

A SONG OF SYLLABLES:

Merton an Artist in Art

By **David Kocka**, O.F.M.Conv.

A mechanical device hangs from the neck of his dark blue workshirt to the weathered leather belt and baggy denim pants. He is of average height; with stubby fingers, strong, working hands, bald head, but his eyes — waterfalls of silence . . .

Today, he feels, the land is alive with miracles. He senses a new presence in the Sun. Brilliant syllable of such an intuition, turns within . . . plunges to discover flame.

Deba Patnaik, *Geography of Holiness*, p. ix.

Here we have a tableau which pictures rather succinctly the mystery of the man and the topic of our discussion: *Merton an Artist in Art*.

It would be at least an injustice to attempt, today or anytime, a comprehensive study and/or presentation of Merton as artist and in art. No doubt our Western cultural approach to life, however, will make that attempt. Though it may be desirable to be faithful to Merton's experience and vision with regard to this topic, I must admit that, because of his influence on me, I cannot — or better will not — be an objective "guilty bystander," for I have been moved. Therefore, out of honesty to my nature and the desire to assimilate his methodology into my own, this presentation will be a moment for "Poetic Contemplative Pause." And what this moment engenders in the realm of the reasonable will hopefully be realized in the moment itself.

Writing a message to a meeting of Latin American poets, Merton puts the same thought in this way: "We who are poets know that the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists. The reason for any living act is realized in the act itself." MERTON: The contemplative artist, the narrative writer, the diarist, the essayist, the poet has one common methodological characteristic: namely, the dialectic. He places two ideas in symmetrical opposition to each other. He hoped by this device to find the unity and clarity that he believed emerged from the tension and paradox. Characteristically, the clash of opposites in his life resulted in a helix-shaped ascent to the level of illumination that he sought.

In *The Sign of Jonas*, there is a text which clarifies for me Merton's own feeling for the sense and use of paradox throughout his whole life. It is almost as if the paradox or the dialectic is not so much a method that he discovered as useful so much as he was discovered by the life of

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Paradox which, once accepted as a creative process, carried him to his final destiny. He states:

But I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign [sign of Jonas] which Baptism and monastic profession and priestly ordination have burned into the roots of my being, because like Jonas himself, I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the Belly of a Paradox.

Because of the acute identification I experience in relating to this statement I would like the body of this presentation to be expressed in the form of the dialectic. That is to say I would like to share the fruit of my dialogue with Merton, the Artist, in Art.

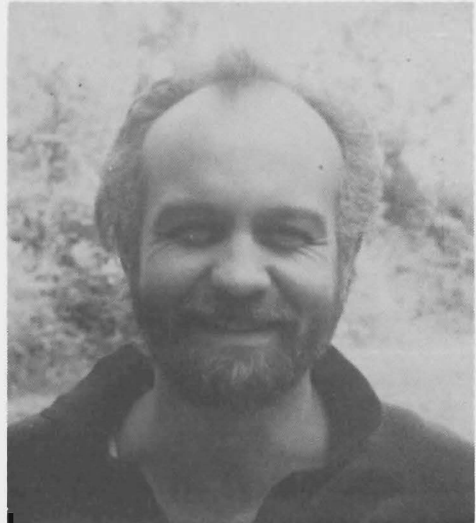
To understand Merton's art is to presume that we understand Merton. Yet, he would be the first to say that his life or our lives in relation to his life is not a matter of comprehension so much as it is a matter of apprehension. To comprehend infers control, to apprehend suggests an encounter: a sense of openness and relationship. He infers this idea when he discusses humankind's relationship to God in *Seeds of Contemplation*: "We are like words spoken by God. How can a word comprehend the voice that spoke it?"

There are three concepts in dialoguing with Merton that have been of interest to me in relation to his life as contemplative artist. I would like to hint at these concepts by fleshing them out in mosaic form so as to be used as future seeds of contemplation.

I MYTH —

A "poet" (artist), he wrote in his prefatory note to *The Geography of Lograire*, "spends his life attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives. But more than that he realizes that this world is at once his and everybody's. It grows out of a common participation which is nevertheless recorded in authentically personal images. I have without scruple mixed what is my own experience with what is almost everybody else's." The geography of Lograire is a mosaic of myths: African, Mixtec, Mayan, Cargo cults, fanatical Ranters of seventeenth century England and the like. All of these converge in Lograire and are assimilated into his own personal Myth Dream. As I am led to understand it Lograire is *The Seven Storey Mountain* material revised and retold on a profound level of myth.

Myths are metaphors. They are public dreams and their contents are the stuff of poets, artists and prophets. Personal dreams are private myths. Myths, like dreams, are not manipulated into being by the ego. Rather, they are spontaneous eruptions, revelations, epiphanies from the soul or psyche. The Jungian school of psychology, with which Merton was familiar, suggests that the archetypal



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forces live autonomous lives within the unconscious. These archetypes of the creative unconscious are intrinsically formless psychic structures which become visible in and through Art. In light of this proposal it strikes me that perhaps we could say of Merton, as St. Bonaventure said of St. Francis of Assisi: "He is a Hierarch. That is, the Keeper of Sacred Things, or better, the Steward of the Sacred Archetypes."

What Merton seems to have done throughout all of his artistic endeavors is to seek communion. Communication pushed to its highest power was for him the stepping stone, or the path which led to communion. Ultimately, it is my impression that his contemplative life is best understood as a journey in which and by which he created consciousness.

It would be patently false to attempt to separate Merton's contemplative life from his art. He was not a priest-monk who was an artist as much as he was an artistic-priestly monk. It is impossible to discuss his artistic life unrelated to the whole of his vision and experience. It is precisely the eclipses of priest — monk — artist nuanced with their own characteristics, which hold Merton in creative existence. He intuited himself as moving toward integration, seeing and acting out the integrated role of priest, monk, prophet, poet, artist. There seems to be an integrated archetype with which he was in concert. The common strain that runs throughout Merton as monk, priest, poet, prophet and artist was the difficult task of synthesizing in one soul all of these limited labels in order to create the New Being. His life was an attempt to discover his motivating myth and thus commune with it.

II HIERARCH —

There is no term which adequately defines this multidimensional unity. I prefer the term hierarch to refer to this unity. I suggest this because the prime material with which the monk, mystic, priest, poet, prophet and artist deal are, in fact, the archetypes. Thus, hierarch, understood as steward of sacred archetypes, seems appropriate.

In his essay, "Answers on Art and Freedom," Merton illuminates this search for unity, identity and integration which describes his understanding of the role of the artist in the world today as well as his own role as artist. He says: "For today the artist has, whether he likes it or not, inherited the combined functions of hermit, pilgrim, prophet, priest, shaman, sorcerer, soothsayer, alchemist and bonze."

Though, on the deepest level, Merton believes this to be true, in relation to his question on the freedom of the artist he answers: "It is conceivable that the artist might once again be completely integrated in society as he was in the Middle Ages. Today, he is hardly likely to find himself unless he is a non-conformist and a rebel . . . How can such a man be free?"

In other words, Merton is pointing to a common theme of his, that of alienation and un-relatedness. Society expects its artists to act out or ritualize in and through their art the struggle with the reason for being. If the creative artist is in harmony with the prevailing myth, the other layers of a culture will follow his or her lead and may even be spared a direct encounter with the ultimate questions of life. The hierarchs, through their art-life, act as Perseus' shield in which, like a mirror, one can observe and relate to Medusa without harm. With such an expectation and the acceptance of this vocation, the hierarch could very easily become an *Angus Dei* or a "victimized scapegoat."

With the dissolution of a central myth, such as prevails in our age, more often than not the hierarch-artist becomes a victim, an unfree, unconscious scapegoat. Van Gogh and Gauguin are two exponents of such a victimization. Even though they may be unconscious victims of the crisis of myth, their work and their energy to ward off the chaos by giving it form, merits our attention and honor. For in their victimization, they have exposed and revealed our common crisis. By inference they also point out the modern crisis of art which is an indication of the crisis of a culture's soul — another theme of Merton's.

The cultural canon of art is in the process of transformation which is experienced as a disintegrating breakdown. The art of this century celebrates the art of chaos. Our culture is in the throes of myth-less-ness. And the characteristics of the new myth which is still gestating somewhere in darkness are not, as yet, clearly defined.

The cultural crisis of a myth-less state as observed and revealed in and through its artists manifests a terrible beauty. The crisis is epitomized and defined in a statement made to Joyce about his mentally disturbed daughter: "She is drowning in the waters in which you swim." In short, the line between the mystic and the madperson is subtly fine. Merton always pushed toward the mystical. Our culture seems to be undergoing the travail of Noah's new psychic deluge. The Promethean spirit (our technological genius) is out of relationship with Sophia (feminine wisdom). The Sophic rhythm of this intuitive femininity appears to be unleashed with vigor. The alienated-unconscious artists of our age are the acute victims of her fury. It seems only the integrated hierarchs will survive the apocalyptic deluge.

In his last address, delivered at Bangkok the day he died, Merton called for a transformation of consciousness and thus called for communion. We can no longer un-contemplatively concern ourselves with the problems of changing structures and sub-structures. What must be changed or transformed is consciousness.

The word itself, Buddhist in tenor, infers a relationship. In an age of technological barbarism, we can observe how we are creatures of appropriated *scientia*, stolen knowledge without relationship. Con-scientia — conscience — and consciousness infer something qualitatively different. That is: loving knowledge and the ability to know lovingly in relationship with everything else.

Perhaps the words uttered by Christ on the Cross, to whom Merton points as "the font of all art because He is the Word, the font of all grace and wisdom," take on a more poignant meaning as He cries: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." In other words, forgive them for living unconscious lives. The preoccupation with the transformation of structures and sub-structures is futile in Merton's perspective without the coincidental transformation of consciousness. Merton, in his final address at Bangkok, quoted the Dalai Lama, a man who faced leaving his country and its structures, as saying: "From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet."

Such a stance in the midst of crisis is an invitation and challenge for every individual to become an integrated hierarch. By creatively facing and assimilating the forces of the paradoxical life one is no longer merely an unconscious victim. Rather one is a *victim and priest* in the deepest sense of the term. With Merton's constant call to create consciousness, he very well may be hinting at the core of the new myth and, thus, a new art — namely, the art of communion and wisdom, rather than the art of alienation and chaos.

III SOPHIA —

The myth of communion, as the art of communion, is essentially found in Christian revelation. The mythic hierarch (steward of sacred archetypes) is also recognizable in the mystical strain of the Christian tradition. Because of mass communication (perhaps a prelude to communion), we see national boundaries, economies, cultures and the like on the verge of imploding or colliding. The artist of the age-to-come will necessarily have to struggle with discovering his own personal myth and set it in relationship with the collective myth which is still rising on the horizon.

The artists of the new myth will, I believe, necessarily take on Merton's lead. They will always be victims of the unconscious forces erupting upward toward consciousness. But, depending on their creative ability to relate to these forces, will we know them as victims alone or as victims and priests? These hierarchs will serve to articulate the motifs and characteristics of the new myth first by suffering the onslaughts of their own dialectic and thereby relating themselves to the collective. Never before in the history of literature, sculpture or painting have there been so many isolated individuals as in our age. Consider, to mention only a few graphic artists of the last sixty years, Cezanne, Van Gogh, O'Keeffe, Kollwitz, Gauguin, Rousseau, Munch, Klee, Matisse, Chagall, Picasso. Each is a world or species unto themselves, discovering and revealing their own mythic images.

Merton, though not celebrated as graphically equal to these artists, absorbed their lead and raised it to the highest power. These artists were struggling spiritually though perhaps, with the exclusion of Chagall and Klee, they did not recognize it as such. For Merton, the struggle to integrate the opposites was the choice of his journey. Art became a means to that ultimate communion. This is his subtle difference and unique contribution in the history of art. In his final address, he stated: "When I said that Saint Paul was attacking religious alienation, I meant that he really meant very seriously what he said about 'There is no longer Jew or Greek.'" In his own words, Merton is calling on every level of life, beginning with the religious level, for the difficult task of respect and communication. He said:

We respect these things (differences / plurality) and go beyond them dialectically. The kind of thing I am saying is that in Christianity you have a dialectical approach to this . . . All these dialectical approaches go beyond the thesis and antithesis; this and that, Black and White, East and West . . . [ego and unconscious]. We accept the division, we work with division and we go beyond division.

This going beyond infers a third thing, a relationship. To my mind it is the creation of consciousness, where with being itself, we know lovingly and love knowingly — and Sophia is born.

This age may not be as apocalyptic as the fundamentalist viewpoint infers. I wonder, however, if because of our myth-less state, modified by the power of information passed on to us through the mass media, we have not formed for ourselves an apocalyptic consciousness? If this is true, that we are on some apocalyptic edge, it is not news to the artist-hierarchs. They are simply living out their nature as Perseus' mirror and as midwives assisting in the birth of Sophia: both within themselves and with the world.

In his meditation on *Hagia Sophia*, we get an intimate glimpse of Merton's artistic center which is not distinguishable from his mystic center. We see that same center revealed in his thoughts on *Pointe Vierge* (Virgin Point). But, most revealing of all, is the dialogue with the soul found in his letter to Boris Pasternak. In that letter he stated:

All genuine art resembles and continues the revelation of St. John

Shall I tell you how I know Lara (Sophia), where I have met her? One night I dreamt that I was sitting with a very young Jewish girl of 14 or 15 and that she suddenly manifested a very deep and pure affection for me and embraced me so that I was moved to the depths of my soul. I learned her name was "Proverb," which I thought very simple and beautiful. And also I thought: "She is of the race of Saint Anne." I spoke to her of her name, and she did not seem to be proud of it, because it seemed that the other young girls mocked her for it. But I told her that it was a very beautiful name, and there the dream ended. A few days later when I happened to be in a nearby city, which is very rare for us, I was walking alone in the crowded street and suddenly saw that everybody was Proverb and that in all of them shone her extraordinary beauty and purity and shyness, even though they did not know who they were and were perhaps ashamed of their names — because they were mocked on account of them. And they did not know their real identity as the Child so dear to God who, from before the beginning, was playing in His sight all days, playing in the world.

Merton's life itself is a proverb. All of his art expresses the dialectical struggle of the coincidence of opposites. His drawings and his photographs celebrate and reveal a geography of sights and insights wherein the Sophionic spirit is born and born again: an epiphany that is so desperately needed today for our life and survival.

The proverb dream was a message from the soul, a portent of things to come. He stood barefoot in Sri Lanka with the Nikon-Ikon maker [it really was a Canon] dangling to his waist, with stubby fingers, strong hands, bald head, with his blue eyes waterfalls of silence. And later he said:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.

The brilliant syllable of intuition turns within and without wearing a common shirt of flame, charged with compassionate indifference and linked to another passion. He sings our history with a song of syllables and images for a compassionate future, one filled with meaning and communion.