

## TWO STUDIES IN CHUANG TZU: Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde

--by **Brother John Albert, O.C.S.O.**

In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in a disparaging comment about the bourgeois respectability and naivete of young communists meeting in a Park Avenue apartment, young Father Louis (Thomas) Merton, O.C.S.O., wrote: "I could get a fair picture of them from the way the furniture looked, and from the volumes of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and Oscar Wilde and Ibsen that filled the bookcase."<sup>1</sup> It can safely be suspected that Merton at this point had never seriously read Oscar Wilde. And, like much of what the young Merton wrote, this statement is more brash than informed. And, from our perspective in history, and knowledge of the literary sources now available to us, we have little trouble seeing Thomas Merton in poetic sympathy with Oscar Wilde.

Let your eyes gaze along the undulating misty landscape of "Round Mountain, Peaks and Trees" by Mi Fei, or throb to the repose of Mu Ch'i's "Six Persimmons," and you will see the TAO in paintings of the East.<sup>2</sup> Follow your thoughts through Oscar Wilde's *Symphony in Yellow*:

An omnibus across the bridge  
Crawls like a yellow butterfly,  
And, here and there, a passer-by  
Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay  
Are moved against the shadowy wharf,  
And, like a yellow silken scarf  
The thick fog hangs along the quay

The yellow leaves begin to fade  
And flutter from the Temple elms,  
And at my feet the pale green Thames  
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.<sup>3</sup>

or trace them within *Symphony for a Sea Bird* by Thomas Merton:

Play all the symphonies you like  
On the marshlands of Thung-Ting.  
The birds will fly away  
In all directions;  
The animals will hide;  
The fish will dive to the bottom:  
But men  
Will gather around to listen.

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<sup>1</sup> (New York: New American Library/Signet Book Edition, Sixth Printing, January 1959): p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> Chang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism. A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1963), plate 3, cover and plate 4.

<sup>3</sup> *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamlyn Edition, 1983 reprint): p. 699.

Water is for fish  
 And air for men.  
 Natures differ, and needs with them.

Hence the wise men of old  
 Did not lay down  
 One measure for all.<sup>4</sup>

and you will meet the TAO in writings of the West.

The interpenetration of opposites, the invisible ground of universal being, the totality of the universe realized in the particular, the integral harmony of man and animal and nature -- all these aspects of Oriental influence pervaded the personal philosophies, beliefs and deeds of Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde.<sup>5</sup> And it comes as little surprise that these two reflective geniuses of the West, men of enormous human feeling and spiritual longing, would link themselves with a nearly incomprehensible writer and spiritual master of the Far East: Chuang Tzu, who lived during the fourth century before the birth of Christ and whose teaching flourished during the Han dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.). As an historical figure, Chuang Tzu is equally obscure. We know him through his writings which form the inner core (the "inner chapters," as they are called) of a book which bears his name, a Taoist anthology edited by Kuo Hsiang who died in 312 A.D.<sup>6</sup>

Chuang Tzu wrote that he did not know if he was a man dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu. Though in their scintillating correspondence he addressed his mock-rival James Abbot McNeill Whistler as "Dear Butterfly," Oscar Wilde did proclaim *The Importance of Being Earnest* a play "written by a butterfly for butterflies." And Thomas Merton experienced his full unfolding in death and resurrection in an age when American musicians dreamed they saw Vietnam-bound bombers "turning into butterflies above our nation."<sup>7</sup> Though in circumstances quite distinct, Thomas Merton, Oscar Wilde and Chuang Tzu all lived in times of social, economic, political and spiritual ferment. And all three have had their lives colored and clouded by legend and myth, something toward which Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde quite delightedly contributed.

Word play and paradox, the reversing of conventional values, the deliberate inversion of cultural principles, a sharply honed wit, and humor -- "that deadliest of weapons against all that is pompous, staid and holy" -- held fascination for all three, and characterize their connection.<sup>8</sup> Very exciting for us, beyond these similarities, is a literary connection: the commentaries on Chuang Tzu written by Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde. Oscar Wilde's "A Chinese Sage" was published in *The Speaker* 1:6 (8 February 1890) as a review of the Herbert A. Giles translation from the Chinese *Chuang Tzu*.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton's "A Note to the Reader" and "A Study of Chuang Tzu," along with his free-form "readings" such as *Symphony for a Sea Bird*, were published in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* in 1965.<sup>10</sup> These commentaries focused on the Oriental influence in these

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<sup>4</sup> The citation for Merton's poem will be given in a fuller context below.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Welch Holmes, *Taoism: The Parting of the Way* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); *Chinese Mystics*; edited with an introd. by Raymond Van Over (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); and the deceptively charming book of Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh*; illustrated by Ernest H. Shepard (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*; translated and introduced by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); pp. 8, 13. Cf. The beautifully produced *Chuang Tzu*; a new translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Joni Mitchell, "Woodstock," c. 1969, Siquomb Publishing Company. Recorded by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Joan Baez and others.

<sup>8</sup> Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> The text can be found in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*; ed. by Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press/Phoenix Edition, 1982); p. 221.

<sup>10</sup> (New York: New Directions); poem on pp. 103-104.

authors' lives, and stand as responses to their own religious and social circumstances. Merton himself used the Giles translation as source material. And whether or not he ever read Wilde's commentary, the literary and doctrinal parallels are remarkable.

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Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland on October 16, 1854. He died an exile of England in Paris, France, on November 30, 1900 where he had lived the final years of his life. His full name more than suggests that Oscar had a "past" and hints at the influence of his "style," even to the present. That he came from a prestigious Irish family made his demise all the harsher in contrast to how he lived. His father, a renowned eye surgeon, once successfully operated on King Oscar of Sweden, winning a name and a godfather for his son. His mother was a fiery partisan poet of national distinction. Oscar's span of years indicates that he lived in an age when all religious, political, social and personal securities were being called into question: the Victorian Era, as we now call it.



**BROTHER JOHN ALBERT**

Photo by Father Stanislaus Hrapek, O.C.S.O.

As author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, Oscar Wilde is remembered as the Apostle of the Perverse. As lover of Lord Alfred Douglas and other young men of lesser rank, punished with two years hard labor in prison, Wilde is remembered (at least by some) as the very personification of a particularly heinous kind of evil. For his poses and his postures, his composure and his paunch, for his *Importance of Being Earnest*, his wit and his brilliant sophistries, he is remembered as an amusing hedonist. Yet few persons in history are more spoken of and less known than is Oscar Wilde. And no person in modern experience is equal to him. His life is one of the most documented in all of English letters, but the paradox of his popularity and obloquy immediately surrounds any interpreter like the many-headed beast the Greeks called Hydra. Far from being too little, it is nearly impossible to control the overabundance of information from and about him. With Wilde we are overwhelmed with an embarrassment of literary riches and malicious hack-work. To Wilde's homosexuality more than anything else is attention generally directed, yet to him indeed can we rightly apply the dictum of *The Imitation of Christ* (I:4): "For such is the weakness of human nature, alas, that evil is often more readily believed of and spoken of another than good."

"The world is made by the singer for the dreamer," Wilde once declared. "Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative" are also his words. And Wilde himself was a most imaginative man. In 1954, his son Vyvyan Holland commented: "My father lived in a world of his own; an artificial world, perhaps, but a world in which the only things that really mattered were art and beauty in all their forms. This gave him that horror of conventionality which destroyed him in the end."<sup>11</sup> Wilde had proclaimed "insincerity" as "simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities." Yet, for all the sparkling levity, a record of Wilde's loving kindness toward family and friends (famous and not), the expanse of his generosity and his gifts of joy and psychic healing, exists in the personal testimonies of those who knew him best.

Once, when asked his religion, Oscar replied: "Well, you know, I don't think I have any. I am an Irish Protestant." Though he actually memorized much of it in the original Greek and wrote plays

<sup>11</sup> *Son of Oscar Wilde* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis): p. 54.

and poems in prose around its themes, he once said of the Bible: "When I think of all the harm that book has done, I despair of ever writing anything to equal it." More soberly, following his prison experience, Oscar commented: "It was well for the poor and the outcast in the early days of Christianity that they had Christ to help them instead of a Christian." Ultimately, Oscar Wilde was not punished for his wickedness in his art and life. Wilde was punished because he committed the last offense against the very society he wanted to influence in his favor. In a culture in which moral propriety was a veneer, he could have had his private life of whatever persuasion (as thousands of similar persuasion did). He fell when he took Victorian England (in the person of Lord Queensberry, the father of Alfred Douglas) to court for publicly insulting him as a gentleman -- that is, for hypocrisy. No one wants the truth of themselves, unless it seems flattering. A natural contemplative on a public stage (of his own design, no doubt), a genius with the immediate insight into human nature, a man of peace at heart, willingly or not, Wilde became a prophet who exposed the truth of his time.

Oscar Wilde reminds us of the wondrous mystery of life itself and the fundamental goodness of each human person. Like other Wilde scholars before and after him, Vincent O'Sullivan doubted the authenticity of Wilde's last hour conversion to Roman Catholicism. But in 1936, he recalled: "If terrible sufferings courageously borne, the enduring of dire injustice and reviling without complaint, be matter of saintliness, then Wilde was a saint. What says the prayer of Islam? 'O God, make not man endure *all* that he can bear.' In Wilde's case this prayer was not heard. It is hard to imagine *moral* suffering, at any rate, which went to a further extreme."<sup>12</sup>

To know Oscar Wilde's spiritual depths, we must read his poetry and prose compositions about Christ. From the verse of his earliest days as an Oxonian visiting Italy (*Sonnet -- Written in Holy Week at Genoa, Easter Day, Ave Maria Grati Plena, Sonnet -- On Hearing the Dies Irae Sung in the Sistine Chapel, E Tenebris*) to his final poem and last published work written after his release from prison (*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*), Wilde wrote of a suffering Christ, an outcast Christ. Out of his very need, he spoke of a Human Christ, Himself broken and in pain for us. And figures and images of Christ fill such prose stories as *The Selfish Giant, The Happy Prince, The Young King*, all from Wilde's "pagan" period, written by him as fairy tales for his children, allegories for adults.

But to know the Christ of Oscar Wilde, we must read the full text (finally published as written in 1962) of *De Profundis (Epistola in Carcere et Vinculis)*. An autobiographical document of supreme significance in our language, this total confession written as a letter ("in prison and in chains") to Lord Alfred Douglas shortly before Wilde's release from Reading Gaol in May of 1897, reveals its author's penetrating meditations on the suffering and healing mission of Christ.

Here, of Christ, Wilde says:

He realized in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich.

...all who come in contact with his personality, even though they may neither bow to his altar nor kneel before his priest, in some way find that the ugliness of their skin is taken away and the beauty of their sorrow revealed to them.

He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something. And everybody is predestined to his presence. Once at least in his life each man walks with Christ to Emmaus.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Aspects of Wilde* (New York: Henry Holt and Company; p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> The critical text is available in *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*; edited by Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); pp. 152ff.

That Oscar Wilde on his deathbed received the last sacraments from a Catholic priest made him a fugitive from the Church of England without official Roman recognition (Tannhauser's flowering staff had often been his theme). But his entering the Roman Catholic Church was the fulfillment of his life-long dream, delayed for whatever reasons. In life, Oscar Wilde proclaimed himself free of all interest in morality. In death, he defies our religiosity by becoming the younger son who returned repentant to his father's house (Luke 15:11ff.). For the inscription on his Paris tomb, a few faithful friends chose some lines from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

And alien tears will fill for him  
Pity's long-broken-urn,  
For his mourners will be outcast men,  
And outcasts always mourn.

However we interpret Evelyn Waugh's remarks about Thomas Merton being "typical of what is newest and best" in America in his preface to *Elected Silence*,<sup>14</sup> we cannot divorce Merton from his English past if we wish properly to understand him as monk and as writer. Father England and Mother Anglicanism were as much objects of rejection for the young Merton as for Wilde, and his baptism into the Roman Catholic Church was equally the repudiation and renunciation of his English past as any embrace of a spiritual future. This is recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In Merton's own words:

Prayer is attractive enough when it is considered in a context of good food, and sunny joyous country churches, and the green English countryside. And, as a matter of fact, the Church of England means all this. It is a class religion, the cult of a special society and group, not even of a whole nation, but of the ruling minority in a nation.<sup>15</sup>

As a mature monk, Merton battled against a modernity that dehumanized persons and pulled them from a full realization of their own selves. He warred against all "...isms" and "systems," and while denouncing false pieties, he did everything in his power to understand and preserve authentic religious experience. More often than not, he opted for preponderance of mystery over theological certitude.

But in the young author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, we detect merely the substitution of a new doctrinaire mind-set for a former one. Merton's rejection of the "stupid and godless society" of England in the post-war years, held together by "the powerful attraction of their own social tradition, and the stubborn tenacity with which they cling to certain social standards and customs, more or less for their own sake," all sounds like the ravings of the adolescent at odds with his entire formerly-known world.<sup>16</sup> Merton had not yet turned his critical faculties inward as a mature man. His interpretations of the substitution of the term "gentleman" for "charity" in the I Corinthians 13 sermon of his Oakham chaplain shows that the young Merton had not read (or understood) John Henry Newman's description of the true gentleman, whatever the intention of the preacher.<sup>17</sup> We know Newman was not speaking of social etiquette and decorum in exterior manners when he composed his *Idea of a University*. But Merton's contention that the Church of England "depends, for its existence, almost entirely on the solidarity and conservatism of the English ruling class" may be to a point objectively valid.<sup>18</sup> In his critique of Church and State in the England he knew, Merton was in direct line as a dissenter with Newman and Wilde.

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<sup>14</sup> The English version of *The Seven Storey Mountain* published in London by Burns and Oates in 1949; pp. 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> op. cit., pp. 83, 84.

<sup>17</sup> op. cit., pp. 93-94.

<sup>18</sup> op. cit., p. 94.

Without doubt, of course, there is more to the life and art of Thomas Merton than reaction to the experiences of his youth in England. Merton's religious and social development as a Columbia student, professor at Saint Bonaventure College and as maturing monk cannot be separated from its American context.

The emergence of the United States, of an America unquestionably new socially and politically, was linked by "Our World" theorists with the "untamed vastness of continent," America's "titanic adolescence" thus judged against the laws and traditions, hierarchies and conventions of Europe. The American continent was considered as a particular instance of the vindication of nature over history, of the "virgin" and "pure" over the formed and traditional. Cornelius De Pauw, in his *Philosophical Studies on the Americas...* (1768), wrote of Americans as degenerate and inferior, the happiness of the "savage" as being like that "enjoyed among us by children, who are savages in the midst of society, until such time as their reason develops and instruction enlightens them." But Bernardin Saint-Pierre, in his *The Harmonies of Nature* (1796), reversed this opinion. For him, "Nature appears to have assigned the character of infancy to America as this last stage in the development of the world, the ignorant happiness of the child precisely what is yearned after as preferable by far to the maturity of instructed and enlightened reason."<sup>19</sup> In *A Woman of No Importance*, Oscar Wilde quipped: "The youth of America is their oldest tradition. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilization goes they are in the second." More recently and perhaps more soberly, British historian Sir John Plumb has commented: "Americans seem curiously frightened of admitting that their's is a continuously revolutionary society."<sup>20</sup>

As a Trappist, Merton was the inheritor of a monastic tradition of dissent and reform rooted in the Desert Fathers and St Benedict of Nursia (480-560), St. Benedict of Aniane (c.750-821) and the Cluniac observance begun in 910. His doctrine of "abandonment to God," even when expressed in Oriental terms, was squarely Cistercian, linked to the Founders who went from the security of Molemse into the marshlands of Citeaux in 1098. The "Trappist" reform of Abbe Jean de Rance (1616-1700), the "Reform of la-Val-Sainte" under Abbot Augustine de Lestrange (1754-1827) following the French Revolution, the unification of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance in 1898 and the reforms following the Second Vatican Council all shaped the American Abbey of Gethsemani that Merton entered on December 10, 1941, and from which he departed for his Asian journey and death in 1968. As an American social critic, Merton's poetic linking with such dissenters as Henry David Thoreau and Bob Dylan as "prisoner" and "outlaw" was in harmony with a Christian spirituality as ancient as John the Baptist and New Testament times. And if Merton's life and art were "decadent," it was a decadence that demonstrates Merton's *capax Dei*: his memory of God, his desire for God, and his genuine experience of God through Christ in his own fragile humanity. By the time he came to write *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Thomas Merton had progressed to a depth of insight parallel to that of Oscar Wilde in his review of the Giles translation.



To begin with, Oscar Wilde contended in "A Chinese Sage," that the "most caustic criticism of modern life" he had met with for some time was Chuang Tzu:

*Chuang Tzu, whose name must carefully be pronounced as it is not written, was born in the fourth century before Christ, by the banks of the Yellow River, in the Flowery Land; and portraits of the wonderful sage seated on the flying dragon of contemplation may still be found on the simple tea-trays and pleasing screens of many of our most respectable suburban households. The honest ratepayer and his healthy family have no doubt often mocked at the dome-like forehead of the*

<sup>19</sup> Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900*; revised and enlarged ed.; translated by Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973); pp. 52-53. 281-283.

<sup>20</sup> *Wall Street Journal* 4 (August 1984): p. 56.



philosopher, and laughed over the strange perspective of the landscape that lies beneath him. If they really knew who he was, they would tremble.

Wilde goes on to tell (we can almost hear his voice) how Chuang Tzu spent his life preaching the great creed on Inaction, and in pointing out the uselessness of all useful things. To resolve action into thought, and thought into abstraction, was his “wicked transcendental aim.” And Wilde wrote of Chuang Tzu’s disregard for the modernity of his own age:

Yes; incredible as it may seem, this curious thinker looked back with a sigh of regret to a certain Golden Age when there were no competitive examinations, no wearisome educational systems, no missionaries, no penny dinners for the people, no Established Churches, no Humanitarian Societies, no dull lectures about one’s duty to one’s neighbor, and no tedious sermons about any subject at all. In those ideal days, he tells us, people loved each other without being conscious of charity, or writing to the newspapers about it. They were upright, and yet they never published books upon Altruism. As every man kept his knowledge to himself, the world escaped the curse of skepticism; and as every man kept his virtues to himself, nobody meddled in other people’s business. They lived simple and peaceful lives, and were contented with such food and raiment as they could get. Neighboring districts were in sight, and “the cocks and dogs of one could be heard in the other,” yet the people grew old and died without ever interchanging visits. There was no chattering about clever men, and no laudation of good men. The intolerable sense of obligation was unknown. The deeds of humanity left no trace, and their affairs were not made a burden for posterity by foolish historians.

Economy is dismissed by Wilde, in the name of Chuang Tzu, as “the curse of capital” which is the origin of evil: “It makes the strong violent, and the weak dishonest. It creates the petty thief, and puts him in a bamboo cage. It creates the big thief, and sets him on a throne of white jade.” Education causes “chaos of opinions” and “the vulgar habit of arguing.” Wilde wrote: “Knowledge is shallow if we compare it with the extent of the unknown, and only the unknowable is of value.” It is only the “intellectually lost” who ever argue. Morality, for Wilde’s Chuang Tzu, went out of fashion when people began to moralize. Then men ceased to be spontaneous and to act on intuition, and then became “priggish and artificial, and were so blind as to have a definite purpose in life.” Then came Government and Philanthropists, those “two pests of the age.” The former, says Wilde, tried to coerce people into being good, and so destroyed the natural goodness of man. The latter, a set of “aggressive busybodies causing confusion wherever they went,” were stupid enough to have principles, and unfortunate enough to act up to them. “They all came to bad ends,” declared Wilde, “and showed that universal altruism is as bad in its results as universal egotism.”

As a consequence of all of the above, the world “lost its equilibrium, and has been staggering ever since.” But then, according to Wilde’s Chuang Tzu, there is the “perfect man” with his own manner of life:

The perfect man does nothing beyond gazing at the universe. He adopts no absolute position. “In motion, he is like water. At rest, he is like a mirror. And, like Echo, he only answers when he is called upon.” He lets externals take care of themselves. Nothing material injures him; nothing spiritual punishes him. His mental equilibrium gives him the empire of the world. He is never the slave of objective existences. He knows that, “just as the best language is that which is never spoken, so the best action is that which is never done.” He is passive, and accepts the laws of life. He rests in inactivity, and sees the world become virtuous of itself. He does not try to “bring about his own good deeds.” He never wastes himself on effort. He is not troubled about moral distinctions. He knows that things are what they are, and that their consequences will be what they will be. His mind is the “speculum of creation,” and he is ever at peace.

Wilde concluded his commentary re-expressing the need for a philosophy such as that of Chuang Tzu “by an age like ours, in which most people are so anxious to educate their neighbours that they have actually no time left in which to educate themselves,” an age of the national habit of “self-glorification” in which “the only thing that ever consoles man for the stupid things he does is the praise he always gives himself for doing them.”

Thomas Merton's commentary, perhaps less satirical but no less insightful, similarly assaults evils Merton perceived in his own world, evils not unlike those Wilde saw. "A Note to the Reader" questions the value of life "submitted entirely to arbitrary secular pre-suppositions, dictated by social convention, and dedicated to the pursuit of temporal satisfactions which are perhaps only a mirage." Merton felt that he and Chuang Tzu shared "the climate and peace of his own kind of solitude" and that Chuang Tzu was his "own kind of person."

In "A Study of Chuang Tzu," Merton speaks of Oriental thought as a "certain understandable dissatisfaction with conventional spiritual patterns and with ethical and religious formalism." Merton saw Western man's turning to the East for insights into his existence as a symptom of his desperate need "to recover spontaneity and depth in a world which his technological skill made rigid, artificial, and spiritually void." In Chuang Tzu and other Oriental masters, Merton found preserved the idea that "the life and integrity of the person remain of greater value than any object or any function to which the person may be called to devote himself." But, warned Merton, here again linking with a universal sympathy, "a personalism that has nothing to offer but evasion will not be a genuine personalism at all, since it destroys the relationships without which the person cannot truly develop." Merton stresses the point: "After all, the idea that one can seriously cultivate his own personal freedom merely by discarding inhibitions and obligations to live in self-centered spontaneity, results in the complete decay of the true self and of its capacity for freedom." "One learns," added Merton, "to take one's place gratefully in the cosmos and in history." A doctrine central to Merton's own well-developed spirituality is underlined: "...the man who has attained...wisdom, has learned spontaneous inner obedience to Heaven, and is no longer governed merely by external standards. But a long and arduous discipline by external standards remains absolutely necessary." This for Merton is not the heroism of virtue and duty which ultimately are no different from hedonism and utilitarianism because these are all achievements "aimed at" and "something to be attained." This is a "devotion to the systematic uselessness of practicing means which leads nowhere." As Merton understands Chuang Tzu, mere virtuousness is without meaning and without deep effect either in the life of the individual or in society.

Like Wilde, then, Merton in his own terms goes on to describe the "perfect man." For Merton, the truly great man is not the man who has, by a lifetime of study and practice, accumulated a great fund of virtue and merit, but the man in whom "Tao acts without impediment;" that is, "the man of Tao," who grows without watching himself grow, and without any appetite for self-improvement. The "man of Tao" does not make the mistake of giving up self-conscious virtuousness in order to immerse himself in an even more self-conscious contemplative recollection. He does not seek interior experiences, or to "cultivate the interior life." "All deliberate, systematic, and reflexive 'self-cultivation,' whether active or contemplative, personalistic or politically committed," contended Merton, "cuts one off from the mysterious but indispensable contact with Tao, the hidden 'Mother' of all life and truth." For Merton, then, the "man of Tao" is one of "ontological" or "cosmic" humility, who fully realizes his own nothingness and becomes totally forgetful of himself.

And like Wilde, Merton portrayed the true nature of things, where fullness of life and awareness, where boundless vitality and joy in all beings co-exist, as a harmony of man, animals and nature. In this "primordial climate of paradise" there was no differentiation and man was "utterly simple, aware of himself, living at peace with himself, with Tao, and with other creatures." For Merton's Chuang Tzu, this is a condition that still prevails, that is still ours, but we have forgotten it in our attempts to increase and perfect ourselves by all sorts of methods and practices. We can return to this primordial condition by giving up care. The sage will "accompany everything and welcome everything in the course of being constructed and in the course of being destroyed. Hence he cannot but obtain joy in freedom, and his joy is unconditional."



Oscar Wilde once said: "For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives." Both Wilde and Thomas Merton were highly sensitive to past traditions and looked through the centuries to other seekers in defense of their interest in Chuang Tzu. Western masters such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, Plotinus, St. Thomas, Aristotle, Averroes, Teilhard de Chardin, Marx, Engels, the author of *Ecclesiastes*, St. Therese are marshalled by Merton in his commentary. With Wilde we find Plato, Dionysius, Scotus Erigena, Jacob Bohme, Philo, Herakleitus, Hegel, Tauler, Eckhart, Rousseau, Herbert Spencer and Flaubert.

It may be said that the Chuang Tzu of Oscar Wilde and Thomas Merton is an Oriental Peter Pan dwelling in a "Never-Never Land" of indecision and irresponsibility, a personification of their own failure to reach full adulthood. But an opposite interpretation is allowed. Their commentaries on Chuang Tzu are instances of Wilde's and Merton's spiritual aspirations. Coming to know Christ as they did, they came to realize that, of themselves, all their own efforts were useless. From the time of these writings to their tragic deaths, Wilde and Merton lived troubled lives. But each, in his own way, surrendered to the Crucified and Risen Christ who had gone ahead of them. As a young man, Wilde had already summed up his resistance and his longing for Christ in *Sonnet -- On Hearing the Dies Irae Sung in the Sistine Chapel*:

Nay, Lord, not thus! white lilies in the spring,  
 Sad olive-groves, or silver-breasted dove,  
 Teach me more clearly of Thy life and love  
 Than terrors of red flame and thundering.  
 The hillside vines dear memories of Thee bring:  
 A bird at evening flying to its nest  
 Tells me of One who had no place of rest:  
 I think it is of Thee the sparrows sing.  
 Come rather on some autumn afternoon,  
 When red and brown are burnished on the leaves,  
 And the fields echo to the gleaner's song.  
 Come when the splendid fullness of the moon  
 Looks down upon the rows of golden sheaves,  
 And reap Thy harvest: we have waited long.<sup>21</sup>

And Thomas Merton, for his part, has these lines from *Cables to the Ace*, Number 80:

Slowly slowly  
 Comes Christ through the garden  
 Speaking to the sacred tress  
 Their branches bear his light  
 Without harm

Slowly slowly  
 Comes Christ through the ruins  
 Seeking the lost disciple  
 A timid one  
 Too literate  
 to believe words  
 So he hides

Slowly slowly  
 Christ rises on the cornfields  
 It is only the harvest moon  
 The disciple  
 Turns over in his sleep  
 And murmurs:  
 "My regret!"

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<sup>21</sup> *Complete Works*: pp. 618-619.

The disciple will awaken  
 When he knows history  
 But slowly slowly  
 The Lord of History  
 Weeps into the fire<sup>22</sup>

Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde, ultimately, were convinced of two things: 1. their own intimate, unique encounter with God in Jesus Christ; 2. that if they did not write, truth itself would not be told. If not under direct influence from Wilde, Merton did enter with him into that poetic realm of Art and spiritual realm of Faith where all words and deeds fall into the Oneness and the Silence of God. Each in his own way can be seen as a preserver of Christianity in its true catholicity: an inheritance of peace and forgiveness for all persons in Christ, where the simple seed of faith grows of itself (*Mark* 4:26-29). With Chuang Tzu, they testify to the integral unity of all life.

There is a text from the *Book of Sirach* (37:19-22) which links these sages of East and West with our times:

A man may be wise and benefit many, yet be of no use to himself. Though a man may be wise, if his words are rejected he will be deprived of enjoyment. When a man is wise to his own advantage, the fruits of his knowledge are seen in his own person; when a man is wise to his people's advantage, the fruits of his knowledge are enduring.

Up against secularizing modernity which substitutes science and action for contemplation and religious experience, up against a neo-Catholic orthodoxy which substitutes another pre-critical conformism for a previous one, in an age of heightened militarism and violent nationalism, Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde exemplify and articulate the capability of contemporary persons freely to choose and freely to fashion, in a sense of wonder, a relationship with God within the ground of our beings that is at once authentic and responsible in the modern context. The fruits of their knowledge endure.

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<sup>22</sup> *Cables to the Ace, Or Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding* (New York: New Directions, 1968): p. 55.