

THOMAS MERTON'S

MYTH FOR MODERN TIMES:

A Tale of the City

by **Gloria Kitto Lewis**

There is nothing in the world of buildings that is not fabricated, and if a tree gets in among the apartment houses by mistake it is taught to grow chemically. It is given a precise reason for existing. They put up a sign on it saying it is health, beauty, perspective; that it is for peace, for prosperity All this is mystification. The city itself lives on its own myth. Instead of waking up and silently existing, the city people prefer a stubborn and fabricated dream; they do not care to be a part of the night, or to be merely of the world. They have constructed a world outside the world, against the world, a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man.¹

It can be posited that a central problem in the technological twentieth century is that human persons have far too often lost touch with reality. Partaking of the city myth, they live as if "*only the city is real*," deluding themselves into believing that their world is the world of buildings ("Rain," p. 12). Holding fast to that "fabricated" dream, they stubbornly look for peace, prosperity, health, and beauty in that synthetic world, that mechanized environment which is actually "a world outside the world" and very importantly "against the world." Unfortunately, human persons have lost communion and identification with the natural world, a real world that exists underneath and beyond the humanmade, an idyllic world *within* the technological illusionary world to which they belong by their very nature, and from which they draw their identity

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1. Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros" in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1966), p. 11. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Rain."

and their sustenance. In a word, they live oblivious of the paradise that surrounds them, a world that lives by the virginal myth.

Thomas Merton, writer and contemplative-philosopher, was acutely aware of the human person's problematic perception of world and self. In the 1960s he wrote a series of what might be loosely called essays in which he considered a central question, "What is reality?"² In two collections, *The Behavior of Titans* and *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Merton sometimes cryptically and often poetically shared some tentative insights about "the REAL within all that is real."³

In these essays, which incorporate meditation, elegy, autobiography and celebration, Merton seeks to explore some views about the world that were timely and worth considering. In an effort to help the reader find peace, security, and beauty in a technological world which seemingly is dominated, controlled by "the bright, self-directed, perfectly obedient and infinitely expensive machine," he speaks in a manner that is exploratory and understated.⁴ Of his subject and purpose he says,

Such insights can hardly be . . . well defined . . . They can not be translated into a program of society, but they can perhaps enable a rare person here and there to come alive and be awake in a moment of ultimate choice, in which he finds himself challenging the roots of his own existence.⁵

In these essays, in which Merton pictures himself as a "solitary explorer" who is "simply thinking out loud," his primary purposes are to awaken the reader's senses, spirit, feelings, and imagination, to inform him/ her about a deeper reality, and to put forth tentatively some answers to questions that could help the human person survive and prevail *within* a technological world.⁶ Merton is quick to point out that humans cannot escape the world of the machine. The challenge is to find the Waldens inside the city world. His information, though presented in pliable and consoliatory terms, carries with it a sense of urgency. Merton is convinced that modern humans are likely "to carry out point by point the 'harlotries' of the Apocalypse" (*Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 85). In a notebook in 1967, he wrote that "the time seems right for the coming of the apocalyptic beast, a time when man was 'completely assured' " (*Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 86).

In "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room," he portrays the contempo-



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Photo by Patricia Clay

2. Thomas Merton, "To Each His Darkness" in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 31.

3. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton/ Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), p. 99.

4. Thomas Merton, "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room" in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 73. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Time."

5. Thomas Merton, "Prologue" in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp. 2-3. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Prologue."

6. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 85. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Art of Thomas Merton*.

rary period as one in which humans have lost touch with their roots and are heading toward a kind of spiritual death. Of the contemporary world he writes:

We live in a time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with the lack of time, lack of space . . . projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power, and acceleration As the end approaches there is no room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth There is no desire for living. The time of the end is the time when men call upon the mountains to fall upon them It is haunted by the demon of emptiness. And out of this unutterable void come the armies, the missiles, the weapons, the bombs, the racist murders, and all the other crimes of mass society. ("Time," pp. 70-71)

In such a world where the mechanized, "the technological furies" obscure the natural, Merton foresees humans confronting "not necessarily the end of the world, but a . . . point of no return, a climax of absolute finality . . . in absurdity" ("Prologue," p. 4). In such a world, humans have no place, no purpose.

In the sixties Merton sought to share his vision of reality in this spirit not only of gentleness but of urgency, using his public voice in some pieces of social commentary. In describing the revelations gained through his observations of social scene and through contemplation of the natural world, most often in his hermitage deep in the woods on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani south of Louisville, Kentucky, Merton drew successfully on characters and themes from Greek myths. He took materials from the parables of three Greek writers and thinkers, Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Herakleitos. In "Atlas and the Fatman," "Prometheus: A Meditation," and "Herakleitos the Obscure," Merton drew telling analogies with such mythic characters as Atlas and Prometheus.

It is not surprising that Merton incorporated Greek myths in his commentaries. He felt that the writer through myth and symbol could most successfully awaken a reader's awareness of his/her fundamental nature. He liked works "juiced with myth," and particularly Greek myth, those ancient stories that had excited his imagination since he was a small boy (*Art of Thomas Merton*, pp. 17). Very often in essays as well as poems, Merton used references to Greek myths, as they provided him "with elevated and coherent models of experience with which to contrast the banality and fragmentation of contemporary life."

"Atlas and the Fatman," a piece that is in both *The Behavior of Titans* and *Raid on the Unspeakable*, is his most provocative and comprehensive essay constructed upon a Greek myth. In this sensuous, meditative prose-poem Merton makes his principal points about surface and underlying realities. Ideas are reinforced in "Prometheus" and "Herakleitos the Obscure" as will be made clear in the discussion of the essay centering on the Titan, Atlas. In Hesiod's myth, Atlas is the god condemned by Zeus for participating in an insurrection to overthrow the Olympian gods. His punishment is to carry forever the earth and heavens on his shoulders. In Greek mythology, it was eventually established that Atlas's abode was a high North African mountain that was visible from the Mediterranean.

"Atlas and the Fatman" is in fact a myth with three characters: the Titan Atlas, the tsar-like Fatman, and the narrator, a sensitive, imaginative, contemplative person who, through his meditations, perceives the eternal in the ephemeral. The setting is "the shores of a sentient mountain." The narrator "on the last day of a rough but fortunate voyage, near the farthest end

7. Thomas Merton, "Atlas and the Fatman" in *Raid on the Unspeakable*, p. 91. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Atlas."

of the known world” finds a path to this “high African rock, a serious crag, at the tip of the land mass, with a cloud balanced on its shoulder.” From this privileged position, he is able to see and hear the words of the “high silent man of lava” and of the Fatman, a dictator who aspires to be an all-powerful deity. The narrator watches the scenario in which the Fatman experiences an earthquake created by Atlas and, in a fit of outrage, asserts that he controls now and forever the movements on earth and in the heavens as he is the prime mover, the maker of the universe. With great drama, the Fatman tries to prove he has dominion over Atlas, but fails. In the end this tsar, in the midst of his violent, angry antics, is simply destroyed in the earthquake by one of his buildings while the Titan quietly looks on and beyond.

The narrator describes Atlas as being at one in body and spirit with the cosmos. He says of the “man of lava, with feet in the green surf” who “watches the stream of days and years”: “His thoughts were full of inscrutable waters. His heart was safe at the bottom of the green ocean. His spirit stood silent and awake in the center of the world” (“Atlas,” p. 91). In “massive silence” he oversees the movements of the spheres; day and night, winter and summer, high tide and low tide are under his control. In poetic terms, the narrator observes, “The seas obeyed . . . the beating of his heart” (“Atlas,” p. 92). With his dim bell, his means of speaking, he changed the weather and the seasons. “A new summer grew upon the ocean . . . closely followed by autumn, then winter.” Time moved with the breathing of Atlas. It “rode on the secret waves, commanded only by Atlas and the bell.”

Patiently, Atlas carries on his lonely work of holding the world together. Though lonely and seemingly ignored by most men, certainly those who see only the fabricated world, Atlas carries on in a spirit of accommodation with nature and the gods, and of love for humanity whom he feels he serves. As he says, “I wish well to mankind. I give man more seasons and pray that he be not left to himself . . . I want him to rest at peace under a safe sky knowing that I am here with my lights and my bell and that the ends of the world are watched by an overseer and the seas are taken care of” (“Atlas,” p. 94). A centered, peaceful god, Atlas is in tune with all of creation.

Using Atlas as a symbol, Merton conveys significant ideas about the natural world. Atlas is used as a symbol of nature, a kind of “world soul,” even perhaps “a cosmic Adam” (“Prologue,” p. 2). The Titan personifies in body and spirit that larger ongoing reality of which humans are a part and with which they should be in tune. Most certainly,, as Merton underscores, Atlas is a symbol of the world as a god. The goodness of the world for Merton is “incontestable and definitive” (“Prologue,” p. 5). And so it is that he defines Atlas as “a friendly mountain, with a cloud on his shoulder, watching the African sun,” a kind of force who willingly insures that the cosmos is orderly, predictable, and beautiful (“Atlas,” p. 107). The narrator characterizes this essentially idyllic, Atlasian world at the end of the essay, as he calls the reader fully to awaken to the wonders in his/ her midst.

The world is tossing in its sleep, the sun is up, the land is bursting in the silence of dawn. The clear bell of Atlas rings once again over the sea and the animals come to the shores at his feet. The gentle earth relaxes and spreads out to embrace the strong sun. The grasses and flowers speak their own secret names. With his great gentle hands, Atlas opens the clouds and birds spill back onto the land out of Paradise. (“Atlas,” p. 107)

Atlas also symbolizes an attitude toward life. He represents a “Job-like forbearance followed by a final reconciliation with the world” (*Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 100). Merton feels that this kind of acceptance of the cosmos, a moving in tune with the forces of nature, is a way to gain inner peace and to discover wholeness. To try to superimpose a mechanized world upon the

natural is a road to madness, to spiritual if not physical oblivion.

Merton further describes this gentle, compassionate accommodation to the greater forces in "Prometheus: A Meditation." In this essay, he uses the Prometheus whom Aeschylus presented in *Prometheus Bound*, the first play in the unfinished trilogy, as another symbol of a conciliatory mode of living. In the drama, Prometheus, the brother of the Titan Atlas, driven not by a wish for power but by love for humans whom he created, steals fire from Zeus. This gift of wisdom, science, and spirit is given freely by Prometheus, who with his gift of forethought knew of his forthcoming punishment. Zeus has him chained to a cliff in the Caucasus where a vulture tears at his liver all day long. During the night the liver grows whole again, so the next day the vulture can resume his feasting. For generations, Prometheus endures his torture, confident of reconciliation with Zeus. Rather than feeling fearful, angry, guilt-ridden, or rebellious, he acquiesces to his fate with a sense of grace under pressure.

The narrator's perceptions of the second character, the Fatman, stand in stark contrast to those of the Titan, Atlas. This deluded dictator is in tune only with the superficial, timebound, illusionary world of his own creation. The narrator is quick to observe.

He had been born with leather hands and a clockwork mind in order to make a lot of money. He hated the country and loved stadiums: a perfect civilized man! His numer was six hundred and sixty-six and he worked hard building up the stadium Atlas had destroyed. ("Atlas," p. 96)

This demigod tells all that his name is god. It is not surprising to the narrator, therefore, to hear him shout during the earthquake, "If anything moves, I am the one to move it, and if anything stops, I am the one to stop it. If anything shakes, I am the one to shake it, and not one being is going to budge unless pushed" ("Atlas," p. 96) Holding up his hands to the sky in an effort to hold up the firmament, the Fatman adds, "I am the suspicious beginning and the prosperous end" ("Atlas," p. 103). Bellowing on, this ludicrous, tragic Napoleon who lives by the time of the clock rather than the seasons, is out of touch with Atlas's bell, the music of the spheres, the sounds of "clouds, skies and centuries," mesmerized as he is by the sound of his own puny voice and by the sounds of his homemade music created by the "clock and cannon" ("Atlas," pp. 100-101).

For Merton, the Fatman is a symbol of a "bloated technocracy" in which man seeks through science and technology in particular to manage the universe (*Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 101). He personifies the tsar and represents that drive in humans to create a world that serves his messianic delusions. In addition, "the Fatman is a symbol of an attitude toward life that Merton finds intolerable, a rebelliousness against a seemingly uncontrollable and alienic cosmos which involves remaking of the world through technology" (*Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 100).

Merton further explains this warlike attitude in "Prometheus: A Meditation." The Prometheus of the Greek writer Hesiod serves as a symbol of a rebellious mode of living. In the myth, Prometheus "frustrated, rebellious, fear-ridden" steals fire from Zeus, not in a spirit of love for humanity but in an effort to become omnipotent and omniscient.⁸ The vindictive Titan fails and is destined to live out his life chained to a rock in a state of despair and anger. The third character, the narrator, is also a symbol for Merton. He represents the human's inability to perceive the ongoing and actual natural world and through the contemplative experience with real objects — mountains, flowers, seas — to touchstone with the spirit which unifies all of creation. Thus he can say in sum:

8. Thomas Merton, "Prometheus: A Meditation" in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 85.

We who stood off amid the tears of the African night, we who stood with our feet on a hot land, we knew who had rung the bell and changed the weather. We knew who had sent rain. We knew which was power and which was image, which was light and which was legend. And we knew which of the two had his heart at the bottom of the ocean. We knew who watched and who moved the theaters every time the bell rang ("Atlas," pp. 99)

In meditation of the mountain and the cosmos, he and those awakened persons come to understand the REAL. They conclude, "These are worlds of themselves. No man can use or destroy them. Theirs is a life that moves without being seen . . ." ("Atlas," p. 106). Merton enlarges upon the human's ability to perceive the truth about existence in "Herakleitos the Obscure." What Merton demonstrates in an implicit way in "Atlas and the Fatman" is explained more explicitly in this study of the ancient Greek mystic and writer who lived in the Ionian city of Ephesus at the turn of the fifth century B. C. and who wrote myths about his world. His writings are known today only in a series of fragments.

For Merton, Herakleitos like the narrator in "Atlas and the Fatman" is a symbol of humanity's ability to intuit deeper realities. For explication, Merton turns to his translation of Herakleitos's cryptic sayings which he strings together to make a unified statement in the second half of the essay "The Legacy of Herakleitos." Herakleitos believes that each person can and must perceive his world on his own. He says, "I have sought for myself," and urged others to do likewise.⁹ Further he is convinced that each person should begin perceiving by experiencing the real world, for "the things that can be seen and heard and learned" are what are of value ("Herakleitos," pp. 95). Using the senses, imagination, and intuition, he finds that an awakened person can discover in meditation of mountains, flowers, trees, and seas, that "common world that underlies the manmade." To explain, he draws a contrast between the awake and the sleeping.

The many do not pay attention to what is right in front of their nose: and when these things are pointed out to them, they do not take note of them though they think they do.

They are estranged from that with which they are always in contact. The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own. ("Herakleitos," p. 96)

Herakleitos concludes that in being alive to the "common world" in which human and human, human and nature, human and spirit are one, the human can intuit "a hidden harmony." With the help of Greek myths, Merton weaves whole his vision, a vision best revealed in "Atlas and the Fatman." This cryptic essay can well be viewed as Merton's central myth for modern times. Merton himself viewed the parable as one of his most mature statements. In it he thought he provided "difficult insights in a moment of crisis," a critical hour in which the major challenge was that of dehumanization ("Prologue," p. 2).

His purpose in revealing these difficult insights is to warn and to give hope. In his essays, Merton reveals to us the world that, in reality, will nourish and sustain. Through meditation, each can discover that: "There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*." Humans have only to stand with their feet on the hot land and listen until the mountain thinks "plain in his own cloud."¹⁰

9. Thomas Merton, "Herakleitos the Obscure" in *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 95. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Herakleitos."

10. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 363.