"No, honestly," Thomas Merton’s letter to John Howard Griffin on January 10, 1967 reads, “I see no reason why an occasional picture taker like myself, who doesn’t even know how to develop a film, can be considered a photographer.” He, in professional skill and life-long commitment to the medium, was not a practitioner like his friends, Griffin, Shirley Burden, and Eugene Meatyard or renowned photographers like Minor White, Aaron Siskind, or Harry Callahan. Nor, in my view, did Merton, as he modestly writes in the same letter, happen “to press the shutter release accidentally, when the thing was pointing at an interesting object.” Michael Mott, in his official Merton biography, describes Griffin’s account of Merton’s attentive manner of taking a photograph. More importantly, his particular images manifest thought and deliberateness in the choice and shooting of the visual subject. It is not especially relevant or useful to raise questions about his calibre and classification as a photographer. I believe, it is pertinent to discuss why, late in life, Merton turned to photography, what it meant to him, what does it say about him, and what do the images convey.

Merton’s vocation in life was that of a Trappist monk and later a hermit. He was a prolific and serious writer; equally productive and accomplished a poet. He has left a treasure trove of art-work – calligraphic and brush paintings and drawings in the manner of Chinese, Japanese, and Zen artists. Merton was a man of prodigious energy, passion, and imagination; his mind inquisitive, voracious, and expansive. He possessed a keen and curious eye. His journals and letters are replete with ample evidence. For example, “on the tongue of one bloom [violet iris] walks a great black-gold bee”, or the hills catching the light “with delicate cups of shadow and dark ripples and crinkles.” Thomas Merton had the gift of a photographer’s sensibility.

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2 Ibid., 134.
5 Ibid., 311.
The editors of The Intimate Merton state, “Writing was his [Merton’s] way to taste and see.” In his own words: “To write is to think and to live … even to pray.” But, he insatiably craved for and deeply enjoyed “moments of eloquent silence and emptiness” beyond the cloister walls. The world of nature and simple ordinary things — “Return to reality and to the ordinary, in silence” — held for him a special kind of appeal and enchantment — not of magic but of mystery. He asserted, “I myself am a part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place, and a day in which I have not shared truly in this is no day at all.”

Merton yearned for a “normal human balance” as a devoted Christian and monk. Photography, I suggest, exposed a way of finding that “balance”, and was a fitting counterpoint to writing — a time for stillness, solitude, and self-reflection.

An avid writer, Merton was, in general, confined to specific themes, topics and issues. In photography, he felt free, open and quiet — nothing to debate or discourse, nothing to argue or explain; only animated by imagination, silence, and connectedness with what he visually experienced. It served him as a mode of attuning “to the other music that is beyond the words” — emptying of even thinking and to be in a state of contemplation. That would explain the eclectic and evocative nature of his imagery. Shorn of triteness, sentimentality, and superfluity, they inspire a sense of “infused contemplation.”

Listen to what Harry Callahan maintains: “a picture is like a prayer” – octave of prayer, to borrow Minor White’s expression.

Window Frame

For I, Solitude, am thine own self:
I, Nothingness, am thy All.
I, Silence, am thy Amen!”

Basket and Tree Root


Basket

Each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and entity, with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art.

Basket (Detail)

The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God.

Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them.
Photography fulfilled Merton’s “urgency of seeing, fully aware, experiencing what is here.” It magnified his experience of “pure seeing”, rather, more accurately, his images are its realization. This parallels the “inseeing” he admired in poet Rainer Maria Rilke, which lets one “into the very center.” The artist, according to him, is both a “maker” and a “seer” — see-er/seer, who combines “aesthetic illumination” and “sapiential awareness” as deepens our communion with the concrete. And this fusion illuminates Merton’s photographs.

He found the camera to be “the most eager and helpful of beings.” Nevertheless, he was cognisant of the medium’s inadequacy: “nothing resembles reality less than the photograph.” He comments on the camera’s limitation in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

To convey meaning of something substantial you have to use not a shadow but a sign, not the imitation but the image. The image is a new and different reality, and of course it does not convey an impression of some object, but the mind of the subject: and that is something else again.

Let us turn to two passages from The Asian Journal:

No, a camera cannot reconcile one with anything. Nor can it see the real mountain. The camera does not know what it takes: it captures materials with which you reconstruct not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it — especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene.

Again:

The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN.

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12

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14 Silhouetted Tree Trunk

The landscape has been splendidly serious. I love the strength of our woods, in this bleak weather. And it is bleak weather. Yes there is warmth in it like the presence of God in aridity of spirit, when He comes closer to us than in consolation.

15 Bare Woods

Out here in the woods I can think of nothing except God and it is not so much that I think of Him either. I am as aware of Him as of the sun and the clouds and the blue sky and the thin cedar trees. When I first came out here, I was sleepy but I read a few lines from the Desert Fathers and then, after that, my whole being was full of serenity and vigilance.

16 Wooded Glade

Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it.

17 Solitary Tree on Hillside

I looked at all this in great tranquility, with my soul and spirit quiet. For me landscape seems to be important for contemplation; anyway, I have no scruples about loving it.

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14 Merton, Turning Toward the World, 123.
16 Merton, Literary Essays, 36.
20 Ibid, 156-57.
21 Merton, Road to Joy, 141.
22 Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 154.
23 Ibid, 134.
24 Merton, Thomas. As a Search for Solitude, 96.
26 Ibid, 156-57.
Does it mean Merton is undercutting photography? Is he being sophistical? I do not think so. Consciously or unconsciously, in these passages, the erudite poet-thinker raises critical issues pertaining to the medium which photo critics and historians, aesthetics-theorists, and artists continue to debate. The significant aspect of these extracts is that they underscore the aesthetic process and intention of the contemplative-philosopher, besides indicating the paradoxical nature of the art-form.

One could argue, knowing Merton’s paradoxical inclination, photography attracted him because it inheres paradox. It is the most fleeting and ephemeral among the arts – painting, graphics, and sculpture. Yet, it attempts to arrest time and space. Scholars argue about its claim to bear witness to reality and truth. Merton too implies these questions, as can be noticed, in quotations cited in this essay. His photographs hold a window to the paradox of time and place. He explores, at the same time, the metaphorical and symbolic as well as the ironic and the emblematic signification of an image. His images do lend themselves to multiple allusions. Remarkably, none of his photographs is a manipulated image. In their lucidity, simplicity, and lack of self-projection, they echo Merton’s remark on Zen: “If Zen has any preference it is for glass that is plain, has no color, and is ‘just glass’.”

They project a “transparence” that accentuates the experience of, to quote Susan Sontag, “luminousness of the thing itself.”

Zen calligraphy and painting – art in general, Merton contends: ...

... by its peculiar suppleness, dynamism, abandon, contempt for "prettiness" and for formal "style," reveals to us something of the freedom which is not transcendent in some abstract and intellectual sense, but which employs a minimum of form without being attached to it, and is therefore free from it.

He further ruminates in an exegesis on Roland Barthes’ writing:

... what he has to choose is his writing. Not so much the kind of writing as the act of writing … when the choice is completely lucid, when the writer chooses simply to write and renounces all the rest ("message," "expression," "soul," "revolution"), then the writing itself stands out clearly as writing.

Later on in the essay, he explains the notion of gestus “the authentic gestus of writing begins only when all meaningful postures have been abandoned, when all the obvious ‘signs’ of art have been set aside.”

Barthes’ writing, characterized by Merton as “writing degree zero”, like his close friend, Ad Reinhardt’s painting, infuses “a kind of quietism ... a
Zenlike stillness” which emanates a “certain inscrutable excitement.” Merton’s art and photographic work encapsulate these feelings. Paramount to him is not so much the images as product, compelling as they are, but the choice and the act of image-making.

Thomas Merton’s images are without artifice or disguise. Almost all of them are frontal shots – direct and straight, allowing the object its own autonomy and fidelity. His preferred manner of making pictures was in black and white. It gave the photographs textural depth and authenticity, stripped and emptied of drama or distraction. Like the poetry of his long-lasting friends, Robert Lax and Louis Zukofsky, they are “chaste and sparing.” They imbibe the Zen way of seeing and expressing the visible world around Blakean conceit, innocence, and wit – be it the image of a winter landscape, a discarded glove, a pair of black and white chairs together or a ghosted Tibetan with a poodle, leafless trees in embrace, shadow patterns, old brewery structure, or a “Men” sign with arrows stuck to a tree. For him it is not only “a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence;” but also, if I may interpolate, an “essential factor in asceticism.”

For this utterly Christ-centred eremite, a moment of “self-awareness and self-forgetfulness” – another way for Christ to develop Merton’s life “into Himself like a photograph.”

What do these photographs convey? Over 20 years ago, I published a book with a sampling of Thomas Merton’s photographs and some of my comments and thoughts. As I review them and reflect today, the images whisper in another tone.

The roots say: we are here – uprooted yet alive. The mountains declare: we are here – immutable yet ever-changing like the waters. The paint cans clang: we are useless yet useful. The basket affirms: I’m empty yet full. Sculpted rocks proclaim: we are not the Buddha; if you see him, kill him.

Two chairs ask: do you see the presences? The branches whistle: do you feel the wind tangled within us? Driftwood asks: what is time?

The wheel turns.

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5 Rock with Shadows
Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation out of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich full of inexhaustible interest opening out into infinite further possibilities for study and contemplation and interest and praise. Beyond all and in all is God.

6 Open Barn Door
In contemplation we know by “unknowing.” Or better, we know beyond all knowing or “unknowing.”

7 Trees
It is a strange awakening to find the sky inside you and beneath you and above you and all around you so that your spirit is one with the sky, and all is positive night.

8 Tree in Blossom
Real spring weather – these are the precise days when everything changes. All the trees are fast beginning to be in leaf and the first green freshness of a new summer is all over the hills. Irreplaceable purity of these few days chosen by God as His sign!

9 Barn Doors and Weeds
Paradise is all around us and we do not understand ... “wisdom,” cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend.

10 Branches
My Zen is in the slow swinging tops of sixteen pine trees.

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34 Ibid., 146.
35 Ibid., 129.
A mortal poet-contemplative, a contraption, and chemicals framed us. See. See without the smoke of theories and symbolisms.

We are what we are. We are light and dark, substance and shadow. Speak the images.

We are matter and memory. We are pictures, we are mirrors. We are full, we are empty. Remember the Three Doors:

the door without wish
the door without sign
the door of emptiness.

SEE

And say: Amen. Say: Shantih

1. Solitary Chair
   The urgency of seeing, fully aware, experiencing what is here: not what is given by men, by society, but what is given by God and hidden by society.  

2. Branch and Leaves
   It is in the deepest darkness that we most fully possess God on earth, because it is then that our minds are most truly liberated from the weak, created lights that are darkness in comparison to Him; it is then that we are filled with His infinite Light which seems pure darkness to our reason.

3. Bark
   I am silence, I am poverty, I am solitude, for I have renounced spirituality to find God.

4. Bare Branch and Rock
   Waste. Emptiness. Total poverty of the Creator: yet from this poverty springs everything. The waste is inexhaustible. Infinite Zero. Everything comes from this desert. Nothing. Everything wants to return to it and cannot. For who can return "nowhere?"

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