

The Wilderness of Compassion: Nature's Influence in Thomas Merton's Writing

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Abstract

This essay examines three gifts of the feminine offered to Merton through his contact with nature: (1) a sense of connectedness and interdependence; (2) the ability of nature to instruct, and heal; (3) a deep awareness of oppression that leads to compassion and action. A sense of connectedness transforms Merton's early intellectualism about nature to an incarnational spirituality. The 'call of the wild' – solitude in the hermitage – results in spiritual growth, deeper intimacy, and inner healing. Merton's increasing sense of our irresponsibility toward the environment results in his compassion for all living things, as well as his naming ecology as a crucial social issue. Because of Merton's untimely death, we have no treatise about him and ecology; yet multiple hints in his journals, reading notebooks, letters, and published book reviews reveal his new-found concern for the environment.

Keywords feminism/ecofeminism, interdependence, nature, healing, compassion, ecological conscience

There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that shall truly flourish like the lily.¹

Any discussion of Thomas Merton and the feminine runs headlong into a problem of definition. Are we talking about females, feminine

1. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (ed. Jonathan Montaldo; Journals, II, 1941–52; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 463. See also Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 334.

qualities, one or more of the various feminisms? We generally claim we know, or think that we know, what we mean when using these words, yet we are often stymied from making explicit and external our implicit, internalized understandings. Moreover, when we look at this conundrum through different lenses we see different perspectives of the problem.

If we were to apply a Jungian lens, for example, we could highlight the *animus/anima* interplay of human psychology and study Merton as Suzanne Zuercher, OSB, does in *Merton: An Enneagram Profile*.² From a scriptural perspective, we might focus on Wisdom who plays before the Lord and who—in Merton's dreams—becomes Proverb, Sophia, celebrated so exquisitely in Merton's long prose poem 'Hagia Sophia'.³ Using a theological lens, we might examine feminine archetypes such as Holy Mother Church, the monastic cloister as an enclosed Garden, and Mary as the idealized woman. A psychobiographical approach—such as Anthony Padovano used in his address at Corpus Christi Church commemorating the 60th anniversary of Merton's baptism—might zero in on Merton's relationship with 'M' as a touchstone moment that moved him to greater human wholeness.⁴ A linguistic lens—which might be called a mythopoeic/literary view—would help us see the centrality of the creating, inspiriting force of Mother Nature; the Greek muse of the poets and the romantic spirit of the imagination; Brother Sun and Sister Moon of St Francis; the surrogate mother of Wordsworth; and the eroticism of nature—at times female, at other times male—as in the poetry of Walt Whitman. Yet any one of the various feminist perspectives would require us to acknowledge the oppression and subordination of disempowered groups and identify actions that address these inequities.⁵

Despite the divergence of these perspectives and definitions, there are some common understandings in these descriptions of the feminine—what we might call gifts of the feminine—that are offered to Merton through his contact with nature. These gifts did not come all at once; if we examine Merton's attraction to nature and his willingness to allow nature to influence his thinking, prayer, and action, we

2. Notre Dame, IN, Ave Maria Press, 1996, pp. 162-72.

3. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 61-69.

4. Padovano, 'The Eight Conversions of Thomas Merton', *The Merton Seasonal* 25.2 (Summer 2000), pp. 9-15.

5. For an overview of various feminist critiques of culture, see Judith Lauber (ed.), *Gender Inequality: Feminists Theories and Politics* (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing, 1998).

begin to see evidence of their taking root in him. Three such gifts are here to be explored: the transformation from a preoccupation with power and control to a sense of connectedness and interdependence; the ability of nature to nurture, instruct, and heal; and an awareness of oppression so deep that it leads to compassion and action. Each of these gifts is related to the feminine and each of these gifts came to Merton through his interaction with nature.

Connectedness and Interdependence

In western tradition, nature has always been seen as feminine. For good or ill, woman has historically been associated with nature and, more specifically, with wilderness. In the western philosophical enterprise, rooted in Pythagoras's table of opposites, woman 'epitomizes anti-reason, anti-culture, wild-ness of mind, wild-ness of word'.⁶ Early Christian imagery regards women as 'daughters of Eve' and the 'Devil's gateway',⁷ whereas medieval thought links the female with inferior matter. The physical world is the *vestigia Dei*, with man as the *imago Dei*; woman is valued only when subordinated to man. Following this hierarchical thinking, Aquinas lumps woman with children and imbeciles.⁸ By the seventeenth century, under the influence of Descartes, the mind/body split is complete and woman is universally linked with the body, the earthy, the 'other' needing to be subdued and brought under control.

Not only western philosophy, but our language, as well, uses male and female imagery to describe the tension between power and submission: 'Mother Earth', the 'birth of spring', and the 'life-force' of nature exist side by side with 'plowing' and 'putting in the seed'. American historical accounts are especially rich in feminine metaphors. Early explorers, as well as pastoral poets such as Phillip Freneau and commentators such as Hector Crevecoeur, steeped their writing in feminine imagery. For the explorers, the land was 'virginal' and 'lush',

6. Deborah Dooley *et al.*, 'Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being: A Feminist Approach to Wilderness in Idea and Word', *Contemporary Philosophy* 12.11 (September/October 1989), p. 15.

7. Susannah Heschel, 'Jewish and Christian Feminist Theologies', in Robert Johnson *et al.*, *Critical Issues in Modern Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2nd edn, 1990), p. 312. The phrase 'Devil's gateway' is attributed to Tertullian in his commentary on 1 Tim. See also the historical review of Church attitudes toward women in Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

8. Dooley *et al.*, 'Ways of Knowing', p. 16.

'fruitful', a 'teeming womb', her rich soil an 'ample bosom', her 'waters sweet as milk'.⁹ Advertisements for American land tracts featured the implicit sexuality of the land in erotic and dominating terms. The hills, like a 'woman's breast', contained 'hidden treasures'; the fertile plains invited 'the lifted ax and the furrowing plough'; the forests and wilder ravishing landscape required 'penetration' to subdue it.¹⁰ In early pastoral poetry, the land was celebrated also as maternal. The New World was a 'realm of abundance', the 'lap of *Alma Mater*', and an opportunity for the 'immigrant to be reborn'.¹¹ When the desire for exclusive possession of the land and its concomitant intimacy was betrayed, the homesteaders were accused of 'laying waste' to it, violating and 'raping' the land.¹² Recognition of this domination and implied oppression has recently given rise to a new area of study appropriately called ecofeminism and to seminal texts such as Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land*.¹³

Thomas Merton, born in 1915, inherited this world of thought which is at worst dualistic, regarding matter as evil and spirit as good, and at best invested in a patriarchal hierarchy in which the male is the norm and the center of discourse; the female is the 'Other'. As a student at Columbia University, Merton was reading Gilson, Huxley and Maritain, and responding positively to the influence of two outstanding teachers, Mark Van Doren and Daniel Walsh. Merton's conversion in 1938, seen by some as impulsive, was really the flowering of his early experiences and his search for some anchor in his life. Orphaned by the time he was 15, Merton had been adrift for several years in sensual gratification. His new focus—a quest for the spiritual—reflected the theological attitudes of a pre-Vatican II Church in which Catholicism was the one and only true religion, and the world was assumed to be an imperfect and ephemeral prelude to the eternal City of God. Nature, important as God's creation, was also to point us toward the Transcendent Being; dallying over it might distract one from the ultimate goal of this journey: heaven and the Beatific Vision.

9. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). See especially chapters 1, 2, 3 for an overview of early American writing and multiple examples of the land as feminine.

10. Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, pp. 8-40 *passim*.

11. Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 67.

12. Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 58.

13. Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 150. See also the entire meditation on metaphor, pp. 148-60.

It is not surprising that multiple references to nature in Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, reflect these prevailing attitudes as well as hint at the beginnings of Merton's departure from them.¹⁴ Merton was both detached from nature, and entranced by it, due in part, as he says in the opening paragraph of his autobiography, to his own 'violence and...selfishness'.¹⁵ While at St Antonin's in 1925, for example, Merton describes the church and village as fitting into the landscape and proclaiming a supernatural significance.¹⁶ Yet while living with the Privats, young Tom used to seek freedom in the woods and adjacent mountains.¹⁷ Soon after his father's death, the adolescent Merton discovered the poetry of William Blake and began a life-long fascination with this mystic. As Blake began to infuse his thinking, Merton realized that the only way to live is 'to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God'.¹⁸ Resonating in this statement is another major influence on Merton's development: the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. While recovering from a tooth extraction at Oakham, Merton was given a book of Hopkins's poetry by the headmaster.¹⁹ Both poets, Blake and Hopkins, were responsible for weaning Merton, over time, from a solely intellectual approach to nature.

This 'intellectualism' is evident in Merton's early writing. His religious poetry, as Bonnie Bowman Thurston and others have argued, often uses nature imagery that quickly falls into abstractions and speculative thinking.²⁰ His prose, too, reflects a similar view. In a journal entry for 18 May 1939, Merton writes: 'it is a bitter journey without God's grace' to love created things 'because they are imperfect... When you love them for themselves then you get only bitterness.'²¹ It would be some time before Merton realized that mere

14. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948).

15. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 3.

16. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 37.

17. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 57.

18. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 191. Note that since Merton is writing his autobiography after his entrance into the monastery that his prose about Blake is reminiscent also of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, 'God's Grandeur'.

19. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 100.

20. See Bonnie Bowman, 'Flowers of Contemplation: The Later Poetry of Thomas Merton' (unpublished dissertation, Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1979); and Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, 'The Poetry of Thomas Merton: An Introduction' (unpublished dissertation, Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1977); Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1979).

21. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (ed. Patrick

intellectual conversion was insufficient; the will, and with it the emotions, must also undergo transformation.²² In this early period, the hills of Olean had yet to work their magic on his spirit, teaching him that God is not only a transcendent Being, rarely glimpsed, but also an immanent Presence readily perceived in nature.

Even Merton's decision to become a Trappist monk was tied to a struggle over how he could/would regard nature. Could his Franciscan leanings toward seeing himself as part of the family of nature, fostered by his one and a half years of teaching at St Bonaventure, be a potential stumbling block in his vocation? In his journal entry for 4 September 1941, Merton recounts his struggle during a retreat, finally resolving 'there is nothing in the Trappist discipline to prevent you loving nature the way I meant it then and do now: loving it in God's creation, and a sign of His goodness and Love'. Two paragraphs later he reports that the 'dawn was as clear as glass and the whole white earth praised the Immaculate Mother of God'.²³ For Merton, the subject/object split is beginning to dissolve, and very early in his monastic career, hints of a developing incarnational spirituality emerge in occasional journal entries.

Eight days after entering Gethsemani, for example, Merton indicates that all feelings and obligations inside and outside have been brought into harmony (18 December 1941).²⁴ Although there are few journal entries on any topic from his early years in the monastery, by January of 1947, Merton acknowledges the providence of God for bringing him to this place where he can pray 'walking up and down under the trees'.²⁵ On 2 July 1948, he notes that 'landscape seems to be important for contemplation... Anyway I have no scruples about loving it.'²⁶ Not surprisingly, even experiences of spiritual ecstasy are intertwined with exuberance toward nature. In September of that same year, Merton writes with uncharacteristic emotion:

Love carries me around. Love sails me around the house. Love, love, love lifts me around the cloister. I walk two steps on the ground and four steps in the air. It is love. It is consolation...I don't want to *do* anything but love... That was the way it was up in the apple trees yesterday morning with all that blue sky. The bulls in their pens were rumbling like old men...that was the way it was after Communion...and that was

Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 7.

22. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 231.

23. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, pp. 399-400.

24. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 4.

25. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 36.

26. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 216.

the way it was going into the refectory...and that is the way it is writing this, too. I feel all clean inside because I am full of You, O God, and You are love, love Love!²⁷

Two years later, Merton remarks how his 'chief joy was to escape to the attic of the garden house' where 'in silence I love the green grass'. Nature has 'become part of my prayer' (16 March 1950).²⁸ On 26 February 1952, in a long passage using nature imagery to describe three levels of prayer, Merton writes: '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. Here is where love burns with an innocent flame...'²⁹ Merton's experience—and prayer—is deepening. Nature has become necessary to both his prayer and equilibrium, and he feels an obligation to recognize the daily changes in his surroundings. As he admits some years later, Ash Wednesday, 1963: 'I have a real need to know these things [daily weather] because I myself am 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 all this is no day at all. It is certainly part of my life of prayer.'³⁰

No longer is nature merely something 'out there' that Merton can choose to ignore or regard on only a speculative level. Rather, because of his deepening relationship to Jesus, Merton is developing an incarnational spirituality. He realizes the old way of thinking about human domination and control is misguided. He is discovering that God is not only in heaven but physically present on this earth in human beings and, indeed, in all creation. If Merton is to be 'seized' by Jesus, if the incarnation is to be an ongoing grace and not just a past event, then God must be accessible in the 'raw, brute physicality' of this world.³¹ And if Christ is present in everything, we are all linked as earthy, interdependent members of his Body. One might ask how this dramatic change came about. What events in Merton's life account for this transformation in thinking? There are several specific influences we might point to that explain in part Merton's growing recognition of and reliance on the intimate presence of God in nature.

27. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 234.

28. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 419.

29. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 468.

30. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (ed. Victor A. Kramer; Journals, IV, 1960–63; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 299.

31. Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 78; see especially Chapters 3 and 4 for an explanation of the consequences of the Incarnation.

First, Merton is reading theology. He is studying the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, steeping himself in Augustine, Aquinas, and Bernard. Augustine, who like Merton, came late to an understanding of Christianity and the immanence of God, celebrated the God within himself and all creation. Aquinas, for all his problems with women, those 'misbegotten males', acknowledges that all creation is holy. Bernard even goes so far as to counsel: 'You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.'³² Besides theological treatises, Merton is also reading deeply and widely spiritual mystics like Meister Eckhart (who describes creation in feminine terms as an act of God's passion) as well as philosophy, literature, poetry, and anthropology. In addition to formal study, Merton is also living the spirit of sacred scripture, especially the psalms. Seven times a day he is chanting praise to God in nature metaphors to describe the maternal care of God—a God who feeds us 'with the finest of the wheat' (Ps. 81), who leads us to 'green pastures' (Ps. 23), from whom 'even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest' (Ps. 84); a God about whom the psalmist is moved to exclaim: 'Let everything that breathes praise the Lord' (Ps. 150).³³

Not to be overlooked is the fact that Merton is steeping himself in Benedictine spirituality which fosters a balance of study, worship, and work. Work is never merely manual labor, but part of the monk's commitment to finding the holy in the ordinary, and just as much a part of prayer as chanting psalms.³⁴ Work is spiritual because the Benedictine charism reverences the power of the seed and the feminine rhythm of the soil. In a limited edition of *Gethsemani Magnificat*, a photo essay commemorating the centennial of the founding of this monastery, the unidentified author (Merton) celebrates the physical and spiritual cycles of fertility:

The monk's life moves with the slow and peaceful rhythm of the seasons. The liturgical year is in harmony with the life cycle of growing things... A soul that matures in humble toil in fields, barns, and woods soon develops a beautiful and mellow spirituality, something simple and indefinable... Christ lives close to the soil and His Apostles were men who grew up in the midst of nature.³⁵

32. Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux* (trans. Bruno Scott James; Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), Epistle 106.

33. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

34. Elizabeth J. Canham, *Heart Whispers: Benedictine Wisdom for Today* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999), p. 43.

35. Thomas Merton, *Gethsemani Magnificat* (5 April 1949), np.

This same attention to the Benedictine rhythm is evident throughout Merton's journals where multiple references to working in the fields, clearing brush, cutting and planting trees, are identified as healthy work but also as moments that support and nourish prayer. For example, on 26 September 1952 Merton notes that he was 'cutting corn in the middle bottom... It was good. That side of Trappist life is very good. All of it is good, but the cornfield side is good for me.'³⁶

Merton is also influenced by a physical world that can be instructive. Sitting in the garden house attic on 10 February 1950, he watches a hawk select a target in a flock of starlings, come down 'like a bullet' to sink his talons into his prey, then swoop to a nearby branch to dine. Trying to meditate after this astounding disruption of the peaceful field, Merton admits being distracted by the hawk. He thinks of medieval falconers, and Arabs on horseback, 'hawking on the desert's edge' as well as the fascination that war holds for some men. 'But in the end', he concludes, 'I think the hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives because he knows his business. I wish I knew my business as well as he does.'³⁷ Here Merton cannot help but notice a connection to Hopkins's Windhover ('My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird, / the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!'³⁸) and wonder whether or not his own heart can serve Christ as singly as this bird serves its nature. On this day Merton is indeed learning important lessons from his intimate contact with nature.

If we juxtapose two published works by Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) and *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), we can see more sharply how the various influences affected Merton's thinking.³⁹ As Donald Grayston has effectively demonstrated, Merton's experience during this 12-year period—a time of being more deeply influenced by the maternal, and the alluring/gratifying aspects of nature—enabled him to 'remint' the concept of contemplation.⁴⁰ Whereas *Seeds*

36. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III, 1953–60; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 18 (Merton's italics).

37. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, pp. 407–408.

38. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Windhover: To Christ our Lord' in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie; New York: Oxford University Press, 4th edn, 1970), p. 69.

39. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk CT: New Directions, 1949); Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

40. Donald Grayston (ed.), *Thomas Merton's Rewritings: The Five Versions of Seeds/New Seeds of Contemplation as a Key to the Development of his Thought* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989). See also William H. Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Tho-*

reveals a traditional and orthodox approach to individual Catholic piety, *New Seeds* reveals Merton's spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage; it showcases a Merton 'passing from a conventional member of a conservative order in a conservative church to that of "universal man" (Sufi term)'.⁴¹ The early dominant scholasticism (and dualism) of *Seeds* is balanced in *New Seeds* by a healthy dose of Zen and holistic thinking; reason is balanced by intuition, analysis by synthesis.⁴² The 'seeds' that God sows in our souls help us discover in contemplation our essential unity with one another. As Merton adamantly states in *New Seeds*, Descartes and his dualism are 'alien to contemplation'.⁴³ Indeed, 'in the depths of contemplative prayer there seems to be no division between subject and object, and there is no reason to make any statement either about God or about oneself. He IS and this reality absorbs everything else.'⁴⁴ The individual and God are '[n]ot two loves, one waiting for the other, striving for the other, seeking for the other, but Love Loving in Freedom'.⁴⁵ Again resorting to nature metaphors to explain our connectedness and God's desire to play in the garden of his creation, Merton writes in *New Seeds*: 'When we are alone on a starlit night, when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat...hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash...at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values...provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance'.⁴⁶ The incarnate Christ is the means of our unity, and everything—humans and all creation—is caught up in the ecstasy of the general dance.

This kind of contemplative experience is further supported by Merton's reading. For example, he is quick to recognize the similarity between the French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, and Zen—especially Merleau-Ponty's position that complete separation from environment is a delusion. On 23 December 1963 Merton writes in his journal: 'I am inevitably a dialogue with my surroundings, and have no choice, though I can perhaps change the surroundings'. He then quotes from

mas Merton, his Life and Works (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), pp. 156-59.

41. Grayston, *Thomas Merton's Rewritings*, p. xx.

42. Grayston, *Thomas Merton's Rewritings*, p. xxxii.

43. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 8.

44. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 267; quoted by Shannon, *Something of a Rebel*, p. 159.

45. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 283; quoted by Shannon, *Something of a Rebel*, p. 159.

See also Lawrence S. Cunningham (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 251.

46. Merton, *New Seeds*, pp. 296-97.

Merleau-Ponty a passage that sounds strikingly like an Eastern koan: *'L'interieur et l'exterieur sont inseparables. Le monde est font au dedans et je suis tous hors de moi'* ('The interior and the exterior are inseparable. The world is created from within and I am always outside myself').⁴⁷

Such intensified focus on nature—using it as a vehicle to reflect on and express the movements of God within—is most sharply noticed in Merton's journals after 27 June 1949, when he is given permission to go beyond the confines of the cloister, to wander and pray in the outer reaches of the monastery property. Jonathan Montaldo, editor of Volume II of the Journals rightly cites this date as a defining moment in Merton's vocation after which Merton's prose 'breaks out beyond a past mental and spiritual confinement'.⁴⁸ Montaldo's position can be supported not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. For example, in the first section of Volume II, the Novitiate Journal (December 1941–April 1942), there are three prose references to nature; in the memoir of Dom Frederic Dunne (October 1946–August 1948), there are two references to nature; but in the major portion of this Journal, entitled 'The Whale and the Ivy' (December 1946–July 1952)—much of which was published as *The Sign of Jonas*—some 180 separate references to nature culminate in the rhapsodic Firewatch passage in which Merton celebrates the natural and spiritual rhythms of the night with its 'huge chorus of living beings' (5 July 1952).⁴⁹ In Volume V of the Journals, which details Merton's gradual move to the hermitage full-time, there are more than 225 references to nature, not counting the four full pages that constitute the core of *Day of a Stranger*, in which Merton dialogues with his surroundings, celebrates his harmony with the sun, articulates how he and the warblers share the same nature of love, and how being in the woods reaffirms his vocation to solitude.⁵⁰

Clearly, something different is occurring in Merton's reflection and writing. No longer is he adhering to an arrogant anthropocentrism, but with humility—connected literally and linguistically to *humus*, earth—he anticipates what Rosemary Radford Ruether argues almost 25 years later: that 'the whole ecological community...supports and makes possible our very existence'.⁵¹ Merton's initial attraction to Blake and

47. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Journals, V, 1963–65; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 48.

48. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 328 n. 43.

49. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 486.

50. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 48, 146, 162, 177–78, 229.

51. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature', in Judith Plant (ed.), *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Phila-

Hopkins has become more than literary gratification; it has blossomed into an earth-based spirituality that is deeply rooted in a sacramental view of life which embraces all creation as holy and as manifestations of God. The 'virgin wilderness', with its 'hidden treasures', and 'lush landscape' has lured Merton into intimate relationship and rewarded his attentions with a heightened awareness of physical and spiritual reality. Hence, the rain, the Kentucky knobs, the clouds, stars, sky, birds, deer, and woods significantly impact Merton's thought and prayer. What is external affects and effects the internal. *Habitat* (the landscape) becomes interlaced with *habitus*—Merton's way of living.

Nurture and Healing

There are yet other gifts of the feminine that help transform Merton's spirituality.

If, as ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak says, the purpose of spiritual practices such as meditation is to 'move one's consciousness beyond the mundane perception of illusion—that all beings are separate, mechanistic entities—to the consciousness of oneness',⁵² then this purpose is fulfilled in Merton, especially as he spends more time in the hermitage. As early as 3 September 1952 Merton writes that he is only a monk when he is 'alone in the old toolshed... True, I have the will of a monk in the community. But I have the *prayer* of a monk in the silence of the woods and the toolshed.'⁵³ Less than two weeks later, his sense of oneness with all that is deepens as his attraction to the Camaldolese way of life wanes. Engulfed in 'God's afternoon, this simple sacramental moment of time', Merton understands how his Trappist 'solitude confirms my call to solitude. The more I am in it, the more I love it. One day it will possess me entirely and no man will ever see me again' (15 September 1952).⁵⁴

One could risk suggesting that Merton recognizes the invitation of God to solitude and communion as a kind of feminine 'call of the wild'. By spending more time in the woods and ultimately receiving permission to live in the hermitage, he is centering his life more completely on God. He experiences God not only directly in contemplation but also in the unfolding of God's love around him. As early as

delphia: New Society Publishers, 1989), p. 174.

52. Charlene Spretnak, 'Toward an Ecofeminist Spirituality', in Plant (ed.), *Healing the Wounds*, p. 129.

53. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 14.

54. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 16.

New Year's Day, 1950, for example, Merton recognizes this profound unfolding of Love. In his journal, he recounts his walk in the rainy woods only to find himself 'climbing the steepest of the knobs... When I reached the top,' he writes,

I found there was something terrible about the landscape. But it was marvelous...I said "Now you are indeed alone. Be prepared to fight the devil." But it was not the time of combat. I started down the hill again feeling that perhaps after all I had climbed it uselessly. Half way down...I found a bower God had prepared for me like Jonas' ivy. It had been designed especially for this moment. There was a tree stump, in an even place. It was dry and a small cedar arched over it, like a green tent, forming an alcove. There I sat in silence and loved the wind in the forest and listened for a good while to God...

Merton concludes, 'The peace of the woods steals over me when I am at prayer'.⁵⁵

This reciprocal dynamic between external nature and internal prayer is so pervasive in Merton's experience—the sacramental power of nature and the inner experience of God so intertwined—that no longer is there a subject/object split between the physical and the spiritual. Divine immanence is experienced and celebrated through Merton's immersion in the natural world. Silence and solitude in nature beget communion. And in that communion is healing.

Nevertheless, such healing does not occur in thunderbolts of grace; like Elijah, Merton finds God in the whisper of the wind when, in stillness, the soul is aware of small inner movements of grace. From those first days in the toolshed that Merton named for St Anne, he recognizes the healing power of nature. In his 16 February journal entry for 1953, he notes how everything 'real in me has come back to life in this doorway open to the sky!' The silence of St Anne's brings all the inner and outer experience 'together in unity and the unity is not my unity but Yours, O Father of Peace'. No longer does Merton feel the unexplainable yearning for some as yet unseen place; the silence of this provisional hermitage, half a mile from the monastery buildings, he writes, 'is making me well'.⁵⁶

Five years later, in the middle of his term as Master of Novices, immersed in reading projects on the American Indians and on Pasternak, and fatigued by the strain of conferences, chronic illness, and writing deadlines, Merton again notes how important nature is to him. On 19 December 1958 he resolves to pull himself out of the 'doldrums of

55. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, pp. 393-94.

56. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 32-33.

relative disorientation' by availing himself of the spiritual centering the woods provide.⁵⁷ On 27 December, he comments how valuable the woods are to help him recuperate from the strain of the Christmas feasts.⁵⁸

That next spring, Merton is pondering the advisability of starting a monastery in Mexico; again the woods save him from what might have been a precipitous decision. One of his points of discernment is how much he loves 'these woods'.⁵⁹ Merton comes to the realization that his location in the center of America is not an accident or a personal preference, 'cuddling in self-love'. No, God has chosen the woods for him (28 June 1959);⁶⁰ they are all he needs (2 July 1959).⁶¹ A few months later when the refusal of his petition to relocate comes from Rome, Merton feels freed of this burden and can rejoice in the '[s]olitude outside geography or in it. No matter' (17 December 1959).⁶² Twelve months later he can still write with assurance that

the tall pines, the silence, the moon and stars above the pines as dark falls, the patterns of shadow, the vast valley and hills everything speaks of a more mature and more complete solitude...*Haec requies mea in saeculum saeculi*. [This is my resting place forever]—the sense of a journey ended, of wandering at an end. *The first time in my life* I ever really felt I had come home and that my waiting and looking were ended.⁶³

Certainly Merton's primary attraction to the hermitage is the solitude and contemplation possible in the monastery wilderness, but I believe Merton is also subtly experiencing in nature a sense of sabbath jubilee, of coming home.⁶⁴ Although he never says so in his journals, it is reasonable to connect Merton's happiness in the woods to his childhood experiences. His father, Owen, a landscape painter, awakened in little Tom an attention to detail and color; his mother, Ruth, a writer, recorded many of Merton's early experiences. In *Tom's Book to Granny*, a chronicle Ruth was keeping for the New Zealand relatives, she records how at three months of age Tom 'watched and talked to a flower', that at eight months, he 'stood up in his pram, especially to

57. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 239.

58. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 240.

59. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 278.

60. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 298.

61. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 300.

62. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 359.

63. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 79-80 (Merton's italics).

64. For the development of this idea, see Maria Harris and Walter Brueggemann, *Proclaim Jubilee: A Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996).

see the river when we went on the bridge', and that before they left Prades, France, ten-month old Tom 'had already begun to wave his arms toward the landscape, crying "Oh color!"' ⁶⁵ The list of vocabulary that two-year old Tom had acquired included the typical terms for clothes, food, and furniture, but also a curious and wide array of bird species he apparently recognized and could name, such as kingfisher, chickadee, woodpecker, wren, and oriole.⁶⁶

At the end of *Tom's Book*, his mother includes the daily 'horarium' for her child. After the 7.30 a.m. breakfast, she writes: 'Outdoors as soon as possible to stay until bath time'. Again after the 2 p.m. dinner: 'Outdoors afterward until sunset'.⁶⁷ It appears that much of Merton's infant experience occurred outside and that his early cognitive and aesthetic development was connected to stimuli from nature. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that at least some of this outdoor time might have been spent near his father's painting sites, and that patterns of light and color—from nature and from the canvas—might have become part of Merton's informal schooling. 'When we go out', writes his mother,

he seems conscious of everything. Sometimes he puts up his arms and cries out "Oh Sui! Oh joli!" Often it is to the birds or trees that he makes these pagan hymns of joy. Sometimes he throws himself on the ground to see the "cunnin' little ants" (where he learned that expression, I do not know!)⁶⁸

Tiptoeing lightly around the pitfalls of psychobiography, it can be suggested that the comfort Merton, the monk, finds in the woods is linked to his early experiences of the mother he knew for only six years and the outdoors he shared with his parents in that formative time.

Merton's early habit of being attentive to his surroundings was useful to him throughout his life: as a cartoonist at Columbia, as a writer of letters, essays, and books, and as a contemplative monk, especially in his later years when he became more and more interested in Zen with its emphasis on awareness. Such a long-time pattern of noticing makes it easy for Merton to write in his own journal during a day of recollection on 25 November 1958:

65. Ruth Jenkins Merton, *Tom's Book to Granny* (Louisville, KY: Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine University, 1916, unpublished manuscript), pp. 1, 3, 7. Ruth further explains that 'color' is a word little Tom uses to refer to landscape, his father's paintings, and painting equipment.

66. Merton, *Tom's Book*, p. 17.

67. Merton, *Tom's Book*, p. 15.

68. Merton, *Tom's Book*, pp. 6-7.

My Zen is in the slow swinging tops of sixteen pine trees. One long thin pole of a tree fifty feet high swings in a wider arc than all the others and swings even when they are still... My watch lies among oak leaves. My tee shirt hangs on the barbed wire fence, and the wind sings in the bare wood.⁶⁹

In the spiritual sense of Hosea, Merton allows himself to be lured into the wilderness so that God can possess his heart; in a physical sense, he is lured into the woods so that, like Thoreau, he can learn to live more deliberately and reflectively.

Being at ease with an alluring and gratifying nature motivates Merton to request more time in the woods and eventually to live there more or less permanently as a hermit. In his journals for 1963–64, he frequently mentions not only the power of nature in his prayer but also the harmony he experiences with it and within himself. He expresses kinship with the flowers ('I and the myrtles are one', 4 November 1964);⁷⁰ liberty, tranquillity, and peace (11 December 1964);⁷¹ simplicity (6 January 1965);⁷² preparation for death (24 February 1965);⁷³ and a renewed sense of vocation: 'My one job as monk is to live the hermit life in simple direct contact with nature, primitively, quietly, doing some writing, maintaining such contacts as are willed by God, and bearing witness to the value and goodness of simple things and ways, and loving God in it all' (15 April 1965).⁷⁴

Such constant earth-based spirituality becomes the seedbed for *Day of a Stranger* (May 1965) in which Merton celebrates the seduction of his wooded hermitage and pictures himself as a dawdling lover.⁷⁵ On almost every page of his description of a 'typical day', Merton exhibits a Whitmanesque merging with nature juxtaposed sharply with his chosen posture of one estranged from a society that relies on war. For example, the 2.15 a.m. light on his ikon, illuminating a room in which the 'psalms grow up silently...like plants', contrasts with the SAC plane overhead, that 'metal bird with a scientific egg in its breast!'⁷⁶ A key moment of his text is Merton's awareness of living in an 'ecological balance' in which he knows intimately the trees and birds near the

69. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 232.

70. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 162.

71. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 179.

72. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 186–89.

73. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 209.

74. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 229.

75. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981).

76. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, pp. 43, 31.

hermitage.⁷⁷ But he speaks also of the 'mental ecology' of a Zen climate in the woods that disposes him 'to marry the silence of the forest', to take as his 'wife' the 'sweet dark warmth of the whole world' out of which comes the secret 'heard only in silence' at the 'virginal point of pure nothingness'.⁷⁸ Merton's sense of nature is clearly not the delight of a tourist, alien to or trapped by geography, but the intimate sense of place beyond geography where 'one central tonic note... is unheard and unuttered'.⁷⁹

This same earth-based spirituality is why nature can exert a healing influence on Merton and why during his major crisis in 1966 of falling in love with 'M' he can ultimately choose solitude in the woods. Faced with two expressions of the feminine, the love of a woman, and the nurturing/healing power of the woods – a conversion to the feminine, according to Anthony Padovano⁸⁰ – Merton can distinguish between these two goods and opt for the woods. Six years before (26 December 1960) he had written that the woods were home, 'my resting place forever'.⁸¹ Now in 1966, in *A Mid-Summer Diary for M*, he refers to himself with the feminine metaphor of 'wild being'. Merton acknowledges that '[l]ove and solitude must test each other in the man who means to live alone...'⁸² but ultimately, '[f]reedom, darling. That is what the woods mean to me. I am free, free, a wild being, and that is all that I ever can really be... Darling, I am telling you: this life in the woods is IT. It is the only way... All I say is that it is the life that has chosen itself for me.'⁸³ Merton's decision to 'marry the silence of the forest' is apparently irrevocable.

Perhaps something of this deep unity with the feminine is further exemplified by Merton's fascination with the deer he sees around the hermitage. In 22 journal entries between April 1963 and September 1968, he mentions these graceful beings, either starting up before him as he walks to and from the monastery, or silently grazing near his hermitage in the moonlight.⁸⁴ The deer become, for Merton, more than

77. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, p. 33.

78. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, pp. 35-49.

79. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, p. 61.

80. Padovano, 'The Eight Conversions', pp. 8-15.

81. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 79.

82. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966-67; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 315.

83. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 342.

84. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 311; Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 158-59, 180, 189, 291-92, 300, 312-13, 315-16, 323; Merton, *Learning to Love*,

fascinating woodland creatures; they take on the symbolism of important spiritual lessons. Indeed, they become a kind of ikon of the movement of grace and the immanence of God.

Grace, like the deer in the woods, can come suddenly as a flash of intuition or gradually as a deeply felt realization. Likewise, even though the deer are always in the woods and grace is always available to the soul, silence and solitude are pre-requisites for awareness of the gift that is always present. In his journal entry for 6 September 1965, Merton alludes to this spiritual insight. Looking at a group of deer through his field glasses, Merton is captivated by these wild and graceful beings, 'ears spread out', gazing intently at him. Such a riveting moment helps Merton understand not only the essence of wildness but also his relationship to it. He writes: 'The deer reveal to me something essential in myself. Something beyond the trivialities of my everyday being, and my individuality...[and I] longed to touch them.'⁸⁵ It seems as if the ever-present deer are not only part of the undefiled, virgin landscape, but also an invitation to deeper intimacy with Being itself. Occurring as they do in the hermitage years of his life, these encounters with the deer seem to prepare Merton for his penultimate experience of oneness and compassion—another gift of the feminine—bursting from the very rocks at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon.⁸⁶

Compassion

Merton's increased writing activity about social themes during the 1950s and 1960s is well-known. His reflective sense of kinship with humanity spawned essays on civil rights, non-violence, the dangers of war, technology, nuclear proliferation, and the rights of indigenous people. Most notably, when prevented by the Trappist superiors from publishing statements against war and nuclear weapons, Merton initiated the 'Cold War Letters', a series of mimeographed letter/reflections disseminated among his friends and literary contacts.⁸⁷

During the last five years of his life especially (1963–68), Merton was engaged in a flurry of activity that included more frequent contact with nature and more conscious reflection on our human responsibility

pp. 9, 18, 25, 52-53, 208, 233, 331; Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, VII, 1967-68; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 53, 81, 131-32, 151, 165.

85. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 292.

86. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pp. 322-24.

87. See Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Crossroad, 1995).

toward one another and the health of the planet. In addition to a stream of publications that included *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, *Seeds of Destruction*, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, four issues of *Monk's Pond*, *Cables to the Ace*, *Faith and Violence*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (to name most, but not all of his publications during this period), Merton was writing essays and letters about all these interests. He was meeting a diverse group of people: Argentinian poet Miguel Grinberg, Zen scholar Dr D.T. Suzuki, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, non-violence spokesperson and activist Hildegard Goss-Mayr, Quakers John and June Yungblut. Similarly, his reading notebooks reveal equally eclectic interests: Rilke, St Bernard, Cassian, von Balthasar, Walter Ong, Eric Fromm, Rollo May, Levi-Strauss, Bernard Haring, Loren Eiseley, Foucault, Kierkegaard, Octavio Paz, Bonhoeffer, Heisenberg, Marx, William Carlos Williams, Faulkner, Ricoeur, Buber, Meister Eckhart.⁸⁸

Scholars have often dubbed Merton a man of paradox because his garrulous personality also sought deeper and longer periods of solitude; nevertheless, the natural flowering of contemplation into social action is not so paradoxical as it might seem. Solitude enables the reflective person to discover one's true relationship to God and to all other creatures. In this realization of the True Self, the contemplative finds not only the ground of one's being in God, but discovers there, too, all of creation. Silence and solitude blossom into compassion. Put in other words, awakening to the immanent presence of the Sacred leads to deeper communion with our brothers and sisters, human and non-human; aesthetic response moves toward an ethical response and a cry for justice. And because human justice is related to eco-justice, says ecofeminist Judith Plant, once we have felt 'the life of the other', we arrive at a 'new starting point for human decision making'.⁸⁹ In short, compassion nudges one to critique oppressive power structures.⁹⁰

As early as the 1950s Merton was involved in simple conservation activism. In an attempt to replace old trees on the monastery grounds and control erosion, Merton requested hundreds of loblolly pine seedlings from the government. As Master of Students, working alongside the novices, he was responsible for reforesting whole sections of the Gethsemani property. Such initiative suggests Merton's concern for

88. See Merton's unpublished Reading/Working Notebooks 10-43 at the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

89. Judith Plant, 'Toward a New World: An Introduction', in *idem* (ed.), *Healing the Wounds*, p. 1.

90. Starhawk, 'Feminist Earth-based Spirituality and Eco-feminism', in Plant (ed.), *Healing the Wounds*, pp. 180-81.

the earth before environmental consciousness had become widespread and trendy. Brother Patrick Hart, one of those tree-planting novices and later Merton's secretary, remarked that Merton regarded the woods as a 'sacrament of God's presence and was concerned about preserving it not only for our generation, but for the generations to come'.⁹¹ Merton also saw in the growth of these seedlings, comments Hart, a symbolic parallelism with 'all growing things', and 'the young monks who were entrusted to him'.⁹²

It is not surprising to me, then, that Merton was becoming interested in ecological issues as part of his compassionate 'turning toward the world'. Contemplation is never a gift to be hoarded for the benefit of the prayer, but a gift for the community directed toward communion with the Beloved and with one another. Once we discover ourselves and all creation in God, then oppressive structures must be confronted so that the community can be brought to new life. For example, the recent development of feminism and eco-feminism illustrates how a concern for the devastating effects of nuclear war leads naturally to concern for ecology and the ways in which we are already destroying the planet.⁹³ Certainly, Merton was predisposed to natural beauty from his childhood fascination with colors, shapes, and birds. Add to this, the Benedictine dimension of reverence for living things, commitment to contemplation, his increased time in the hermitage, his ever-expanding ethical conscience, and Merton was ripe to issue a major statement on ecology. Sadly, however, that full flowering was truncated by his untimely death in Bangkok, 10 December 1968. We have only hints in Merton's journals, letters, and published reviews that such flowering was beginning to occur.

In the 1960s, several references to ecology and the environment indicate that the compassion for the world Merton experienced in the late-1950s and 1960s is also one of the fruits of his silence and solitude. During the first month of 1963, 1964, and 1965, Merton seems to be focused on our responsibility to the earth. One of the triggers to this concern is the release of Rachel Carson's seminal book on the toxic effects of DDT. Her controversial text was published, first as installments in *The New Yorker* in early 1962, then as the book, *Silent Spring*. The ripple effect of her research touched not only the chemical

91. Patrick Hart, *Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories* (Bardstown: Necessity Press, 1986), n.p.

92. Hart, *Thomas Merton*, n.p.

93. See the list of Recommended Reading in Plant (ed.), *Healing the Wounds*, pp. 254-57.

industry, agri-business, and Congress, but also the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani. Merton heard about her excellent research, located a copy of the book through his friend Ann Ford, and wrote to Carson on 12 January 1963.

In his complimentary letter, which anticipates arguments of ecofeminism,⁹⁴ Merton praises Carson not just for naming the problem, but for her 'diagnosis of the ills of our civilization', that is, our 'awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values...and dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself'.⁹⁵ What struck Merton so forcefully was Carson's revelation that we fall into a 'consistent pattern' of destruction and that our 'remedies are expressions of the sickness itself'. If the world is a 'transparent manifestation of the love of God', continues Merton, 'down to the tiniest' creatures, then we should be reverencing and preserving our environment. Our

vocation [is] to be in this cosmic creation...as the eye in the body. What I say now is a religious, not a scientific statement. That is to say man [sic] is at once a part of nature, and he transcends it. In maintaining this delicate balance, he must make use of nature wisely, and understand his position, ultimately relating both himself and visible nature to the invisible—in my terms, to the Creator, in any case, to the source and exemplar of all being and all life.⁹⁶

Merton then explicitly makes the connection between ecology and nuclear war, hoping that legislators will also see this connection. Using a nature analogy, he comments that if we do not like the looks of a Japanese beetle, we exterminate it regardless of the health danger the solution poses to our children.⁹⁷ By implication, Merton is commenting on our technological efforts to eradicate our current human enemies.

The following January (1964), perhaps still thinking of Carson's epiphanic treatise and our environmental responsibility, Merton writes to Jim Frost, a high school sophomore who had asked Merton for his views on current issues: '[W]e Americans ought to love our land, our forests, our plains, and we ought to do everything we can to preserve it in its richness and beauty, by respect for our natural resources, for

94. Ruether, 'Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature', pp. 145-50. In this essay, Ruether calls humanity the 'rogue elephant of nature' and argues that our vocation is to be 'servants of the survival of nature'.

95. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p. 70.

96. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 71.

97. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 72.

water, for land, for wild life. We need men and women of the rising generation to dedicate themselves to this.'⁹⁸ Here, again, Merton's comment anticipates the position of late twentieth-century ecologists and eco-feminists who believe our human mission is to be 'servants of the survival of nature'.⁹⁹

During that same year, Merton's reading notebook reveals that he is quite charmed by Celtic nature poetry. Not only does he copy passages about the direct influence of a solitary life in the wilderness on ancient Irish poetry, but he connects his reading to his own hermitage experience as something that 'transcends both nature and hermit alike... Bird and hermit are joining in an act of worship.'¹⁰⁰ A few months later in his 25 January 1965 journal entry, Merton includes this comment in parenthesis: 'on Rum (Hebrides) now they allow no one to live except those protecting the wildlife and trying to restore the original ecology. This is wonderful!'¹⁰¹

Surely a growing consciousness of our interconnection with and responsibility for the welfare of our environment is seeping into Merton's gut and explains in part why his 1965 essay *Day of a Stranger* speaks so eloquently of his relationship with nature. In his attempt to describe what contemplation is, Merton declares not only that he is 'married to the silence of the forest', but that he knows very well the environment around him. 'I exist under trees... I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well...we form an ecological balance.'¹⁰²

The following year, even during and after his brief relationship with 'M', Merton is reading George H. Williams's *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harpers, 1962) and Ulrich W. Mauser's text, *Christ in the Wilderness* (London: SCM Press, 1963). Unlike his reaction to Rachel Carson, Merton is only '[s]trongly tempted' to write to Williams but apparently never acts on this impulse.¹⁰³ In his review of these books, first published in *Cistercian Studies*,¹⁰⁴ Merton agrees

98. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 330.

99. Ruether, 'Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature', p. 148.

100. Thomas Merton, Working Notebook 14, June 1964 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY).

101. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 165.

102. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, p. 33; See also Robert E. Daggy's introduction in which he quotes a paragraph deleted from the final text about the 'destructive unbalance of nature' (p. 17).

103. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 161.

104. Louis Merton, 'Wilderness and Paradise: Two Recent Books', *Cistercian*

with these Protestant scholars on the necessity of desert and wilderness for contemplation, then uses this opportunity to draw a practical lesson for his primarily monastic audience. Merton writes:

If the monk is a man whose whole life is built around a deeply religious appreciation of his call to wilderness and paradise, and thereby to a special kind of kinship with God's creatures...and if technological society is constantly encroaching upon and destroying the remaining "wildernesses" ...[then monks] would seem to be destined by God, in our time, to be not only dwellers in the wilderness but also its protectors.¹⁰⁵

To this paragraph, Merton adds a footnote in which he muses that it 'would be interesting to develop this idea' because hermits have a 'natural opportunity' to act as forest rangers or fire guards in 'our vast forests of North America'.¹⁰⁶

Curiously, yet perhaps not so curiously, Merton is connecting his early duties on firewatch with his current reading, prayer, and commitment to life in the woods. If, as he says, the woods saved him during his crisis with 'M' (19 February 1967), then being 'married to the silence of the forest' carries with it additional responsibility to preserve it. The sense of relatedness he acknowledges on 23 March 1967 is a 'luxury [he] refuses to renounce'.¹⁰⁷ Such a sense of responsibility is completely consistent with contemplation in the wilderness and allows Merton to write confidently two days later to Mario Falsina about his belief in the sacramentality of nature: 'God manifests himself in his creatures, and everything that he has made speaks of him... The world in itself can never be evil.'¹⁰⁸

Merton's public stance on ecology gains an even broader audience in February of 1968, when he reviews Roderick Nash's first edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). In this essay, published in *The Catholic Worker* (June 1968) and *The Center Magazine* (July 1968), Merton skillfully summarizes our American attitudes toward the wilderness over three and a half centuries.¹⁰⁹ He recaps the Puritans' sacred duty to subdue the wilderness,

Studies 2.1 (1967), pp. 83-89; reprinted in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey: Thomas Merton* (ed. Patrick Hart; Mission, KS: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977).

105. Louis Merton, 'Wilderness and Paradise', p. 89.

106. Louis Merton, 'Wilderness and Paradise', p. 89 n.

107. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 200, 208.

108. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 347.

109. Thomas Merton, 'The Wild Places', *The Catholic Worker* (June 1968); 'The Wild Places', *The Center Magazine* (July 1968), pp. 40-44; reprinted in *The Ecological Conscience: Values for Survival* (ed. Robert Disch; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 37-43. See also Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey* (ed.

Thoreau and the Transcendentalists' view of nature as healing symbol, John Muir's commitment to preserve wilderness, Theodore Roosevelt's impulse to preserve hunting opportunities to support the cult of virility, and Aldo Leopold's principles for ethical land use.

Again using this book review as opportunity to discuss his current interests, Merton goes beyond summarizing the text to criticize Nash for remaining in the historical mode and failing to recognize what Merton regards as the crucial issue facing humankind, namely, that the savagery which the Puritans had projected 'out there' onto the wilderness has turned out to be savagery within the human heart. For Merton, the subject-object split had collapsed long ago. Now he calls on us, the readers, to recognize our own twisted thinking—to identify the ways we continue to honor the wilderness myth while continuing to destroy the wilderness. Merton challenges us to come to terms with the deep conflict imposed by our patriarchal and oppressive culture, namely, the tension between the wilderness mystique and the mystique of exploitation and power in the name of freedom and creativity. 'Take away the space, the freshness, the rich spontaneity of a wildly flourishing nature', Merton writes,

and what will become of the creative pioneer mystique? A pioneer in a suburb is a sick man tormenting himself with projects of virile conquest. In a ghetto he is a policeman shooting every black man who gives him a dirty look. Obviously, the frontier is a thing of the past, the bison has vanished, and only by some miracle have a few Indians managed to survive. There are still some forests and wilderness areas, but we are firmly established as an urban culture. Nevertheless, the problem of ecology exists in a most acute form. The danger of fallout and atomic waste is only one of the more spectacular ones.¹¹⁰

Merton concludes his review, as does Nash his book, with a section on Aldo Leopold who well understood, says Merton, 'that the erosion of American land was only part of a more drastic erosion of American freedom'.¹¹¹ It is this understanding that led Leopold to what Merton regards as one of the most important moral discoveries of our time, namely, Leopold's concept of the 'ecological conscience'—an 'awareness of our true place as a dependent member of the biotic community'.¹¹²

Walter Capps; New York: Crossroad, 1989).

110. Merton, 'The Wild Places', pp. 43-44.

111. Merton, 'The Wild Places', p. 44.

112. Merton, 'The Wild Places', p. 44.

The tragedy of our time, as Merton sees it, is our misplaced reverence toward goods, money, and property. We 'mistake', he writes, 'the artificial value of [these] inert objects and abstractions for the power of life itself'. The 'character of the war in Viet Nam—with crop poisoning, the defoliation of forest trees, the incineration of villages and their inhabitants with napalm—presents a stark enough example to remind us of this most urgent moral need'.¹¹³ Merton ends his review by asking all of us if Aldo Leopold's ecological conscience can become effective in America today?

This Merton who asks such profound questions about the environment is a far different Merton from the 26 year old who joined a cloistered monastery in 1941. The grace of his life has been a willingness to learn from the feminine lushness of nature, and shape his prayer, writing, and daily life on its lessons. By immersing himself in the abundance of nature, Merton has successfully rejected dualistic thinking and anthropocentrism, and learned—not without struggle and pain—the principle of interconnectedness. He has allowed St Bernard's counsel to supplement intellectual pursuit with nourishment and healing from the trees and the stones. And in a solitude that leads to compassion and action, he has expanded his awareness of human oppression to include the ways in which we oppress and ravish the environment, endangering life itself.

Although Merton's early death prevented him from publishing an essay or a set of letters on environmental concerns, nevertheless, we can discover in his reading notebooks, letters, journals, and book reviews, ample testimony to his growing concern for the environment. One can safely conjecture that it would have been merely a matter of time before such a challenging treatise was forthcoming. Three specific gifts of the feminine had been received and embraced in the wilderness. Judging from Merton's pattern of concerns, these gifts were about to bear more fruit to be shared with the wider community. The desert was about to flourish like the lily.

113. Merton, 'The Wild Places', p. 44.