectations make it impossible? . . . ~~Twelve~~ Ten more years, or five or three? How long before our insanity works itself out to its logical conclusion?[6]

It is clear from this that he is placing the prospect of his death in a framework of thought about nuclear war, and equally clear that it is his own mortality which has sparked the reflection. This becomes explicit in a passage which was included in *Conjectures*, where it immediately follows the third dream which we shall examine. "I think sometimes that I may soon die, although I am not yet old (forty-seven). I don't know exactly what kind of conviction this thought carries with it or what I mean by it. Death is always a possibility for everyone. We live in the presence of this possibility. So I have a habitual awareness that I may die, and that, if this is God's will, then I am glad. 'Go ye forth to meet Him'" (*CGB* 171, quoting Mt. 25:6). Merton turned 47 in January 1962, and the omitted passage dates from the end of 1960. So we can say that the years 1960-62 were years of particular preoccupation on his part with death. The other major personal reference in *Conjectures* is not dateable,

beyond the fact that like everything else in the book it will have been written in 1965 or earlier; that it comes later in the book than the last passage is no guarantee that it was written later. It is longer, more psychologically speculative, and combines existential reflection with spiritual affirmation:

> The change that is working itself out in me comes to the surface of my psyche in the form of deep upheavals of impatience, resentment, disgust. And yet I am a joyful person, I like life, and I have really nothing to complain of. Then suddenly a tide of this unexpected chill comes up out of the depths: and I breathe the cold air of darkness, the sense of void! . . . And I say to my body: "Oh, all right, then *die*, you idiot." But that is not what it is trying to do. It is my impatience that thinks of this in terms of death. . . . My body . . . is only saying: "Let's go a little slower for a change." Nor is it just "the body" that is talking. Where does this naked and cold darkness come from? . . . Thus, putting it in the form of a question, it comes out like "Who are you when you do not exist?" . . . When the question presents itself as an alien chill, it is . . . telling me that I am too concerned with trivialities. That life is losing itself in trifles which cannot bear inspection in the face of death. . . . That I must begin to face the deepest of all decisions – "the answer of death" – *the acceptance of the death sentence* – and with joy, because of the victory of Christ. (*CGB* 239-40)

These last words bring us to a consideration of Merton's more specifically theological references to death. As we would expect, they are made against the backdrop of the monastic institution, which has always cultivated in its members the "habitual awareness" of death as over against a "vague awareness."[7] But any monasticism, including Merton's own Cistercian tradition, if it does nothing to help its members face "the deepest of all decisions," becomes itself one of those "trifles which cannot bear inspection." The monk, however, cannot be satisfied with trivialization, but must fulfill the office which is properly his, "to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life" (*AJ* 306). This going-beyond is effected, and experienced by the monk (or any believer), "when death is accepted in a spirit of faith, and when one's whole life is oriented to self-giving so that at its end one gladly and freely surrenders it back into the hands of God the Creator and Redeemer" (*CGB* 213). This kind of offering is only possible, of course, if it has become innate, connatural, organic to life. If it has, then death can be for the monk

> the last free perfect act of love which is at once surrender and acceptance: the surrender of his being into the hands of God, who made it, and the acceptance of the death which in its details and circumstances is perhaps very significantly in continuity with all the acts and incidents of life . . . . It is the final seal his freedom sets upon the love and trust with which it has striven to live.[8]

This continuity in "details and circumstances" was remarked on by Jean Leclercq (who had invited Merton to the conference at which he died), when he wrote of Merton's death as being, as his life had been, "*au service du monachisme, de la rencontre des religions, de toute l'humanité, de Dieu*" ["at the service of monasticism, of interfaith encounter, of all humankind, of God."].[9] So death, in Merton's Christian and monastic perspective, was an act of giving-in-love, of surrender and acceptance, an act which in its authenticity would continue to image forth the character of the person dying.[10] As I will demonstrate, this understanding, drawn from his consciously-affirmed statements, is in full continuity both with his dreams and with his death itself.

Three Dreams of Premonition

Merton's dreams had interested him, at least enough for him to record and publish some of them, during the last two decades of his life. In addition to the dreams in *Conjectures*, both *The Sign of Jonas* and the *Asian Journal* contain accounts of dreams which intrigued him. "He himself never read anything prophetic into his dreams; but neither did he attribute them to an undigested blob of mustard! They interested him, and he recorded them without drawing conclusions as to their esoteric meaning; he recorded them without commenting [on] why so many of his dreams approximated the actualities that followed them."[11] Irving Sussman, whose comment here is confirmed by Merton's monastic colleague John Eudes Bamberger,[12] goes on to point out in the same article a connection between the third dream we will examine ("The Stranger"), and the premonition, quoted above, which follows it in *Conjectures*.[13] The other two dreams, which in my view are equally premonitory of Merton's death, I have named "The Dancers" and "The Great Swim." Before examining them, however, let me offer a brief account of the interpretive method I have used to reflect on them.

A dream, according to Jung, is a "spontaneous self-portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious."[14] Because it is symbolic, it needs interpretation, and authentic interpretation requires an attempt to formulate its meaning in terms of the conscious situation of the dreamer. One method of doing this is *correlation*,[15] which involves the setting side-by-side of the outer and inner aspects of the life of the dreamer: "It is a balancing on the one hand of the symbols that occur in dreams and . . . on the other hand, either the actual life situation as it is occurring in the present moment, or the pattern of movement that expresses the inner continuity of the life as a whole" (Progoff 34).

The symbols which present themselves for interpretation are of two kinds: those of a personal character, which appear to refer to personal experiences, remembered or forgotten, and those of an impersonal character, which Jung attributes to the aspect of the unconscious which is transpersonal or collective. These latter symbols Jung calls archetypes – underlying patterns of symbol formation that express universal representations of human life, death, rebirth, and the struggle, transformation and possible union of the opposites within human personality. Since the unconscious, like consciousness, operates continuously, the correlation will be most successful when dreams as "the visible links in a chain of unconscious events"[16] can be interpreted in a series. These symbols, according to Jung, are to be interpreted teleologically; for in his clinical experience, symbols could express tendencies not yet consciously present to the dreamer, but germinative in the unconscious. Not infrequently, he found himself able to follow patients into the immediate presence of death by this kind of interpretation. Although the outward situation of the patient need not prompt thoughts of death (Merton, as we know, was vigorous and productive), the symbolism cast up in dreams can throw an anticipatory shadow, an *adumbratio*, upon the patient's life. The future, in other words, casts its shadow on the present. The task of the analyst, on this methodology, is to assist the dreamer to incorporate the dream's meaning into his/her conscious understanding, and thereby to approach more closely the goal (the *telos*) of human wholeness which Jung calls individuation. Our task in this essay, more limited, is a parallel one: to try to understand the meaning of particular dreams of a person significant to us as a spiritual guide.

First Dream: The Dancers

> In a dream I saw people dancing new dances, with great gestures: a ballet. One of the dancers, in tight-fitting velvet of olive green, was a dark-haired woman, her hair cut close and shapeless like a boy's. In the middle of the dance she turned over sideways or backwards and touched the floor with her hands, very easily, but with a curious impossible gesture. I observed that all the dancers were serious, elegant, and bored. Their expressions of boredom were, however, slightly different from what they once were when I was in the world. Then men came into the room with straw caps. Kentucky politicians. (*CGB* 7)

In relation to Merton's life and thought, what do the terms of this dream suggest, and with what can they be correlated? The *dance*, of course, is life. Merton uses this image in his magnificent conclusion to *New Seeds of Contemplation*, in which he speaks of the "mysterious, cosmic dance" of God, the "dance of the Lord in emptiness" which is the world and time, the "general dance" to which all humankind is called.[17] These dances are new; a new act or form is beginning in life's *ballet* – one of Merton's images for the Eucharist, for Merton the liturgical point at which life was celebrated as a whole.[18] *One of the dancers*, dressed in *olive green* (not the first green of spring, but rather a somber, mature shade of green), *dark-haired*, *touched the floor with her hands*. Can this androgynous creature be the mature soul? Is her touching of the floor death, the return to the earth? This touching takes place *sideways or backwards*, that is, not in a natural or expected way, but in a *curious impossible* way; and in *the middle of the dance* of life, when (if it refers to death) the person dying is at his/her prime. The *boredom* of the dancers suggests that they do not comprehend the newness of the dances, or, possibly, that the action of the dance takes place on a plane different in some basic way from the usual plane on which their life is lived.

Second Dream: The Great Swim

> A dream: I am invited to a party. The people are dressed in fine new clothes, walking about by the waterfront of a small fishing village of old stone houses. The gay, light dresses of the women contrast with the dark stones of the houses. I am invited to the party with them, and suddenly they are all gone, and the party is much farther away than I thought it would be. I must get there in a boat. I am all alone; the boat is at the quay. A man of the town says that for five dollars I can get across on a yacht. I have five dollars, more than five dollars, hundreds of dollars, and also francs. He takes me to the yacht, but it is not a yacht. It is a workaday fishing schooner, which I prefer. But it does not move from shore. It is very heavy. We try to push it off, it does not move, we try in many ways to make it move, and it seems to have moved a little. But then I know that I must strike out and swim. And I am swimming ahead in the beautiful magic water of the bay. From the clear depths of the water comes a wonderful life to which I am not entitled, a life and a power which I both love and fear. I know that by diving down into the water I can find wonders and joys, but that it is not for me to dive down; rather I must go to the other side, and I am indeed swimming to the other side. The other side is

> there. The end of the swim. The house is on the shore. The wide summer house which I am reaching with the strength that came to me from the water. The water is great and vast beneath me as I come toward the shore. And I have arrived. I am out of the water. I know now all that I must do in the summer house. I know that I must first play with this dog who comes running from one of the halls. I know the Child will come, and He comes. The Child comes and smiles. It is the smile of a Great One, hidden. He gives to me, in simplicity, two pieces of buttered white bread, the ritual and hieratic meal given to all who come to stay. (*CGB* 20)

This time, the *party* is life. The contrast between the women in their gay, light dresses and the dark stones of the houses evokes the world of Merton's youth with its pleasures and its sufferings. He knows that he is invited to the party with others; but suddenly they are all gone, and he is all alone; everyone has to get to the party on his/her own. An unidentified stranger, *a man of the town*, suddenly appears (he will reappear in a more active role in the third dream). Merton has *dollars, and also francs*; he has the resources which his life and education in both France and the United States have given him, and these he brings with him into his monastic life. They will pay for his passage on the *yacht* which becomes the *workaday fishing schooner* – the monastic institution the glories of which Merton sings in his first years within it, and which he later comes to see as something which after much effort *only seems to have moved a little* – or perhaps it represents the institutional church as a whole. Relatively unsuccessful at moving the schooner, he realizes that he must *strike out and swim* on his own. This refers first, I speculate, to the critical period of unnamed sickness (1949-50) which Merton experienced after his ordination and after the profound self-emptying effected by the writing and publication of his autobiography (see *SJ* 230-31). On Jung's understanding, this would be an instance of the abandonment by the individual of the security primarily found in an established belief-system or institution; and certainly, at this time he had reached the end of the specific goals prescribed for him by that system. If he was then to seek truth for himself, to strike out and swim, the psychic precondition for this would be, as it was, a regression of libido leading to a neurosis. Libido is directed away from external living down toward the activation of unconscious contents which, when recognized by the conscious mind, provide the materials with which the dreamer can establish a new psychic equilibrium. From this time of sickness, Merton emerged much stronger psychically, empowered with self-knowledge and compassion, and prepared for his new tasks of spiritual formation of the scholastics and novices of Gethsemani, and, as time went on, spiritual guide, formal and informal, to thousands. A second reference of this image is more simply recognizable. In becoming a hermit for the last three years of his life, he struck out and swam into the spiritual adventure which took him through the challenge of solitude, to Asia and to death. It was a time of moving aside from his community, not by inner withdrawal as during his sickness, but by physical separateness in the attempt to advance further, along the path of solitude, in the spiritual search.

So he finds himself swimming, in *water* which is *beautiful*, *magic* and *clear*. It is the water of the *bay*, a part of the sea, which in many mythologies is a supreme symbol of the unconscious, the power-charged and numinous substrate of the psyche. Its clarity points to Merton as an individuated person, or at least a person on the path to individuation, one in whom the murkiness of an unintegrated relationship between conscious and unconscious has been mitigated, if not completely resolved. He knows that the water holds in its depths *wonders and joys*; he knows also that he must not be seduced

by their powerful attractiveness into diving down to find them,[19] but must continue his great swim until he reaches the other side. This is a term, notable in Tibetan religion, for the achievement of "the great realization," spiritual transformation;[20] it is also a symbol of death. Less than a month before his death, both meanings come together – and in a Tibetan context – in a dream which he had in India:

> Last night I had a curious dream about Kanchenjunga. I was looking at the mountain and it was pure white, absolutely pure, especially the peaks that lie to the west. And I saw the pure beauty of their shape and outline, all in white. And I heard a voice saying – or got the clear idea of: "There is another side to the mountain." I realized that it was turned around and everything was lined up differently; I was seeing it from the Tibetan side. (*AJ* 152 [11/19/1968])

He reaches this other side through the *strength* that comes to him from the water, the unconscious; and he knows that before the end of his time in the summer house he must *play with the dog* – common mythologem of death, more specifically, a guide to the land of the dead, Cerberus, for example. In language derived from the Psalms, Merton uses this symbolism in his poem "Unpublished Litany," included in Rice's memoir:

> *It yawns at me the cavernous gulf.*
> *Find, find the nuns and make them pray.*
> *De ore Leonis, libera nos Domine: and*
> *again, De manu canis unicam meam.*
> *Hand of the dog reaching out*
> *from under fur, lousy false dog.*
> *What is to be done?*
> *Miserere.* (Rice 9)[21]

Having played with the dog, he is now ready to meet the *Child*. With this image, Merton's dream has activated one of the most powerful archetypes known, that of the Divine Child. The Child represents all that is weak and exposed, *and* all that is divinely powerful: the unconscious state of early childhood, the anticipation of rebirth, and the urge in every being to realize itself, an urge strikingly revealed in the miraculous deeds of the child-hero, such as Hercules, or Jesus in the Temple. Its appearance, like the clarity of the water, signifies the nearness of the dreamer to individuation, both in terms of unity or synthesis, as well as futurity – the Child being potential future and the fruitful sign of the union in the personality of the psychic opposites, namely the Self.[22] In Christian terms, as used by Eckhart, for example, God incarnates Godself as Christ through the Spirit in the creature. This is part of what it means for persons to "become like children" (Matthew 18:3 [NRSV]), or to be "born from above" (John 3:3 [NRSV]). Eckhart's description of this was familiar to Merton, as he indicates in this brief and astonishing quotation in *Conjectures*: "Eckhart, in a sermon on the divine birth, says that, when a person is about to be struck by a thunderbolt, he turns unconsciously toward it. When a tree is about to be struck, all the leaves turn toward the blow. And one in whom the divine birth is to take place turns, without realizing, completely toward it" (*CGB* 169). The Divine Child *comes and smiles*; and as an archetype of God, his smile, the regard of his countenance, is death, as Moses was warned (cf. Exodus 33:20). But the Child can also represent the dreamer himself, who through the heroic deed of the great swim and the thunderbolt of the divine smile has experienced the divine birth of which Eckhart speaks.[23] Merton evidences the fascination which this image held

for him in his account of the dream of Karl Barth which gave the preliminary title to *Conjectures*. In that dream, Barth finds himself appointed as examiner in theology to Mozart, through whose music, he says, "a child, even a 'divine' child" (*CGB* 3) speaks to us.[24]

The Child gives him *two pieces of buttered white bread*, the food of immortality (what the Tibetans call *mendrup*), "the fruits of the tree in the Western Land,"[25] the land of death, or of the afterlife. Its double character and the fact that it is buttered simply carry to a superlative degree this basic meaning; and we are told that it is given *to all who come to stay.*[26] This last expression, with its tone of finality, was not present in the earlier version found in "Barth's Dream," in which the final sentence simply concludes with "buttered white bread, my hieratic meal." Sometimes the editing of a dream will distort its meaning; but it can also happen that in the retelling of a dream, an authentic aspect, forgotten, can re-emerge; and in view of Merton's death, it would seem that this is what happened here.

Third Dream: The Stranger

> I dreamt I was lost in a great city and was walking "toward the center" without quite knowing where I was going. Suddenly I came to a dead end, but on a height, looking at a great bay, an arm of the harbor. I saw a whole section of the city spread out before me on hills covered with light snow, and realized that, though I had far to go, I knew where I was: because in this city there are two arms of the harbor and they help you to find your way, as you are always encountering them. Then, in this city, I speak with a stranger in the library (being still on my way). I realize that there is a charterhouse here, and that I have been meaning to go there, to speak to the prior about my vocation. I ask "where is the charterhouse?" He says: "I am just going to drive that way, and I go right by it. I will take you." I accept his offer, realizing that it is providential. (*CGB* 170-71)

Like the second, this third dream was slightly edited by Merton. In the original version, in "Barth's Dream," the entire dream was in the present tense, normally the most suitable tense for the contents of the unconscious, experienced as not bound by time. After the first draft of "Barth's Dream," however, Merton puts the first paragraph in the past tense, and leaves the second in the present. To read the whole dream in the present tense, however, as Merton originally wrote it, heightens the reader's sense of its numinosity and of its origin in the unconscious. Once again, it speaks of death. Merton is walking *toward the center*, in Gnostic as in Indian mythology the limit of human experience, the metaphysical location where the subject is finally *nirdvanda*, freed from the opposites. It is also a symbol for the final realization of the Self – the *apex mentis*, *le point vierge*. On the way to the center, Merton comes to a dead end (a pun from the unconscious) overlooking a *great bay*, *an arm of the harbor*. The sea again appears, still symbolizing the unconscious, this time not as the source of power but as the organ of orientation. The hills are covered with *light snow*, and he has *far to go*: a journey in winter, the journey of death, lies before him.

In the *library* – a sign of Merton's attraction to the intellectual quest, and to some extent a sign of an over-functioning of one psychic function, thinking (but then he is *still on his way*) he speaks with *a stranger*. In myth and dreams, death often comes as a stranger, sometimes a helpful or handsome stranger.[27] In a poem by Merton contemporary with *Conjectures*, the image of the stranger comes together with the image of the "unplanned crossing," the place of mortality, of the mortal meeting which can take place anywhere, possibly in a place of harbors:

> We have found places where the Lord of Songs
> visits his beloved. Crossroads. Hilltops. Market towns.
> Ball courts. Harbors. Crossroads. Meeting places.
> Bridges. Places where the Lord of Songs
> is refreshed. Crossroads.
> It is when the Stranger is met and known
> at the unplanned crossing
> that the Nameless becomes a Name.[28]

In the Christian tradition, the *locus classicus* of this motif is Luke 24:13-35, the "unplanned crossing" of Jesus with his two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Merton used this motif in a passage in *No Man Is an Island* which was selected for the first reading at the special prayer service offered at Gethsemani the day after his death:[29]

> If, at the moment of our death, death comes to us as an unwelcome stranger, it will be because Christ also has always been to us an unwelcome stranger. For when death comes, Christ comes also, bringing us the everlasting life which He has bought for us by His own death. Those who love true life, therefore, frequently think about their death. Their life is full of a silence that is an anticipated victory over death. Silence, indeed, makes death our servant and even our friend. Thoughts and prayers that grow up out of the silent thought of death are like trees growing where there is water. . . . They turn the face of our soul, in constant desire, toward the face of Christ.[30]

The important word here is "unwelcome." But Merton, Christ's disciple, had welcomed his master, "in constant desire," throughout his life as Christian and monk. He does not hesitate to welcome the stranger in the dream – and then asks him where the *charterhouse* is. This is a highly personal symbol of solitude – in this context, of the final aloneness with God which is death – with strong reverberations in Merton's history. In his early years at Gethsemani, Merton struggled with the desire to move to the strictest of all contemplative orders, the Carthusians ("charterhouse" is the English word for a Carthusian monastery) (see *SJ* 20, 65-66, 137, 243-44; *CGB* 165, 235). He eventually came to regard this desire as a temptation: "As soon as God gets you in one monastery you want to be in another" (*NSC* 260) – a temptation which had also been experienced by his spiritual patron, St. John of the Cross. He was finally to obtain what he had been seeking by the permission he was given to live as a hermit at Gethsemani itself.

So he has been meaning to go to the charterhouse, to speak about his vocation to *the prior*, the title of the superior of a Carthusian monastery. At Samut Prakhan he would indeed meet the One who above all is "prior," as the comment of those who wrote to his abbot after his death indicates: "it was obvious that he had found Him Whom he had searched for so diligently" (*AJ* 346). The stranger says *I will take you*; and Merton responds, *I accept his offer*. Death comes to take him, and he does not resist: "Go ye forth to meet him." In the first dream, Merton was an observer, uninvolved. In the second he was a participant, experiencing himself as the performer of a great deed. In this third dream, he is again involved, with the message of the second being repeated by means of different but consonant symbols. But its distinctive place in the series is indicated by the dreamer's realization expressed in its concluding words – *it is providential*. Meaning is drawn from and added to the experience of the dreams, and the series can thus be seen as a whole; and so the

next paragraph in *Conjectures* begins, in words we have already read, "I think sometimes that I may soon die" (*CGB* 171).[31]

Numen and Synchronicity

On the basis of these dreams, we can postulate that Merton, revealed by them as a highly individuated person, had dream-conveyed knowledge of his own death; as Jung says, the future can cast its shadow on the present. In addition to these dreams, however, there also exists a cluster around his death of external events which have been noted, with more or less mystification, by friends and other commentators. Taken together, these two categories comprise an instance of what Jung, in a word of his own coinage, calls synchronicity, understood as the meaningful coincidence of acausally-related events. This coincidence – Progoff suggests "co-occurrence" as a more exact term (Progoff 23) – is more than simple chance, because it is experienced as meaning-bearing, even if the meaning cannot be fully elucidated. Nor are the categories causally related, as if in this instance Merton's death "caused" the events we recount. What does happen is that a psychic state is linked with a corresponding physical event in a relation transcendent of time and perceived as connected by meaning. Without this connection, these events would simply be simultaneous, or, as Jung says, synchronous, but not synchronistic. Each event has its own more-or-less traceable chain of causality; but causality is of no help in the lateral attempt to find meaning. The linking function is a contingent one, effected by the presence of the archetypal factor, which serves as a center to constellate the various elements into a meaningful gestalt. Until meaning is perceived, we have only co-incidence in the ordinary sense of the word; but the archetype permits the recognition of a "new quality of orderedness that permeates and characterizes the new situation as it exists *across time*" (Progoff 161).[32] It is a process which increases in numinosity in proportion to the number of terms so constellated. A classic example, minus the term, is familiar to every reader of the Gospels. "When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. . . . Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Mark 15:33, 37-38 [NRSV]). There is darkness, Jesus dies, and the curtain is torn in two. No causal relationship is suggested; but the terms are correlated by the evangelist because of their illuminative co-occurrence.

Similar co-occurrences can be related to the dreams of Merton that we have considered. The visit to Gethsemani in the fall of 1968 of Tom Cahill, a travelling musician and dancer, illuminates the first dream, "The Dancers." He danced for the monks in their chapter room, and at the end of his dancing "to the chant of Tibetan monks did a 'piece' in honor of Father Louis . . . now on pilgrimage to the monastic orient. He did this in a woolen monastic cowl and it was very very beautiful." This comment, from monk of Gethsemani Matthew Kelty, was included in a letter published in *Monastic Exchange* (an intramural Cistercian journal). Then in a postscript he says:

> This letter was written last Fall after Tom had come and gone. As it turned out, his dance for Father Louis was prophetic: he danced the length of the chapter room and out the west door and did not return. It was the finale. Someone remarked to me at the time: "It means Louie is not coming back." He didn't. And the call to turn west to the east is still in my memory, written in [a] large beckoning gesture.[33]

The second dream, "The Great Swim," offers many similar connections. Karl Barth, to whom on the plane of salvation Merton himself is to be linked through the presence in each of them of the archetype of the Divine Child, died the same day as did Merton, December 10, 1968.[34] The ending of the first entry in *Conjectures* we can read as Merton's epitaph for them both. "Fear not, Karl Barth! Trust in the divine mercy. Though you have grown up to become a theologian, Christ remains a child in you. Your books (and mine) matter less than we might think! There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation" (*CGB* 4). The paragraph from which this is taken was printed in the form of service for Merton's requiem, and occurs there between the end of the funeral mass and the beginning of the burial office. Also at this point, the second movement of Mozart's Sonata in D Major (K.311), the *Andante*, was played on the organ by Chrysogonus Waddell, the musicologist of Gethsemani. He chose to use the Barth passage and the Mozart selection for reasons which he recounts in an article about Merton's funeral:

> I had a rather curious experience the day we received news of Fr. Louis' death. I was up to my neck in work connected with the texts and music of the Christmas season, and felt more than a bit uncomfortable at being several days behind schedule in the various projects. I was working as usual in the trailer hidden behind a knob a bit less than a mile from the monastery, where I have most of the tools of the musical trade I need for my work – including a somewhat battered but still serviceable spinet piano. I had been working all morning, felt worn out, but felt no less the need for pushing on with the work at hand. I was a bit surprised, then, suddenly to find myself at the piano with the Kalmus ur-text of the Mozart sonatas open on the music rack and my fingers moving over the keys. Here I was, playing Mozart, and thinking about the opening pages of Fr. Louis' *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where he writes so wonderfully well about Karl Barth and Mozart. A few minutes later the phone rang. It was our cantor, Br. Chrysostom, calling to tell me that Fr. Flavian [the abbot] had just announced to the brethren the news about Fr. Louis' sudden death in Bangkok. A few hours later I learned that Karl Barth had died the same day.[35]

The article continues, discussing the challenges of planning this liturgy, without comment on this collocation of Merton, Barth and Mozart; the observation is simply recorded.

Also related to this second dream is a recollection of Merton's friend John Moffitt, with whom he had shared accommodation at the Samut Prakhan conference:

> One day shortly after his death, the Abbot Primate, Dom Rembert Weakland, and another monk were walking along the long and narrow lake [a *klong*, to use the Thai word] between the hotel and the conference hall when four creatures that looked like small crocodiles came out of the water onto the grass. As the monks watched, fascinated, one of the creatures seized a dog that happened by, tore it apart and devoured it. Later I told the incident to a friend of mine who was a student of world mythology. "How fitting," he said. "The crocodile has always stood for the Abyss. In the Buddhist scriptures there is a discussion of whether a dog has consciousness. The message is clear: the individual consciousness has been swallowed up in the abyss of the Godhead."[36]

This incident, minus the interpretation, reads almost like a dream itself. In support of the interpretation, it may be noted that the crocodiles, variants of the great dragon which appears in the mythologies as an image of the unconscious, are four in number, comprising thereby a quaternity mandala, a numerical archetype of psychic wholeness. The individual consciousness so swallowed is therefore a self-realized one. But another interpretation is possible. If the dog, as earlier represented, suggests death, then, as St. Paul says, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54 [NRSV], itself referring back to Isaiah 25:8).

The last roll of film taken by Merton before he died was sent to his mentor in photography and early biographer, John Howard Griffin. Here Griffin relates what he saw when he developed that roll to the third dream, "The Stranger." In these lines he juxtaposes, without interpretation, the extrapsychic and the intrapsychic, as he recounts the experience of developing the film:

> I looked through Merton's eyes on a scene viewed from some high place, downward past the edge of a building and a foreground of shore across a broad body of water from which reflected sunlight glinted back into the viewer's eyes – a universal, all-embracing view of men and boats and water, seen from the perspective of height and distance. Only later did a friend, Irving Sussman, unaware of this photograph, point out the prophetic nature of Merton's preoccupation with his own death in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published two years before his death, wherein Merton preceded the premonition of his own death . . . with the description of a dream about "walking 'toward the center,' without quite knowing where I was going. Suddenly I came to a dead end, but on a height, looking at a great bay, an arm of the harbor." His photograph of the Bangkok River, the one that was in his camera at the time of his death and the one I had enlarged, was an exact depiction of that dream. (Griffin 144, 146)

In Griffin's words we can recognize the numinous effect of synchronicity on the observer. No causal relationship is posited, but an illuminative one is offered. The principle of synchronicity, which seeks to explain the figurative constellating which observers of and participants in the events in question feel compelled to describe, is, to my knowledge, and beyond the unsatisfying attribution of them to chance, the only theoretical principle available to us for their elucidation.

The Image-maker and the Image

Turning away from these *numinosa*, one feels pulled, almost for one's own intellectual safety, into scepticism. Resisting this, however, one asks oneself, "What does it all *mean*?" The best beginning of a response to this question, frankly, is that it is impossible to know in any complete sense what it means. At the most basic level, all we are doing is recording the circumstances and hazarding one possible interpretation of them, in order to reflect on what they may tell us about Merton's death. At a slightly higher level, we can speculate that Merton knew that his death was imminent, and that by this assertion we are linked with him in a shared trans-temporal perception. But this is as far as the rational faculty will take us. *Having thus admitted our incapacity to grasp the mystery rationally, we can then permit it to grasp us.* We can expose ourselves contemplatively to the meaning which Jung invites us to find through synchronicity, and which he found therapeutically helpful once a patient had permitted himself or herself to be so grasped. When we do this, a governing archetypal

image tends to stand out, holding the larger meaning up before us. In this series of dreams, that image is the Divine Child, the foundational meaning of which is rebirth – which includes, and goes beyond, death.

We also look for meaning in the only part of this process of rebirth which we are able to observe, the death itself, and in so doing we ask ourselves whether Merton, by his death, redefines or remints our understanding of death, more specifically, the good death, for Christian spirituality in general. I suggest that he does, by baptizing, as it were, the death of the Zen master into Christian experience. There is in fact no other western modality of death that offers any satisfaction. He did not die a natural death or make an edifying departure strengthened by the sacraments. Nor was there about his death, in the prime of his productivity, the sense of fittingness which accompanies the natural death of an organism which has used up all of its biological potential. Again, if his death was an accident, we can draw from that modality little but a sense of tragedy at the cutting-off of promise, and a wondering at the ways of providence. We also know that there was no question of homicide, a circumstance that might have given him the martyr's palm. Finally, we acknowledge that most of us would be horrified at the very suggestion that he might have committed suicide,[37] separating himself thereby in sympathy or even destiny from the many who trusted him as a spiritual guide and teacher.

There being no satisfaction, then, in the traditional western categories, we can postulate a fifth distinct category, in Zen called the death of the master, for which Christianity has no counterpart. In this modality, *subintention* would take the form of the drive, so patent in Merton's life, toward the experience of the eternal, the "great realization." Although a death of this kind might in circumstance or method be classified as belonging to one of the traditional categories, it would be by the direction of the subintention, toward self-realization rather than self-destruction, that the true character of the death could be ascertained. The variety of responses Merton's death has elicited can on this basis be understood as owing to the lack in Christian thanatology of this fifth modality. Here, however, another difficulty poses itself. Is not subintention – a complex of influences of which the subject is less than fully conscious – incompatible with the notion of full spiritual realization? In Merton's stated conception of death, self-giving is essential, and for this, intention rather than subintention is required. Perhaps all we can conjecture is that at the very moment of departure, as at the moment of death in many examples of the other modalities, subintention surfaces and becomes intention. I see a parallel here to what Eckhart says about the union of tree and storm, each containing an electrical charge, in the single flash of energy which links heaven and earth at the time of its appearing.

Returning to Cameron-Brown's tribute, we can agree that Merton did die a Zen death, marked by absurdity, sacramentally "outside the camp" (Hebrew 13:13 [NRSV]) of his own spiritual community. In the Zen death, a recognized master gathers his disciples around him, does something absurd, and dies. The death of Jesus is the prime example of this for Christians. He is recognized as a rabbi, a teacher, a master, by the disciples he gathers around him for the last supper. At that supper he states that the bread and wine of the meal are his body and blood, something rationally absurd but not symbolically so; the next day he dies. Merton comes to the conference at Samut Prakhan, his presence central to the event. At the end of his talk, he makes the mysterious/absurd statement, "So I will disappear" (*AJ* 343).[38] His death later that day, as a result of an encounter with a short-circuited fan, piles absurdity upon absurdity. As a result, the grounding in Christian soil of our understanding of his death is problematic. But because Merton's life, until the moment of his

equivocal death, was so striking a witness to the wholeness and validity of his Zen Catholicism, it is important that we attempt to complete the paradigm for him. Our addition of the category of the Zen death to the four western categories accomplishes this.

1. Aldhelm Cameron-Brown, "Zen Master," in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974) 161-62; enlarged edition, Cistercian Studies vol. 52 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 161-62 (subsequent references will be cited as "*Thomas Merton, Monk* " parenthetically in the text); originally published as "Seeking the Rhinoceros: A Tribute to Thomas Merton," *Monastic Studies* 7 (1969) 64.
2. See Appendix VIII: "Letter to Abbot Flavian Burns," in Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 345; subsequent references will be cited as "*AJ*" parenthetically in the text.
3. See James Fox, "The Spiritual Son" (*Thomas Merton, Monk* 158). Merton's own identification of the "burnt men" (Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948] 423; subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text) demystifies these macabre linkages: "I have a great, though confused, affection for the writers of the Bible. . . . I know well the burnt faces of the Prophets and the Evangelists, transformed by the white-hot dangerous presence of inspiration, for they looked at God as into a furnace . . . . They are the 'burnt men' in the last line of *The Seven Storey Mountain*" (Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953] 224; subsequent references will be cited as "*SJ*" parenthetically in the text).
4. Ira Progoff, *Jung, Synchronicity and Human Destiny* (New York: Julian Press, 1973) 86; subsequent references will be cited as "Progoff" parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); subsequent references will be cited as "*CGB*" parenthetically in the text.
6. Typescript in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
7. Phrases found in "Barth's Dream and Other Conjectures," first draft, with author's corrections. Their location is not paginated, but they appear just before the item referring to his forty-sixth birthday (*CGB* 48-49).
8. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 103.
9. Jean Leclercq, "*Derniers souvenirs*" ["Last memories"], in Thomas Merton, "Collected Essays," the 24-volume bound set of published and unpublished materials assembled at the Abbey of Gethsemani and available both there and at the Merton Center (1.241).
10. See Stanley Keleman, *Living Your Dying* (New York: Random House, 1974) 78.
11. Irving Sussman, "A Meditation on *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*," *The Way* 30.7 (September 1974) 13.
12. Personal interview, October 3, 1975.
13. Although Sussman doesn't mention that it was he who had pointed out this connection to John Howard Griffin: see John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) 144, 146; subsequent references will be cited as "Griffin" parenthetically in the text.
14. C. G. Jung, "General Aspects of Dream Psychology," in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) 263.
15. Rather than amplification, which normally requires directed association on the part of the subject.
16. C. G. Jung, "Psychology and Religion," in *Psychology and Religion: East and West*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958) 33.
17. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 296-97; subsequent references will be cited as "*NSC*" parenthetically in the text.
18. See Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 72; subsequent references will be cited as "Rice" parenthetically in the text.
19. See C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Random House, 1961) 192-93, a passage which deals with the fascination exercised by psychic images.
20. See Merton's discussion of this with Chatral Rinpoche (*AJ* 142-45).
21. Psalm 22:20 (NRSV) reads: "Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!" The Vulgate of the same verse reads: "*de manu canis unicam meam salva me ex ore leonis*" ["save my soul from the power/hand of the dog and from the mouth of the lion"]; "*Miserere*" ["have mercy"].

22. See C. G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959) 159, 164-65, 170-71, 178-79.
23. See Merton's reference to the "great smiles" of the statues of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa (*AJ* 233).
24. Barth's own account of this dream is found in "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart," in Walter Leibrecht, ed., *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper, 1959) 62, 66-67.
25. C. G. Jung, "The Philosophical Tree," in *Alchemical Studies*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler and William McGuire, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 306. Many mythologies think of the west, the land of the setting sun, as also the land of death. Note also Merton's reference to "the west" in his dream of Kanchenjunga (*AJ* 152).
26. Cf. Brother Matthew's question to Merton on his arrival at Gethsemani on December 10, 1941: "This time have you come to stay?" (*SSM* 371).
27. C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 189.
28. "The Early Legend: Notes for a Cosmic Meditation," in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 132.
29. "An Office of Prayer for Our Brother among Those Who Sleep in Christ, Father Louis" (mimeograph, Abbey of Gethsemani, December 11, 1968 [TMC]).
30. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 263.
31. A striking parallel to this dream is found in Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (197-98), a dream to which Jung attributed great significance. Like Merton's dream, it is characterized by a foreign (i.e., strange, *étranger*) city, winter, the harbor and the height, the journey toward the center and a sense of finality.
32. Progoff suggests another possible term: transtemporality.
33. Matthew Kelty, "Tom Cahill Dances at Gethsemani," *Monastic Exchange* 1.2 (Summer 1969) 14.
34. Barth was remembered that same day at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches at Bossey, Switzerland, in a liturgy at which John A. T. Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, was presiding. We participants did not hear about Merton's death until some days later.
35. Chrysogonus Waddell, "A Letter to Mother Laetitia about the Funeral of Fr. Louis," *Liturgy OCSO* 4.1 (March 1970) 45-46.
36. John Moffitt, "Thomas Merton: The Last Three Days," *New Theology No. 7*, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 133-34.
37. It is a thought widespread, nonetheless. Twice during the writing of this paper (September-November 1975) I was asked by persons familiar at a popular level with Merton's name and writing not *whether* he committed suicide, but *why* he committed suicide.
38. This is what concludes the talk in the *Asian Journal*; the film of his presentation catches the throw-away comment which follows: ". . . and we can all get a Coke or something."