

The Ox Mountain Parable: An Introduction

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In 1960 Thomas Merton's arrangement of The Ox Mountain Parable, based on the translation of I.A. Richards from his book *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition*, was published with an introduction by Merton. It was printed by Victor Hammer as Broadside 2 on his Stamperia del Santuccio press in Lexington, Kentucky, in a limited edition of 100 copies. Merton's arrangement of The Ox Mountain Parable and his introduction to it were subsequently published in *Commonweal* in 1961,¹ included at the end of his essay 'Classic Chinese Thought' in *Mystics and Zen Masters*² and included in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*,³ though without Merton's introduction in the latter case.

Although Merton notes that his arrangement of the parable is based on I.A. Richards' work on Mencius he was also familiar with Arthur Waley's book *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*⁴ which included an extensive section on Mencius and a version of The Ox Mountain Parable, which he calls the 'Bull Mountain'⁵ parable and Albert Felix Verwilghen's book *Mencius: The Man and his Ideas*.⁶

Merton's interest in Chinese philosophy and thought developed from the early 1950s onwards and during the 1960s he was in touch with a

1. *Commonweal* 74 (12 May 1961), p. 174.

2. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), pp. 65-68.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp. 970-71.

4. Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

5. Waley, *Three Ways*, p. 84.

6. Albert Felix Verwilghen, *Mencius: The Man and his Ideas* (New York: St John's University Press, 1967).

number of Chinese scholars, including John C.H. Wu and Paul K.T. Sih. At the beginning of the 1950s Merton had read Pound's translations of Mencius after they were sent to him by his publisher James Laughlin, along with other books on Eastern philosophy in response to a request from Merton.⁷ At this point Merton makes no reference to *The Ox Mountain Parable* in his journals or working notebooks.

Merton's first references to *The Ox Mountain Parable* occur in 1960 in a journal entry for 10 July where he writes:

Mencius—'The Ox Mountain parable'. Importance of 'night-spirit' and 'dawn-breath' in the restoration of the trees to life. Men cut them down, beasts browse on the new shoots, no night spirit and no dawn breath—no rest; no renewal—and then one is convinced at last that the mountain *never had* any trees on it.⁸

It is interesting to see how soon after Merton's first reference to this he is discussing the possibility with Victor and Carolyn Hammer of bringing *The Ox Mountain Parable* out as a broadside, literally within days, and how quickly after their discussions it is published. Merton enjoyed seeing his work published in high-quality editions by specialty presses and only did this with works which were of special importance to him.⁹

In *The Ox Mountain Parable* the 'night spirit' and the 'dawn breath' are important 'in restoring life to the forest that has been cut down'. Through rest and recuperation 'in the night and the dawn' the trees will return. Similarly Merton suggests

...with human nature. Without the night spirit, the dawn breath, silence, passivity, rest, man's nature cannot be itself. In its barrenness it is no longer *natura*: nothing grows from it, nothing is born of it any more.¹⁰

Merton's interest in *The Ox Mountain Parable* goes much deeper than just a purely scholarly interest in the thought of Mencius. The concept of the night spirit and the dawn air found in *The Ox Mountain Parable* is adopted by Merton as his title for ch. 3 of his journal *Conjectures of a*

7. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986), p. 264.

8. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (Journals, 4; 1960–1963; ed. Victor A. Kramer; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 19.

9. In a letter of 5 December, 1960 to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, Merton describes Hammer's edition of *The Ox Mountain Parable* as 'superbly done as usual'. See *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 237.

10. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), pp. 122–23.

Guilty Bystander, 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air'.¹¹ In this chapter of *Conjectures* which is pivotal to the whole book, Merton draws on the wisdom images of ch. 1, 'Barth's Dream', and lays key foundations for the remaining chapters of the book.

Mencius's approach is one that would obviously appeal to Merton with his longing for solitude, and in ch. 3 of *Conjectures* Merton presents it as a solution both for himself¹² and for the world. The Ox Mountain Parable could also be seen as a metaphor for Merton's experience at this stage of his life and I will return to the pivotal effect of the night spirit and the dawn air upon Merton later. The effect of the night spirit and the dawn air is also evident in the change of direction in the remaining two sections of the book.

Chapter 3 of *Conjectures* begins with a description of the valley awakening in the early morning – an apposite beginning to the section titled 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air'. Having spent the previous section looking at the challenges and questions raised by the modern world Merton, in his description of dawn and the gradual awakening of nature, points to a different kind of wisdom than that of the human world, the wisdom he had earlier pointed to in his references to Mozart and the wisdom of the divine child in ch. 1. He describes the early morning as 'the most wonderful moment of the day...when creation in its innocence asks permission to "be" once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was' and at that moment of dawn 'all wisdom seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point'.¹³

As Merton becomes more aware of the natural world surrounding him at Gethsemani so his attitude to place changes markedly from section 3 of *Conjectures* onwards. In one entry contained in the section 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air', probably dating from the early 1960s, Merton begins by describing 'the "way" up through the woods' and how he 'appreciate[s] the beauty and the solemnity' of it, going on to describe the sunrise before stating: 'it is essential to experience all the times and moods of one good place. No one will ever be able to say how essential, how truly part of a genuine life this is'.¹⁴ Merton's deepening sense of his

11. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 115.

12. In a letter to Abdul Aziz Merton spoke of 'the hour of dawn when the world is silent and the new light is most pure', as 'symbolizing the dawning of divine light in the stillness of our hearts'. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 46.

13. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp. 117-18.

14. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 161.

vow of stability here reflects another effect of the night spirit and the dawn air upon him.

In a brief entry in the fourth section of *Conjectures* Merton points to Thoreau as someone who experienced the night spirit and the dawn air. Set against the industrial and affluent image of America, 'Thoreau's idleness (as "inspector of snowstorms") was an incomparable gift and its fruits were blessings that America has never really learned to appreciate'. After offering his gift to America, Thoreau, in Merton's words, 'went his way, without following the advice of his neighbors. He took the fork in the road'.¹⁵ Merton takes that phrase, 'The Fork in the Road',¹⁶ as his title for this chapter reflecting a movement in his life as presented in *Conjectures*. After Merton's awakening to the importance of the night spirit and the dawn air (a gradual discovery over many years but which, in *Conjectures*, he actually names for the first time) he can approach the questions and problems he was facing earlier in the book with a new sense of freedom and a lightness of touch. The effect upon him of the night spirit and the dawn air is summed up in one of his epigrams for this chapter where he quotes Lieh Tzu as saying 'life comes without warning'.¹⁷

In *The Ox Mountain Parable* Merton found an expression of his experience of the effect nature had upon him, especially the effect of the woods and of nature in the very early hours of the morning a time when he, as a Cistercian monk, was awake as nature itself began to awaken. The understanding of nature that Merton found in Mencius's parable fits into his own expression of 'paradise consciousness' so, in the early morning, Merton discovers 'an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand', the 'dawn deacon' cries out 'wisdom' but 'we don't attend'.¹⁸

For Merton, the wind and the rain and the darkness and the solitude of the night in his hermitage at Gethsemani had a restoring effect similar to the night spirit and the dawn air in *The Ox Mountain Parable*. The rain helped to heal the damage done to the woods by men who had 'stripped the hillside' and it also had a similar effect on Merton as he says in his essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' from *Raids on the Unspeakable*:

In this wilderness I have learned how to sleep again. Here I am not alien.
The trees I know, the night I know, the rain I know. I close my eyes and

15. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 227.

16. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 195.

17. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 195.

18. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp. 117-18.

instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part, and the world goes on with me in it, for I am not alien to it.¹⁹

For Ionesco rhinocerotitis is the sickness that lies in wait 'for those who have lost the sense and the taste for solitude' – for those who are no longer open to the experience of the night spirit and the dawn air.

In his introduction to *The Ox Mountain Parable*, Merton stresses both the need to keep 'the heart of a child',²⁰ and his understanding of the parable as a 'parable of mercy'. Arthur Waley in his introduction to the thought of Mencius and to this parable wrote that all of Mencius's teaching centered around the word 'goodness' – *jên*. Waley clarifies that for different schools within Confucianism this term could mean different things. But, for Mencius, in a paragraph underlined by Merton in his edition of Waley's book: 'Goodness meant compassion; it meant not being able to bear that others should suffer. It meant a feeling of responsibility for the sufferings of others'.²¹

During the period covered by *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton's horizons had begun to broaden rapidly. The mercy he felt so strongly in *Jonas*²² led gradually to an overflowing of mercy and compassion towards others: beginning with those with whom he was in contact in the monastery, the scholastics and then novices, through his expanding correspondence, the stream of visitors who came to Gethsemani to see him and through his writings, especially his writings on the social issues of his day.

The revelatory experience Merton had on a visit to Louisville in March 1958 is a clear expression of these changes. Although the account was elaborated by Merton in his preparation of this material for publication, the essence was there in his original text. On the corner of a busy street in Louisville Merton was 'overwhelmed with the realization that I love all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers'.²³ Significantly this incident is placed by Merton in the pivotal chapter of *Conjectures*, 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air', and is another illustration from

19. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), pp. 7-8.

20. 'The Ox Mountain Parable', with notes and text arrangement (after the translation of I.A. Richards) by Thomas Merton (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1960).

21. Waley, *Three Ways*, p. 83.

22. T. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953).

23. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 140.

Merton's life of the power of the night spirit and the dawn air to bring healing to the human condition.

Merton came to realize that the night spirit and the dawn air, discovered through some 'stability in a peaceful place', gave him life and enhanced his prophetic and poetic voice so he could declare that life to others: 'There is the hope, there is the world that remakes itself at God's command without consulting us. So the poet...sees only the world remaking itself in the live seed.'²⁴

The age in which Mencius lived, as Merton points out, was a time of violence, war and chaos which he parallels to the time in which he was writing at the beginning of the 1960s and the message of The Ox Mountain Parable is as relevant to our present age of violence, war and chaos as it was for the times in which Merton and Mencius lived.

24. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp. 319-20.