

MERTON'S DREAMS:

A Jungian Analysis

by **Robert G. Waldron**

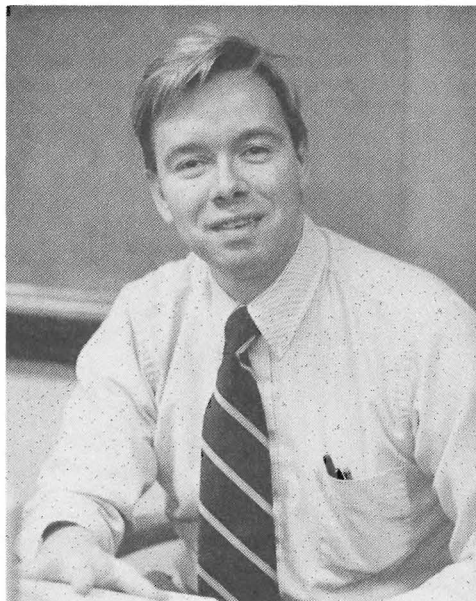
I. PROVERB: MERTON'S ANIMA

The anima is personified in dreams by images of women ranging from seductress to spiritual guide. It is associated with the eros principle, hence a man's anima development is reflected in how he relates to women. Within his own psyche, the anima functions as his soul, influencing his ideas, attitudes and emotions.¹

PART ONE

An analysis from a Jungian perspective of Thomas Merton's dreams (the "Proverb" dreams) reveals that his encounter with his anima resulted in two remarkable events: the epiphany of the Louisville vision and the composition of the haunting prose poem, *Hagia Sophia*.

Jung held that everyone is psychologically androgynous. He designates a man's feminine component the *anima* and a woman's masculine component the *animus*. Psychological growth for both a man and a woman demands the assistance of a contrasexual archetype. The specific function of a man's anima is to serve as a mediatrix between the ego, the center of the conscious mind, and the Self, the center of the unconscious and the unifying force of the whole psyche. When a man listens to his anima, he is led into the deepest regions of the unconscious mind where



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1. Daryl Sharp, *C. G. Jung Lexicon: A Primer of Terms and Concepts* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1991), p. 19. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Sharp*.

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the source of wisdom and self-knowledge lie. The anima also assists a man in discovering his personal symbols which will release the Eros, the principle of relatedness without which he cannot connect with the Self or with people in the external world, and the Libido (energy) necessary for the further development of the personality. Jungian analyst John Sanford writes:

When the anima functions in her correct place, she serves to broaden and enlarge a man's consciousness, and to enrich his personality by infusing into him, through dreams, fantasies, and inspired ideas, an awareness of an inner world of psychic images and life-giving emotions. A man's consciousness tends to be constricted, and without contact with the unconscious, becomes dry and sterile.²

It is in dreams that the anima most often appears. Interpretation of dreams is the cornerstone of Jung's psychology and analytic method. Jung recorded and interpreted many of his dreams in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. He viewed dreams as "utterances of the unconscious," and the primary means through which the unconscious communicates with the conscious mind. Dreams, therefore, are symbolic letters that, if decoded wisely, reveal much about the personality. In his own encounter with his anima, Jung records the following: "Then a new idea came to me: in putting down all this for analysis I was in effect writing letters to the anima, that is, to a part of myself with a different viewpoint from my conscious one."³ He goes on to say about the anima: "It is she who communicates the images of the unconscious to the conscious mind, and that is what I chiefly valued her for. For decades I always turned to the anima when I felt that my emotional behavior was disturbed" (*Memories*, p. 187).

Merton, too, recorded many of his dreams in his published and unpublished journals. Obviously he believed that they were an important aspect of his inner life and that an understanding of his dreams would lead to increased self-knowledge. Many of his dreams, like the following one experienced on February 28, 1958, concern the anima:

On a porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let me go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect "She belongs to the same race as St. Anne." I ask her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it — perhaps others have mocked her for it.⁴

The dream-ego, Merton at his current age, and the Jewish girl, much younger, the Eternal Feminine, meet on the porch of his grandparents' home in Douglaston, Long Island, New York. The porch, symbol of receptivity (at one time in American life the traditional locus of girl/ boy encounters) is really a threshold or entrance to the rest of the house (cf., Mary, Gate of Heaven). The house symbolizes the psyche. The girl is Merton's anima: when she embraces him in "virginal passion," they are unified, one man/ woman. Thus, the embrace is symbolic of "coniunctio" which Jung defines as the inner marriage. Being a man and true to the Logos impulse in all men, Merton asks her name. She gives a symbolic name, "Proverb." A proverb is a wise saying. Hence, Proverb is a spiritual guide, a wise woman who will lead Merton into the house of the psyche where he too will attain true wisdom. Merton deduces that Proverb is "mocked by others." These "others" are elements of Merton's shadow which disparage holy wisdom or the feminine in general in favor of the rational, intellectual, masculine way of the world. In the world

2. John Sanford, *The Invisible Partners* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 65-66.

3. Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 186. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Memories*.

4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 312. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

the stewards of holy wisdom from time immemorial have been mocked, the Jews, “the same race as St. Anne” — St. Anne the mother of Mary, the mother of God.

A close reading of this dream also suggests some noteworthy biographical information about Merton. Merton’s father and mother were married in St. Anne’s Church in Soho, London. He named his first hermitage, an old abandoned tool shed at Gethsemani, after St. Ann. And as a young man attending school in England, Merton met his friend Andrew Winsor’s sister, Ann. She made such a lasting impression on him that in 1965, over thirty years after their meeting, Merton writes:

The other day after Mass I suddenly thought of Ann Winsor, Andrew’s little sister. She was about twelve or thirteen when I used to visit at his parent’s parsonage on the Isle of Wight. I remember that quiet rectory in the shady valley of Brooke. She was the quietest thing in it. A dark and secret child. One does not fall in love with a child of thirteen and I hardly remember even thinking of her or noticing her, yet the other day I realized that I had never forgotten her and that she had made a deep impression.⁵

Consider also that when Merton lived with his grandparents in Douglaston, he often used the porch as a place to read:

The first two months after I landed in New York, and went to the house in Douglaston, I continued to read the Bible surreptitiously — I was afraid someone might make fun of me. And since I slept on the sleeping porch, which opened on the upstairs hall through glass doors and which, in any case, I shared with my uncle, I no longer dared to pray on my knees.⁶

That sleep would be associated with the Douglaston porch, along with reading the Bible (perhaps the Book of Proverbs) and Merton’s sense of shame (“others have mocked her for it”) in reading the Bible, adds to our appreciation of this dream, a dream resonating with hints about Merton’s life and personality. To enter more deeply into the significance of his dream, Merton initiates a dialogue with Proverb through a series of love letters. This active engagement Jung would laud as it is a form of “Active Imagination,” a method of communing with unconscious elements in order to elicit their full import.

On March 4, 1958, Merton writes in a letter to “Dear Proverb” of his gratitude for Proverb’s love despite a “great difference in our ages”: “How grateful I am to you for loving in me something which I thought I had entirely lost, and someone who, I thought, had long ago ceased to be . . . Dearest Proverb, I love your name, its mystery, its simplicity and its secret, which even you yourself seem not to appreciate” (*Mott*, p. 313). Merton’s description is remarkably similar to Jung’s diction about his own anima: “Something strangely meaningful clings to her . . . a secret knowledge or hidden wisdom . . . in her lies something like a hidden purpose which seems to reflect a superior knowledge of life’s laws.”⁷

What exactly did Merton think he had lost? Perhaps the severity of his mother who wrote him a letter to inform him of her impending death frightened him to the point he could never completely trust a woman again. He himself writes that “perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers.”⁸ Maybe in his flight from the world and its perceived evils into Gethsemani Merton,

5. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), pp. 193-194. Hereafter referred to in the text as VOC.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 115. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

7. Carl G. Jung, source unknown.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953). Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

too self-absorbed, too much focused on his own inner journey, failed to be concerned sufficiently about his brothers and sisters struggling to save their souls in the labyrinthine ways of the world. We recall the young Merton, socially conscious, who volunteered his services to Friendship House in Harlem.

Perhaps Merton realized that he owed much to the women he had known. There were many who enriched his life, women like his grandmother, his Aunt Maud Pearce, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Ginny Burton, Naomi Burton Stone, Sister Therese Lentfoehr, and many others. And now at the age of fifty-three he is writing letters to his own inner woman. The embracing of the anima in his dream is the beginning of a breakthrough in Merton's individuation: it symbolically portrays Merton's willingness to accept the feminine, an acceptance Jung calls the "masterpiece" of the individuation process.⁹ Keep in mind, however, that in Merton's dream, the anima imitates the embrace of Merton. She is "determined" and she "clings" to Merton: she is demanding recognition because as her youth suggests, she is the undeveloped aspect of Merton's personality.

On March 18, 1958, Merton experienced his well known Louisville vision. The following is the original account, not the revised description included in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, suddenly I realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or could be, totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream — the dream of my separateness, of my "special" vocation to be different. My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men or just one in a special category, except artificially, juridically. I am still a member of the human race — and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race. (Mott, p. 312)

This is not the Merton who entered Gethsemani in *contemptus mundi* on December 10, 1941. Nor is this the Merton who eleven years later in the Cincinnati airport thought that the passersby were "infected with some moral corruption that had been brought in by the planes from New York" (Mott, p. 311). His embrace, now, of the "Human Race" is certainly the fruit of Merton's embrace of the feminine components of his own personality symbolized in his Proverb dream.

As a man is physically born of woman, so is man spiritually/ psychologically reborn through/ by/ of the anima. The Louisville vision clearly proves that Merton is moving away from being the "petulant ascetic" of his early years as a monk toward becoming the "radical humanist of the last decade of his life."¹⁰ Thus, the dogmatic, moralistic, world-denying man of *The Seven Storey Mountain* becomes the antithesis of the Merton who emerges as the world-embracing monk of the 1960s. Consequently, we cannot underestimate the significance of the Louisville vision, an epiphany causing Merton to shift his gaze from the narrow, tunnel vision of a Catholic convert to a sweeping, truly catholic gaze that encompasses the whole world, its people, and their woe.

A scrutiny of Merton's writing after the Louisville vision shows a prolific creativity never achieved before. His poetic output alone triples, and his newfound, broad inclusiveness finds its expression in a myriad of essays on a number of topics: war, peace, nonviolence, racism, cold war, arms control, and Eastern mysticism. He writes: "To choose the world is to choose to do the

9. Carl G. Jung, source unknown.

10. David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 143.

work I am capable of doing, in collaboration with my brothers, to make the world better, more free, more just, more livable, more human.”¹¹

On March 19, 1958, in his unpublished journal, after recording at length his Louisville vision, Merton writes: “it is not a question of proving to myself that I dislike or like the women one sees in the street” (*Mott*, p. 313). No, the issue is much more complex. If we accept Jung’s theory that dreams are compensatory mechanisms attempting to rectify an imbalance in a person’s psyche, then Merton’s embrace by Proverb compensates for a failure to accept the feminine in his own inner and outer life. That this could happen to a monk who lives, prays, and works in a world of men is not difficult to understand.

Michael Mott indicates that Merton recorded in his journals more about Proverb, her secret beauty and how he “was married to what is most true in all women in the world” (*Mott*, p. 313). Referring to the Louisville vision in his final letter to Proverb, he writes:

I have kept one promise and I have refrained from speaking of you until seeing you again. I knew that when I saw you again it would be very different, in a different place, in a different form, in the most unexpected circumstances. I shall never forget our meeting yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and Truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child, sent to me by God. (*Mott*, p. 313)

Merton’s struggles to love himself and others are far from over, but he, at least, is more conscious of his dilemma. On March 30, 1958, Father John of the Cross Wasserman delivered a Palm Sunday sermon that moved Merton very much. Merton writes in his journal:

One reason I am so grateful for this morning’s sermon is that my worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being able truly to love, because I despair of ever being worthy of love. But the way out is to be able to trust one’s friends and thus accept in them acts and things which a sick mind grabs as evidence of lack of love — as pretexts for evading the obligation of love. (*Mott*, p. 317)

PART TWO

Shortly after the dream sequence, on Tuesday, April 21, 1958, Merton visited the home of his friend Victor Hammer in nearby Lexington, Kentucky. Hammer was a painter of spiritual themes as well as a publisher of rare, artistic editions of religious books. Delightedly viewing Hammer’s paintings, one after another, Merton came to an abrupt halt before Hammer’s unfinished triptych depicting a young woman offering a crown to a young man. Merton became emotional. He questioned Hammer about the identity of the woman, as he previously questioned Proverb. Hammer was uncertain. He explained that the male figure was Christ, but he was unsure about the identity of the woman who could be either Mary or some other woman. Mystified, Merton kept returning to the panel to peruse the features of the young maiden.

Why Merton’s emotional response? It is likely that Merton unconsciously recognized in the painting the encounter with his anima, Proverb, in his own grappling with the whole concept of the feminine and its importance in his life. Rather than identifying the woman in the painting, Merton would have been better advised to enter its symbolic meaning. The young woman (anima) offers a crown (circle = wholeness) to a young man. Through the anima comes wholeness just as through Mary comes all grace. The young man is every man who, when he accepts wholeness, takes upon himself Christ.

11. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Unwin, 1971), p. 149.

Not long after his experience at his home, Merton wrote to Hammer: “The feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of creative realization of the Father’s glory in the world and is in fact the manifestation of his glory . . .” (*Mott*, p. 326). This letter is the origin of the poem “Hagia Sophia.”¹² Merton arranges the poem in the form of a quaternity which follows the canonical hours of Lauds, Prime, Tierce, and Compline. For Jung quaternity is the symbol of wholeness (the square or the circle within the square). Since the poem concerns spiritual/psychic awakening, the poet devotes the first three sections of the poem to the new, morning light: 5.30 a.m., 6.00 a.m., and 9.00 a.m. — Lauds, Prime, and Tierce respectively. The last section of the poem occurs at sunset, the hour of Compline, the time of the completion of the day’s work and the singing of the “Salve Regina.”

In the first section, “Dawn, the Hour of Lauds,” Merton, in the voice of the first person singular, compares himself to a man who has just awakened from sleep: “I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity.” The Sister (from now on referred to as Anima) is Merton’s anima who “rises” from the depths of the unconscious, “the divine fecundity,” the locus of the archetypes. Anima brings to Merton a “hidden wholeness” whose origin lies deeper in the psyche: in “the unseen roots of all created being” — the collective unconscious. Note that Anima, like Proverb, is the initiator of the encounter between Merton and her: Merton is awakened.

Later in this section, Merton compares himself to a man in a hospital, and Anima is likened to a nurse who has “the touch of all life, the touch of the spirit.” As a nurse ministers to a sick body, Anima bestows wholeness of spirit/psyche upon Merton. However, Anima did not always appear to Merton. There was a time when he “defended himself, fought himself, guarded himself and loved himself alone” — a time of egoism, perhaps a time in his early manhood when he exploited women. And Merton warns the reader that Anima will only come to a man when he is “little,” “poor,” and “without defense.” He must be a humble man, a man stripped of all masks, a man who knows he is not self-sufficient. Then the poet declares: “This is what it means to recognize Hagia Sophia.” Hagia Sophia is Anima. Anima is Holy Wisdom who invites Merton and all men “with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live.”

In the second section, “Early Morning, the Hour of Prime,” Merton apostrophizes his Anima: “O blessed, silent one, who speaks everywhere!” Although the anima speaks to every man, she can only be heard in silence. However, man refuses to be silent, to listen. In the first person plural, Merton identifies with all men who fail to listen to anima: “We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine.” The anaphora, “we do not hear,” is the sad refrain of this section. Merton again warns that if men do not listen to their anima, they will be denied her fruits: “mercy,” “yielding love,” “non-resistance,” “non reprisal,” and “simplicity.” The exceptional man listens to the inner feminine. He “has come out of the confused primordial dark night into consciousness.” He is the individuated man who has survived the dark night of the soul because he “has expressed the clear silence of Sophia in his own heart.” Merton also states that every man’s individuation is of infinite importance: “the heavenly lights rejoice in the going forth of one man to make a new world in the morning.”

In the next section, “High Morning, the Hour of Tierce,” Merton evokes the spirit of the fourteenth century: “(When the recluses of fourteenth-century England heard their bells and looked out upon the wolds and fens under a kind sky, they spoke in their hearts to ‘Jesus our Mother.’ It was Sophia that awakened in their childlike ears.)”

12. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 363. Hereafter referred to in the text as CP.

Clearly, Merton is referring to Lady Julian of Norwich, the great mystic of the fourteenth century, who lovingly invokes Jesus as our Mother in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. Merton commenced his poem in the first person singular, then moved on to the inclusive first person plural, and then he joins his voice with Lady Julian who possessed the wisdom early to recognize and accept the feminine in God. And at one point in the poem, Merton boldly announces to the reader: "All the perfections of created things are also in God; and therefore He is at once Father and Mother."

The motherhood of God was a daring concept in the fourteenth century, and remains one in our century. But for Merton to be attracted to this feminine image of God indicates that he is, indeed, coming to terms with his own negative experience of motherhood, for it was he who wrote: "[P]erhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers." Merton's attraction to the loving, compassionate Lady Julian is a far cry from the monk who early in his religious life was enamored of the severe, ascetic mystic, St. John of the Cross. Lady Julian's message is love, that God loves us "Not with blame but with pity." To Julian God promised "All manner of things shall be well." Merton says of Julian:

Julian is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older and whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St. John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian if you gave me the world and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. (Mott, p. 362)

It is interesting to note that another great poet, T. S. Eliot, also included Julian in his poetry, in his masterpiece *Four Quartets*.

Much of the remainder of this section of the poem concerns Merton's attempt to define Sophia, the name given to anima. He is always the man of intellect (Logos). He uses her name more than ten times, employing more than ten descriptions of her:

Hagia Sophia considered as spontaneous participation,
Sophia is God's sharing of Himself with creatures,
She is in all things,
She is union between them,
She is love that unites them,
She is life as communion,
She is the Bride and the Feast and the Wedding.

Finally, Merton settles for an all-embracing definition of Hagia Sophia, of Anima, by recalling the words set down in the letter to his friend Victor Hammer soon after he viewed Hammer's triptych: "The feminine principle in the world is the inexhaustible source of creative realization of the Father's glory. She is His manifestation in radiant splendor! But she remains unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know her at all." Merton has amplified his original definition.

The last section, "Sunset, the Hour of Compline, Salve Regina," is the most hauntingly beautiful portion of the poem. We have arrived at the end of the monastic day when all Cistercian monks assemble in the church for the final singing of the Psalms and the hymn, "Salve Regina." According to custom, the church is in darkness, symbolizing the earth's approaching darkness (sunset). First, Merton meditates on the Virgin Mary, our mother, who is the real "personal manifestation of Sophia." He goes on to say that Mary is "perfect Creature" and "perfectly Redeemed" and "the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy." Through Mary "God enters into

His creation.” She is our Mother of mercy and our most gracious advocate. Then Merton recalls his encounter with the mysterious maiden of Hammer’s triptych: “She crowns Him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty.”

When he first saw the triptych, he was perplexed about her identity. She was the unknown. But Merton has moved through her mystery into an acceptance of her reality in his life and in the life of the church. She is Sister, she is Anima, she is Hagia Sophia. She sent Christ “to die for us on the cross.” She offers a crown of wholeness to every man because Christ accepted the crown of thorns, the Christ who still Himself is “a homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification.” Like Sophia, He is heard in silence, in stillness, in darkness.

The Louisville vision, a moment of epiphany, and “Hagia Sophia,” a poem of immense beauty, are both the fruit of Merton’s dream embrace of the mysterious, secret Proverb, his anima.

II. DREAMS: HIDDEN DOOR INTO THE PSYCHE

The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness extends.¹³

As seen in the previous section, integration of the anima into consciousness is a vitally important aspect of the individuation process. And although Merton’s Proverb dreams represent an important breakthrough in his individuation, his integration of the feminine in his psychic life is far from complete. Merton continued to be visited in his dreams by anima figures as shown in *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-195*. *Dreams can be interpreted on two levels: the objective and the subjective. Objectively the dream is a commentary on the dreamer’s external world; subjectively the dream is a commentary on the dreamer’s inner world. In both cases the message of the dream is best comprehended by symbolic interpretation. Jung maintained that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. He writes: “Dreams are often anticipatory and would lose their specific meaning on a purely causalistic view. They afford unmistakable information about analytical situations, the correct understanding of which is of the greatest therapeutic importance” (Reflections, p. 60).*

This is the appropriate time to address Merton’s projection of his anima onto a woman. Mott’s biography corroborates Merton’s romantic involvement with a nurse he met on March 31, 1966, when he was hospitalized for a back ailment (Mott, p. 437). Much has been made of this, but from a Jungian perspective this occurrence is understandable, if not to be expected. It is natural for a man to project his anima onto a woman. It is the psychological impetus for a man falling in love with a woman, just as a woman falls in love with a man as the result of her projection of her animus onto him.

13. Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Reflections*; ed. Jolanda Jacobi & R. F. C. Hall (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1970), p. 53. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Reflections*.

The nurse (Mott calls her S.) is “dark Irish” and resembles in looks and age Merton’s dream anima, Proverb (Mott, p. 435). Mott writes that Merton “was overwhelmed by the experience and it changed him forever” (Mott, p. 438). Psychically it probably was the best thing that could have happened to Merton because, as Mott says, he never again referred to his inability to love, or to be loved, such was the gift of love and acceptance he received from S. and which he reciprocated (Mott, p. 438). There is no evidence, however, that Merton violated his vow of celibacy. The affair remained platonic to its conclusion.

For Merton, as with all Cistercian monks, Mary the mother of God is the only acceptable recipient of anima projections. She is their patroness. Merton’s full religious name was Father Mary Louis. And every monk’s last prayer at the end of the day at Compline is the “Salve Regina.” However, the earth link with Mary has been weakened because she has been raised so high into the rarified world of dogma with her immaculate conception and her assumption of body and soul into heaven. Jung was jubilant when Pius XII declared in 1950 the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He writes: “The new dogma affirms that Mary as the Bride is united with the Son in the heavenly bridal chamber, and as Sophia (Wisdom) she is united with the Godhead. Thus the feminine principle is brought into immediate proximity with the masculine Trinity” (Memories, p. 202). This recognition of the feminine in our culture was long overdue. But, Mary cannot be the recipient of instinctual longing or fantasy, a dilemma for all monks who take vows of celibacy.

Being aware of the psychological dynamic of projection, we can understand why so many men fail to take final vows as monks. And we can understand compassionately Merton’s falling in love with his nurse who is mysteriously foreshadowed in “Hagia Sophia.” A monk’s vocation is a special one. At the same time it is a rather difficult one. Monks need, however, contact with women who will assist them in getting in touch with the feminine within themselves. Permitting retreats for women at Gethsemani, as is now done, was a bold but wise decision.

In *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton records three dreams resonant of his continued, and positive, confrontation with the feminine side of his personality. An examination of the third dream reveals that Merton has made progress in coming to terms with his first, negative experience of the feminine, that of his severe, demanding mother. The anima figures of these dreams appear in three distinctly different guises: a lady Latinist, a Chinese princess, and a black mother. It is enlightening to explore these dreams on both objective and subjective levels because they offer us important insights into Merton’s outer and inner life.

It should be noted that because Merton recorded these dreams, he invites the reader to interpret them. Journals are composed of episodic and epigrammatic entries meant to be read slowly so that one can meditate on them in order to elicit their full import. As a poet, Merton uses symbols. Therefore, a symbolic reading of his dreams is one with which Merton himself would have been comfortable. Jung says many times that the language of the soul is symbolic. He wrote: “Psychic development cannot be accomplished by intention and will alone; it needs the attraction of the symbol, whose value quantum exceeds that of cause.”¹⁴

On March 10, 1964, Merton recorded the following dream:

Last night I dreamed that a distinguished Lady Latinist came to give a talk to the novices on St. Bernard. Instead of a lecture, she sang in Latin meters, flexes and puncta. Something that sounded like the sermon of the saint, though I could not recognize it. The novices were restive and giggled. This made

14. Carl G. Jung, “On Psychic Energy” par. 47. In *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*; trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953-1979).

me sad. In the middle of the performance the late abbot Dom Frederic, solemnly entered. We all stood. The singing was interrupted. I explained in an undertone that I had just now realized that the presence of this woman constituted a violation of cloister and I would remedy matters as soon as possible. Where did she come from, he asked. "Harvard," I said in a stage whisper which she must have heard. Then the novices were all on a big semi, loaded on the elevator, I don't know how, to go down from the top of the building. Instead of the Latinist coming on the elevator, I left the novices and escorted her down safely by the stairs: but now her clothes were all soiled and torn. She was confused and sad. She had no Latin and nothing much to say. I wonder what this dream is about. Is it about the Church? Is it about the liturgical revival, Anglicanism perhaps? Is it about some secret Anglican anima of my own? (VOC, pp. 32-33)

The Lady Latinist can be construed as the Catholic Church. She represents the church before Vatican II. Therefore, she is the rejected former church whose language is now considered archaic if not laughable, causing the novices to giggle. Merton is saddened by their reaction. He always loved the Latin language of the church. In fact, he never gave up reading his Latin breviaries which were with him even on his last trip to Asia. The stairs symbolize the descent of the church, now soiled, worn, and in need of new clothes. The Lady is also confused and sad. The church of the sixties, endeavoring to modernize and update itself, confused and saddened many Catholics. The Mass in the vernacular was the most controversial change for many. Merton himself, in favor of most of the liturgical changes, was saddened to see the Latin antiphons disappear forever. He continued to recite them privately.

Generally, Merton's dream reveals an ambiguity of response to the changing church of the sixties. The Lady Latinist represents the church Merton was received into. It was the Roman Catholic Church he loved so much, the church that perhaps saved him from a life of dissipation. Although Merton does not defend the Lady Latinist, he does not abandon her. Concerned for her safety, he escorts her down the stairs, the archaic means of movement, while the novices take the modern means of descent, the elevator, symbolic of the ecumenical movement. Implied in Merton's choice of the stairs over the elevator is a criticism that perhaps the church is changing (moving) too quickly.

Dom Frederic Dunne is the male equivalent of the Lady Latinist. He represents the old order at Gethsemani, and had he lived (he died on August 4, 1948), he might have been disturbed by the changes of Vatican II. He was abbot of Gethsemani when Gregorian chant and the Latin Mass were the spiritual sustenance of Trappist monks. He was abbot before the church was stripped of its statues and altars. He was abbot when Merton entered Gethsemani. He encouraged Merton to write his autobiography. He handed Merton the first copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* on July 7, 1948. His successor was Dom James Fox who led Gethsemani through the Vatican II period. He was a graduate of Harvard's business school. He implemented sweeping changes at Gethsemani just as Vatican II would do for the church. The old guard gives way to the new: the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Subjectively this dream reveals that Merton is still not completely comfortable with the feminine aspects of his personality. The cloister is symbolic of the psyche. The problem is that there is no place for the feminine in a cloister which prohibits the presence of any woman. Furthermore, Merton himself does not comprehend her Latin singing. In other words anima and the dream-ego do not understand each other. The novices and Dom Frederic are shadow figures in the dream: both question her presence. The novices mock it, reminding us of the mockers in Merton's Proverb dream. The abbot asks where she comes from. Merton says "Harvard" and apologizes to the abbot for her presence, having forgotten she is in violation of cloister. Merton's lapse of memory suggests an unconscious desire for the feminine, a desire not strong enough yet to withstand the presence of an authority figure like Dom Frederic.

Merton's dream-ego, therefore, does nothing to defend her presence in his cloister, his consciousness. He does not embrace her as he embraced Proverb, his anima figure of a previous dream, but escorts her from the cloister by descending the stairs, causing her to become more soiled and torn. All of this suggests that it is Merton who is torn or rather ambivalent about his anima (she is an aspect of his psyche), and by escorting her downstairs, symbolic of repression, he is avoiding his problem by returning his anima to the unconscious. One could say this is a negative dream offering little hope for psychic integration of the feminine (Merton seems to be regressing to his former unconscious state) except for the fact that the dream-ego is saddened by the novices's and Dom Frederick's rejection ("This made me sad"). The reader feels Merton's empathy and compassion for the Lady Latinist. Generally speaking we can view this as a positive dream regarding the anima.

In 1965, during the time of the recording of this journal, Merton continued to refer to his "refusal of women," and on July 7, 1965, he wrote to Sister Mary Luke Tobin recommending Karl Stern's new book, *The Flight from Woman*, saying: "But you are not the ones who need it."¹⁵ Merton was conscious of his struggle to integrate the feminine into his life. Consciousness of psychic imbalance facilitates its resolution. On November 19, 1964, Merton recorded the following dream:

Last night I had a haunting dream of a Chinese princess which stayed with me all day. ("Proverb" again). This lovely and familiar and archetypal person. (No "object" yet how close and real, and how elusive.) She comes to me in various mysterious ways in my dreams. This time she was with her "brothers," and I felt overwhelmingly the freshness, the youth, the wonder, the truth of her; her complete reality, more real than any other, yet unobtainable. Yet I deeply felt the sense of her understanding, knowing and loving me, in my depths — not merely in my individuality and everyday self, yet not as if this self were utterly irrelevant to her. (Not rejected, not accepted either.)

(VOC, p. 101)

The Chinese princess is an anima figure who represents Merton's interest in all things Eastern, including Chinese painting, Taoist philosophy and Zen Buddhism. The East is also the land of compassion, the land of nothingness, the land of the tea ceremony and calligraphy, all of which fascinated Merton. In 1962 Merton began corresponding with Dr. John C. H. Wu who helped Merton with one of his finest books, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Merton called it his favorite), published in 1965 while this journal was being written. The poetic interpretations of Chuang Tzu were very much on Merton's mind at the time of this dream. Wu wrote him on May 11, 1965, praising Merton's "nosegay of poems."¹⁶ This made Merton ecstatic, and he wrote in return: "What a wonderful letter that was! It was a pure delight, and it made me so happy that I had been insane enough to go ahead with the work on Chuang Tzu" (*HGL*, p. 627). In June 1963, Merton wrote of his new love: "Chuang Tzu is my delight" (*HGL*, p. 624). It is no wonder that this so very positive dream reflects Merton's enriching study of Chuang Tzu which he said, at one point, "restores me to sanity" (*HGL*, p. 623). Because Merton's numinous dreams of anima are those of Proverb, it is understandable that he would compare his Chinese princess to her. If we can credit Proverb with Merton's poem, "Hagia Sophia," perhaps we can credit the Chinese princess with his fine books on the East: *Mystics and Zen Masters*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and, of course, his poetic renditions, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.

15. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal & Spiritual Direction*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 287.

16. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 627. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

As previously stated, the anima offers man the libido to develop further his personality (a woman's animus performs a similar function for her) which often results in a burst of creativity. Merton's Chinese princess makes available to him "freshness" and "youth" and "wonder" and "truth." How often men in late life fall in love with a younger woman and find themselves renewed, producing work of importance, if not genius. Artists like Yeats and Picasso are classic examples of such renewal inspired by a younger woman who becomes the artist's muse. Merton, a celibate, had to rely on his inner woman.

This dream of anima invigorates Merton because he knows "in my depths," in his unconscious, that there is a figure who loves him for what he is and not just for his "everyday self," his ego and persona. He is loved for his complete self which also includes the negative, the shadow. There is a suggestion, however, that his anima and his ego are not completely in tune with each other, that there are some aspects of Merton's anima that are still "unobtainable," perhaps referring to Merton's belief that he was incapable of loving or accepting love. Merton's journal entry about this dream reveals that he has analyzed it carefully, seeking its meaning, trying to find what is "unobtainable." Jungian Marie Von France writes:

But what does the role of the anima as guide to the inner world mean in practical terms? This positive function occurs when a man takes seriously the feelings, moods, expectations, and fantasies sent by his anima and when he fixes them in some form — for example, in writing, painting, sculpture, musical composition, or dancing. When he works at this patiently and slowly, other more deeply unconscious material wells up from the depths and connects with the earlier material.¹⁷

On February 4, 1965, Merton recorded the following dream:

Last night I had a curious and moving dream about a "black mother." I was in a place somewhere I had been as a child. I could not recognize it, but also there seemed to be some connection with Bell Hollow and I realized that I had come there for a reunion with a Negro foster mother whom I had loved in my childhood in the dream. Indeed it seemed, in the dream, that I owed my life to her, to her love for me, so that it was really she and not my natural mother who had given me life, as if from her had come a new life. And there she was. Her face was ugly and severe, yet a great warmth came from her to me and we embraced with love. I felt deep gratitude, and what I recognized was not her face but the warmth of her embrace and of her heart, so to speak. Then we danced a little together, I and my black mother.

Finally I had to continue the journey that I was on in my dream. I cannot remember any more about this journey or any incidents connected with it. The comings and goings, the turning back and so forth. (VOC, p. 144)

Merton was very much concerned with racism in America and wrote eloquently about the Civil Rights Movement. His poems — "And the Children of Birmingham" and "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll" — reveal his great compassion for the suffering of black children at the hands of white racists. One of his best friends was John Howard Griffin, the author of *Black Like Me*. A black anima figure certainly points to an empathy for and an identification with black people in his conscious life. It also illustrates Merton's continuing all-embracing attitude toward the world.

In his autobiography Merton says little about his mother who died of cancer when he was just six years old. She was a perfectionist whose demanding ways of rearing him negatively affected her son. It is likely that this first experience of the feminine caused Merton's "refusal of women." Marie Von France writes: "In its individual manifestation the character of a man's anima is as a rule shaped by his mother. If he feels that his mother had a negative influence on

17. Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1964), p. 195. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Symbols*.

him, his anima will often express itself in irritable, depressed moods, uncertainty, insecurity, and touchiness” (*Symbols*, p. 186). Just a cursory glance at Merton’s journals and letters reveals all of the above mentioned negative states of being which caused him a host of physical ailments from skin disease to insomnia to stomach problems to various forms of neuralgia.

He describes his mother in the first chapter of *The Seven Storey Mountain* as “thin and pale and rather severe” (*SSM*, p. 15). The adjective “severe” appears again in *The Sign of Jonas* when he says “perhaps solitaires are made by severe mothers.” In this dream he describes the black mother: “Her face was ugly and severe, yet a great warmth came from her to me and we embraced with love” (the antithesis of his natural mother). An anima figure who is black and ugly is an anima figure who needs not attract by being white or beautiful. Beauty is held as the ideal of feminine perfection, but beauty is not the essence of the feminine. In the dream, Merton, it seems, is not duped by appearances and accepts the gifts of the feminine which are love and warmth. He feels her love in the *embrace*, symbolic of the archetype *coniunctio*, suggesting the union of opposites and the birth of new possibilities. He then dances with her. The dance, too, is symbolic. Its motion is circular. Thus, it traces a mandala. Jung writes: “The circle, as the symbol of completeness and perfect being, is a widespread expression for heaven, sun, and God; it is also the primordial image of man and the soul” (*Sharp*, p. 110).

The dream-ego’s dance with his black mother enhances their union and harmony: subject and object have become one. Perhaps Merton has finally come to terms with his severe mother. Perhaps Merton, on a deep level, accepts the reality that although his mother *appeared* to be demanding and severe, she really loved him, that perhaps she herself, like her son, was uncomfortable in expressing love, but the love was always there. Thus, Merton feels a “deep gratitude.” The reference to Bell Hollow concerns an Edenic piece of land Gethsemani was considering purchasing for hermitages (*VOC*, p. 130). Merton lyrically describes the area. It is a place untouched where the water is pure. This is the land of his black mother. Such a positive dream can only mean that Merton is now entering new territories of self-discovery and self-realization, a land of milk and honey.

A lady Latinist, a Chinese princess, and a black mother — three anima figures with important messages for Merton from his own unconscious. Any person who enters Jungian analysis will be instructed to record all remembered dreams, for they are truly hidden doors into the unconscious. Merton intuitively understood this truth. Furthermore, the title of his journal, *A Vow of Conversation*, suggests that even though Merton may be moving farther from people into his hermitage, he is completely committed to maintaining open dialogue with the world he loves. The title also suggests that Merton will remain conversant with his inner world, for Merton is also committed to open dialogue with the deepest aspects of his own psyche. As he says in one of his late poems, “All the Way Down”:

I went down
 Into the cavern
 All the way down
 To the bottom of the sea.
 I went down lower
 Than Jonas and the whale
 No one ever got so far down
 As me.

(*CP*, p. 669)