

DIFFERENT DRUMMERS:

Thomas Merton and Henry Thoreau

—By Gilles Farcé

“Thoreau’s idleness. . . was an incomparable gift and its fruits were blessings that America has never really learned to appreciate” observed Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.¹ Fervent readers of both Henry Thoreau and Thomas Merton will necessarily notice that these writers have a lot in common, so much so that in a way Merton might be viewed as Thoreau’s spokesman in the twentieth century, reasserting in a contemporary context all the values for which the author of *Walden* had stood. The deep similarities between Thoreau and Merton deserve to be treated in a detailed comparative study. Meanwhile, this short article will only attempt to point out some of the more obvious and important parallels.

First of all, it must be said that both men were highly original individuals who always paid attention to the beat of “a different drummer,”² thus exposing themselves to criticism and misunderstanding. In fact, almost all mystics have experienced at some point that by trying to advance “in the direction of their dreams”³ they were profoundly disturbing people who had settled down somewhere at the beginning of the road and did not intend to go any further. Thoreau often passed for a misanthrope and an egotist and was suspiciously regarded by his neighbors; Merton increasingly became a “free-lance monk” in the words of his friend Edward Rice,⁴ fighting against the censors and shocking many Catholics who did not want to hear about Zen, peace or nuclear weapons. Both men were educated persons who took issue with society at an early age and somehow rejected the way of life they were expected to adopt, Merton by becoming a Trappist monk and eventually a hermit, Thoreau by spending most of his time in the woods, refusing to be tied down to any job in order to devote himself to what he called his “profession,” namely “to be always on the alert to find God in nature.”⁵

Although they really loved to talk and share experiences with others, both men were basically loners who chose solitude as their life-long and dearest companion. In *Walden*, Thoreau explains: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”⁶ Probably recognizing the reasons (or at least, some of the reasons) which led him to the monastery, Merton copied this passage in the journal subsequently published as *The Sign of Jonas*. At the end of his life he got his own hermitage in the woods and even had his own Walden Pond, appropriately dubbed “Monk’s Pond.”

Born in Lyon France, in 1959, Gilles Farcé holds a M.A. and a Doctorate with Honors in American Literature from the University of Lyon II. His doctoral dissertation was on Thoreau and Hinduism. He has recently published a book of poems in Paris plus several articles and reviews and plans to publish a study on Thoreau this year. He is currently working in the French Studies Department of the AUELPEL in Montreal and is a regular contributor to the French-Canadian literary review *Spirale*.

And of course, Thoreau and Merton were writers. They could not help it and therefore strove to communicate the best that was in them and make it a work of art. It is interesting to note that they mostly expressed themselves through the same genre, that is to say spiritual autobiography, undoubtedly because it was the most congenial mode for what they had to say. "I . . . require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life" wrote Thoreau at the beginning of *Walden*.⁷ He stuck to this requirement and, on the whole, so did Merton whose *Seven Storey Mountain* is just what the author of *Walden* demanded. Just as the best of Thoreau's writing is to be found in his journals, many of Merton's best works (such as *The Sign of Jonas*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *The Asian Journal*) are journals or reflections taken from his notebooks. Even the articles and essays Thoreau wrote (the most famous being *Civil Disobedience*) sprang directly from his own experience and can be considered as another form of spiritual autobiography. They are not intellectual performances or demonstrations, but intuitive insights and observations recorded by a writer who works with his soul and draws on the richness of his inner life. The same can be said about Merton's essays. His books on Zen and Eastern mysticism, for example, not only penetrate the essence of these teachings but precisely do so because they tell at the same time the story of the author's own pilgrimage, explaining the ways in which he himself relates to this wisdom. As Anthony Padovano has pointed out, Merton's predilection for spiritual autobiography places him at the core of the American literary tradition which, from the early Puritan journals to the novels of Jack Kerouac, has always been fascinated by the self in quest of an identity.⁸ In the footsteps of Thoreau, Merton spent his life recording his inner journey as he went along.

The woods of his birthplace, Concord, were Thoreau's church, where he naturally practiced contemplation. Although Merton originally was a city man and could not claim Thoreau's exceptional familiarity with nature, he nevertheless often discovered the presence of God in the woods. Part three of *Conjectures* is introduced by a beautiful passage which is very close to Thoreau's pages on



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morning and wakefulness. Both writers love dawn, which is the privileged moment when they catch a glimpse of what T. S. Eliot calls “the still point of the turning world.” This “virgin point” (Merton) or “meeting of two eternities” (Thoreau)⁹ gives them a sense of witnessing the very first morning, of being present at the creation of the world. In this vigorous joy of nature awakening to itself, Thoreau and Merton see a tremendous opportunity for redemption. As Merton puts it, “paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it.”¹⁰ Thoreau observes that “in a pleasant spring morning, all man’s sins are forgiven.”¹¹ But both writers know that men are too busy to pay attention to this daily miracle and seize this opportunity to plunge back into Eden; in Thoreau’s words, “they do not obey the hint which God gives them, nor accept the pardon which he freely offers all.”¹² As Merton puts it: “‘wisdom,’ cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend.”¹³

If Thoreau and Merton were men of solitude and contemplation, they nevertheless took strong positions on some of the most disputed social and political questions of their time. The strength of their appeals probably comes from the purity of their motives and may also be due to the fact that they viewed the world from a distance. Originating in silence rather than in the whirlpool of public opinion and debates, their reflections always strike at the root of the matter involved. The causes they fought for, before being political, were above all moral issues. They did not commit themselves to serve any party or ideology (in fact, Merton’s writings on peace really challenged certain forms of Catholic ideology), but spoke because they felt it was demanded of them to do so, that the law of their being gave them no alternative. Trying to be faithful to one’s inmost convictions may often prove quite dangerous. In an informal talk delivered at Calcutta, Merton said that since the monk is “essentially outside of all establishments,” he speaks “as a representative of all marginal persons” who had withdrawn deliberately “to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience.”¹⁴ Indeed, Thoreau and Merton spent a good deal of their lives fighting establishments. Thoreau braved the law by helping runaway slaves to enter Canada. He publicly denounced slavery and pleaded for the abolitionist John Brown who had been sentenced to death. His night in jail, which prompted him to write the essay entitled *Civil Disobedience*, has become part of American mythology. As for Merton, he braved the censors who did not want him to write against racism and nuclear weapons, daring to live up to the Gospel without ever ceasing to be a contemplative. The link with Thoreau becomes even more obvious if we think of Gandhi’s strong influence on Merton. Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* played a great part in shaping the Mahatma’s thought and tactics which opened new vistas to the monk of Gethsemani.

Finally, both writers were deeply interested in Eastern mysticism and contributed to popularize it at a time when Orientalism had not become the fashion that it is today. Along with his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau was one of the very first Americans to gain a

deep knowledge of Hindu and Chinese scriptures and to make some of it pass into his daily life. He had found an enlivening spiritual influence in the Eastern mystics, who insisted on experiencing the divine rather than talking about it, on joy and contemplation rather than on punishment and deeds. Hinduism and Buddhism challenged the self-satisfied religion practiced by many of his fellow "Christians." In the same way, Merton felt that Eastern mysticism, Zen in particular, could revive Christianity and lead it away from sterile rationalizations, back to its ascetic roots as preached and practiced by the desert fathers. This interest in other religions and cultures was a manifestation of Thoreau's and Merton's prophetic openness. Both were above all intuitive geniuses who had the ability to transcend the limitations which any background must necessarily have in order to commune at the summit of universal religious experience. "I have no sympathy with the bigotry and ignorance which make transient and partial and puerile distinctions between one man's faith or form of faith and another's - as Christian and heathen. . . . I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha, the Great Spirit, as well as God," noted Thoreau.¹⁵ As for Merton, without ever ceasing to be a Catholic, he expressed his conviction that Christians should not overlook Eastern religions but on the contrary be prepared to learn from them :

. . . I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church.¹⁶

Thoreau's and Merton's openness was a manifestation, not only of intelligence, but of love, of spiritual nonviolence, made possible by a life-long commitment to truth. Thoreau had clearly seen that most men are living lives of "quiet desperation" as a result of being "in a false position," unfaithful to their own true self. And Gandhi, who said that "lying is the mother of violence", taught Merton that quiet desperation, born of untruthfulness, is likely to turn quickly into violent hatred. As Merton noted in his journal, meditating on Gandhi's words :

The lie brings violence and disorder into our nature itself. It divides us against ourselves, alienates us from ourselves, makes us enemies of ourselves, and of the truth that is in us. From this division hatred and violence arise. We hate others because we cannot stand the disorder, the intolerable division in ourselves. We are violent to others because we are already divided by the inner violence of our infidelity to our own truth. Hatred projects this division outside ourselves into society.¹⁷

The tremendous and very special appeal both writers have had on countless readers may be explained by the complete authenticity one can sense in their work. They not only express something essential, but also do it from their own experience, giving their readers that unmistakable taste of truth which has become so rare at a time when people tend to write “not because they really have anything to say, but because they think it is important for something by them to be in print” as Merton himself observed.¹⁸ “How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book” exclaimed Thoreau.¹⁹ And indeed, innumerable readers of Thoreau and Merton report that the discovery of either author marked a turning point in their life and often changed it in a very practical way. Both men “endeavored to be what they were made,” to use Thoreau’s expression,²⁰ and their writings still contribute to our happiness by helping us to become what we are.

NOTES

¹Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York : Doubleday Image Book, 1968), p. 249.

²“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.” *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 326.

³“ . . . if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams. . .” *Walden*, p. 323.

⁴Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (New York : Doubleday, 1970), p. 117.

⁵*The Heart of Thoreau’s Journals*, ed. Odell Shepard (New York : Dover 1961), p. 58.

⁶*Walden*, p. 90.

⁷*Walden*, p. 3.

⁸See Anthony T. Padovano, “Merton and American Culture,” in *The Human Journey* (New York : Doubleday Image Book, 1984), pp. 3-7.

⁹*Walden*, p. 17.

¹⁰*Conjectures*, p. 132.

¹¹*Walden*, p. 314.

¹²*Walden*, p. 315.

¹³*Conjectures*, p. 132.

¹⁴*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York : New Directions, 1973), p. 309.

¹⁵*Heart of Thoreau’s Journals*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁶*Asian Journal*, p. 313.

¹⁷*Conjectures*, p. 85.

¹⁸Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York : Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1953), p. 59.

¹⁹*Walden*, p. 107.

²⁰“Let every one mind his own business, and endeavour to be what he was made.” *Walden*, p. 326.