

MERTON'S LIFE AS "MONASTIC NARRATIVE"

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

Was Thomas Merton the artist victimized by the Trappists or did Merton the monk find with the Trappists the true path to himself as artist? How did Merton structure our response to his art? How do we structure an interpretation of Merton himself?

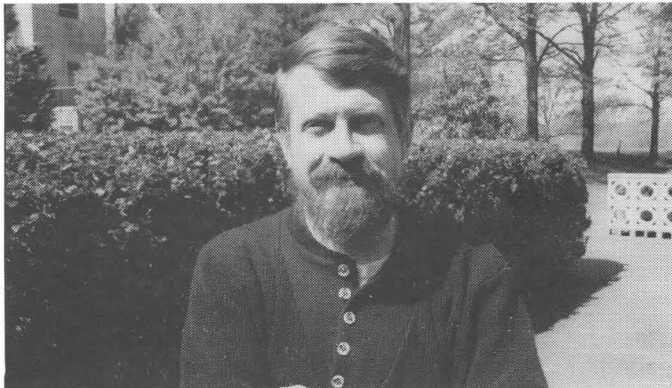
Reactions to Thomas Merton have been immensely varied and Merton *seems* to live out Oscar Wilde's dictum that when the critics disagree the artist is in harmony with himself. I use the term *seems* with a specific intention. We know what we know according to the person we are, our capacities and our limitations. St. Thomas Aquinas made it his method to preface his philosophical propositions with the remark: "*videtur quod*" ("it seems that"). Paraphrasing him, I preface my own interpretation of Merton with the remark: "*videtur mihi*" ("it seems to me").

Building upon this philosophical ground and employing some principles of criticism from Oscar Wilde and others, the following reflections suggest that there is indeed an interaction between the "text" of Merton's life and my own efforts as "reader" to make some sense of him as man, Christian, artist and monk.¹

1. Life and Art

As an artist, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) sought to redefine reality in a time of intense personal and communal crisis. Writing in England at the end of the last century, Wilde posed critical

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BROTHER JOHN ALBERT

Photo by Fred Cellamare (26 April 1990)

1. I am indebted to Dr. Bernard Brandon Scott, currently at Philips Graduate Seminary at the University of Tulsa, for opening up to me the literary interpretation of texts. See for example *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Fr. Eugene LaVerdiere, S.S.S., read an earlier draft of this manuscript and his recommendations for improvement are greatly appreciated.

questions and his own life stands as a testimony of the inner struggle between artistic and moral integrity. A reading of Wilde can give us insights into Merton.²

Art as Life

In *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), Wilde wrote that a work of art has a life of its own, capable of delivering a message very different from what is intended by the author. To appreciate this, we must come to the work of art with a spirit of openness, surrendering our desire to exercise authority over it or over the artist. The work of art ought to dominate us. We should not dominate it. We must be receptive like a violin on which a master plays. The more completely we suppress our own views, prejudices and ideas of what Art should be or not be, the more likely we are to understand and appreciate the work of art in question.³

In his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde wrote that the highest as well as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. The critic translates personal impressions into another manner or new material. It is the critic that art really mirrors.⁴ In response to indignant reviews of his novel, Wilde succinctly remarked that it was necessary for the dramatic development of his story to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption. To keep the atmosphere vague and indeterminate was his immediate intention. Wilde concluded: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them."⁵

Life as Art

Eight years before the public disgrace of 1895, Wilde published a review of Swinburne, Browning and Tennyson entitled, "The Poets and the People by One of the Latter." Here, Wilde called for a poet to rouse England's suffering people, whatever their social class or condition.⁶ By the time he came to write *De Profundis* from Reading Gaol in 1897, Wilde's identification with this poet was complete. Then he could write: "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age."

Suffering and sorrow and their relation to Art is one of the dominant themes of Wilde's long prison letter. Wilde described suffering as "one very long moment" which we cannot divide by seasons. We can only "record its moods, and chronicle their return." For Wilde, we can only know life when we know sorrow, and where there is sorrow "there is holy ground." A coarse temperament may lie behind joy and laughter but behind sorrow, Wilde contended, there is always sorrow: "Pain, unlike pleasure, wears no mask."

2. The reader may consult my "Two Studies of Chuang Tzu: Thomas Merton and Oscar Wilde," *Merton Seasonal* 12:1 (Winter 1987): pp. 5-14.; "The Christ of Oscar Wilde," *American Benedictine Review* 39:4 (December 1988): pp. 372-403; and "Oscar Wilde and the Forgiving Christ," *Hospitality* 8:5 (June 1989): pp. 10-11.

3. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923): vol. 10, pp. 1-68.

4. *Ibid*: vol. 4, pp. 5-7. The Preface was published the year following the initial appearance of *Dorian Gray* in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* on 20 June 1890. If in defending his novel, Wilde could argue that there was no such thing as a "moral" or an "immoral" book, only those "well written" or "badly written," he himself was being a shrewd amoralist. Commentators have suggested John Gray, handsome poet and later priest, as the inspiration for Wilde's content and title. We can keep in mind that the color gray is itself indeterminate, a combination of both black and white.

5. Letter of 9 July 1890 to the Editor of *The Scots Observer*, in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*; ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962): p. 266. Two versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are available on video cassette: 1) MGM/UA (1945) VHS MV400566; 2) NTA Home Entertainment (1971) VHS V1091. The quite divergent interpretations reflect the moral sensibilities of the commercial markets for which they were created.

6. Unsigned article in *The Pall Mall Gazette* XLV:6840 (17 February 1887) in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*; ed. by Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960): pp. 43-45.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde's aesthetic canons emerge once again: "Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to sorrow. There are times when sorrow seems to me to be the only truth." Yet, Wilde did not isolate his own experience: there is not a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relation to the very secret of life. For the secret of life is suffering."⁷

In the end, Oscar Wilde became his own *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Even his death bed conversion to Roman Catholicism has been viewed by some as an aesthetic pretension, despite the testimony to the contrary of the priest who received him. What Oscar Wilde's sins were, no one knows. He who finds them has brought them.

2. Life and Theology

These reflections began with a statement of subjectivity as the necessary philosophical ground for any critique of Merton. Then, using the art and life of Oscar Wilde, a suggestion was made that not only an artist's work but his life itself may be viewed as art. Thus, having moved from "texts" to the "text" of the artist himself, I would like to broaden possibilities for an interpretation of Merton by proposing the wider "context" of theology, specifically, the theology of "mystery."

A Theology of "Mystery"

Better to understand Thomas Merton, we can look again to Oscar Wilde's era. The function of human reason within faith experience was a central issue in the nineteenth century debate with modern science. The Church of England, to which both Wilde and Merton belonged initially, and the Church of Rome, to which they both converted, differed on the doctrine of "mystery" in the Christian experience.

Gerard Manley Hopkins told his friend Robert Bridges (not a Roman Catholic): "You do not mean by mystery what a Catholic does. You mean an interesting uncertainty . . . But a Catholic means an incomprehensible certainty." John Henry Newman, in *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects*, said that "life is not long enough for a religion of inferences" and he considered faith as a principle of action. To act, wrote Newman, "we must assume, and that assumption is faith." In 1843, in a University Sermon called "The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine," Newman argued:

Creeds and dogmas live in the one idea which they are designed to express, and which alone is substantive; and are necessary only because the human mind cannot reflect upon that idea, except piecemeal, cannot use it in its oneness and entirety, nor without resolving it into a series of aspects and relations. And as a matter of fact these experiences are able, indeed, to define the creations of our own minds, for they are what we make them and nothing else: but it were as easy to create what is real as to define it: and thus the Catholic dogmas are, after all, but symbols of a Divine fact, which, far from being compassed by those very propositions, would not be exhausted, not fathomed, by a thousand.⁸

In our own time, Karl Rahner defined mystery as: ". . . a primordial aspect, essential and permanent, of total reality, in that reality as a whole (that is, as infinite) is present for the finite, created spirit in the latter's intrinsic openness to the infinite." Following from this, Rahner

7. *De Profundis*; with a preface by Geoffrey Rowell (London: Methuen & Co., 1905): *passim*.

8. Quoted by Geoffrey Rowell in *The Vision Glorious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983): pp. 11, 12, 68.

defined this spirit, this openness to the infinite as: "... the capacity to accept the incomprehensible as such, i.e. as permanent mystery. For Rahner, the essential and permanent incomprehensibility of God precisely as such must be the real reason for the existence of mystery. Rather than terrorize the believer, this doctrine gives force and shape and direction to the believer's life. Only where God is truly God, only where persons truly believe, can there be mystery. God is revealed to us through Jesus Christ. Yet all the events of the life of Jesus (birth, consciousness, death, resurrection) share in the same mystery of God as revealed mysteries in themselves. The whole life of Jesus is the pattern for the whole unfolding of each person's own mysterious participation in divine reality.⁹

The "Catholic" Tradition

In her articulation of mystery, reason and love in the Catholic tradition, Thomas Merton's theologian friend, Rosemary Haughton, transcends denominational boundaries. Rather, she metaphorically compares and contrasts the workings of "Mother Church" and her "Sister Sophia" (Holy Wisdom) who ever seek to prove their independence from burdensome restrictions in the movement toward full integration of human and spiritual life. For Haughton, authority and structure, prophecy and charism, acquired wisdom and exploring intuition are all aspects and qualities of "catholicity." The "catholic" enterprise is never completed, though its unreleased wholeness may be "glimpsed" in a person, or a moment in history. Catholicity is a quest, a work grounded in hope in human nature, in persons of quality, destiny and inner sanctity.

The "radical," according to Haughton, is someone who goes back to the roots to rediscover the true meaning, looking sometimes within his or her own tradition, sometimes to other sources of inspiration from without Roman Catholicism, even outside of Christianity. The "revolutionary" is someone who is aware of sins against honesty, justice, humanity, and who seeks the means (almost any means) to create a more human society. The catholic "message," in Haughton's view, is carried from one generation to the next by the entire Catholic Church and it is recognized and revitalized when in danger of being obscured (if not lost), by radicals and revolutionaries greater or lesser in their impact upon the tradition. The Catholic enterprise is forwarded, amended, challenged, and even guided by ideas that grow up among very definitely "non-Roman" people whose lives contribute to the very wholeness of which the official Church has temporarily lost sight.¹⁰

3. Thomas Merton: Monasticism and Art

Does not all of the above suggest the vocation of Thomas Merton? Merton's life, like any human life, will never be told in all its details. There are too many. Merton is too far removed from us for us to know more. There are many gaps in his life narrative, as any retrospective proves. His editors continue attempting to fill in empty spaces (see, for example, the recent *A Vow of Conversation and Thomas Merton in Alaska*), and this helps give continuity to our "re-reading" of his story.¹¹

9. Karl Rahner & Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*; ed. by Cornelius Ernst, O.P.; trans. by Richard Strachan (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965); pp. 300-301.

10. Rosemary Haughton, *The Catholic Thing* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1979): *passim*.

11. See *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*; ed. with an introd. by Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988) and *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to The Asian Journal: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*; introd. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989).

The Monk as Artist

Perhaps the gaps themselves are essential to the nature of the narrative structure of the life of Thomas Merton. Merton himself wrote of the many gaps in *The Geography of Lograire* and considered them essential to the nature of that verse structure. Fiction imitates reality in his *My Argument with the Gestapo*. Merton wrote honestly and sincerely in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. But Merton also used his art to recreate his own reality, as all artists do. Factual and fictive merge in his autobiographical writings. Each further reading reveals his conscious and subconscious editorial process: the initial glamorization of his father and Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, then later, the hermitage. There is the compression of sequence in *Day of a Stranger*, and the “persona” of *Cables to the Ace*, with its self-referential world independent of the author’s actual situation. Merton struggled to renounce his ego and to secure his identity as writer at the same time. Truly, his letters and comments on the writing process and the writings themselves are kindred pieces of the narrative. The very literary techniques he chose manifest Merton’s continuous evolution as person.

The life of Thomas Merton is the central narrative theme of all his art, a narrative with many sub-narratives, a plot with many sub-plots. As an artist (writer-poet), Merton could define himself as a man searching for God in Beauty, no matter what form that Beauty might take. His tragic ending only accentuates the conditions set up by Merton himself: fragmentation, alienation, renunciation of role expectations, recognition of life’s crisis situations, contradictions.

For me as a “reader,” Merton’s narrative or “text” is lifelike, very much like my own. All of the inconsistencies and paradoxes are familiar: the pull of the senses vs. the pull of the spirit; the desire to maintain integrity of conscience vs. the desire to be recognized; the demands of subsistence vs. the penury of the monk’s existence; the open rebelliousness vs. the need to be accepted in human affection; solitude vs. the intrusion of modern life; faith vs. despair.

Merton both has and does not have my sympathetic identification. I cannot agree with him on all points, not only because I am who I am, but because Merton himself did not consistently maintain the same stance on each social issue or aesthetic and religious value.

Merton can no longer explain himself in person, and as an artist, most likely would refuse to respond to any accusations against him. Against my own arbitrary or summary judgments of him (for whatever reasons), Merton’s life and art stand on their own. Merton was not who I thought he was when I first came to study him many years ago. He is less. He is more. Certain of my expectations regarding him have been frustrated. Yet he is a continuous surprise. There is always more Merton to contend with. Merton as monk-artist is in harmony with himself.

The Artist as Monk

Thomas Merton’s story has a provocative ending. Was his “Buddhist” experience in Asia truly “religious” or merely “aesthetic”? What was Merton’s relationship with Christ at the time of his death? Since Merton’s story ends without a clear narrative closing, it remains enigmatic. I think I understand it, and then I do not. There is no doubt that Merton was a good writer, but did he die a good monk? My judgment concerning Merton is a judgment of myself, as Oscar Wilde warned me it would be.

There is evidence in Merton’s writings to use against him concerning the matter of faith, his opposition to institutional religion clearly articulated in his work. Yet, I believe, Merton was in his spiritual makeup as religiously structured as any human being can be. He was a rebellious, obedient man who accepted monastic life on its fundamental terms: dying to self and living for a higher reality. In his fifty-three years, twenty-seven of them as a monk, Merton walked the high

tension wire between his own idealism and his experiential realism. He never, to my mind, capitulated to either. *The Geography of Lograire* is a poetic work of extreme ambiguity. Yet here, in Number 14 of the section “WEST: II, At This Precise Moment in History,” Merton challenges: “You people are criticizing the Church but what are you going to put in her place? Sometime sit down with a pencil and paper and ask yourself what you’ve got that the Church hasn’t?”

Early on, I brought a preformed image of the monk to the works of Merton, anticipating him with safe thoughts: the monk does this; the monk does not do that. But Merton’s life narrative is highly subjective, new, original, ever-changing, sometimes bringing me into realms that seem surreal, if not actually frightening. Merton, I now believe, was doing more than having light fun at my expense. He challenged the way “holiness” functioned within and outside the monastic enclosure in my perception of reality.

Merton allowed for the full range of emotions within himself. He could be hostile, angry, accusatory, cynical, negative. Merton was in love with and loved many people, was lonely, depressed, despondent, and often frustrated. He continually reacted against the predetermined role of the monk as genteel, docile and submissive, haughty and aloof from a world in religious and social turmoil, pompous and pious, and, in the end, innocuous. He continually shattered cultural expectations, religious and secular, which he himself had helped to establish.

In Merton’s story, the artistic protagonist became the monastic antagonist. Merton teaches me the power of the victim. Toward the end of his life, he equated holiness with vulnerability and spiritual uncertainty. That is, he exchanged new, true belief in Christ for former religious security.

In *Monastic Peace* (written in 1957), a guide for men discerning a possible vocation to monastic life, Merton articulated the foundational principles of his own vocation. Far more than an answer to inquirers or a guide to beginners, *Monastic Peace* is an autobiographical treatise on the monastic struggle. Along with fundamental charity, Merton speaks here of faith as “the central ‘existential’ reality of the monk’s life.” The monastery, for Merton, is a “school of freedom.” It is “a place where we can come to understand our liberty, our fear of liberty, and our brother’s fear of liberty. Here we can educate one another in liberty by patiently bearing with one another’s misuse of it, and our own incapacity to bear it.”

Ultimately, for Merton, the monastery is the place, the particular religious family, in which the monk realizes that his total acceptance of God’s plan for him is conditioned upon his willingness to be “inserted into the mystery of Christ.” Merton wrote: “The whole monastic consecration derives its theological value not from the subjective disposition of the monk himself but from the fact of his objective incorporation in the mystery of Christ.”

I believe this phrase, “incorporation in the mystery of Christ,” gives full content to the central narrative of Thomas Merton’s life. In *Monastic Peace*, Merton outlined the four traditional criteria for the discernment of a vocation to monastic life according to the Rule of St. Benedict. First, the beginner must truly seek God. Second, he must be obedient. Third, he must be a man of prayer. Finally, he must appreciate the value of humiliation and spiritual poverty. Then, Merton added a fifth criterion, and it is Merton through and through: “To be a monk one must have plenty of common sense, as well as a sense of humor, and a normal sympathy and toleration of the weakness of other human beings.”

In the end, Merton stands in symbolic relation to the very secret of life with Christ. In *Monastic Peace* he wrote: “The monk therefore obeys not only because the discipline of obedience has a special psychological and ascetic value, but rather he obeys above all out of love of Christ, in imitation of Christ, in union with the sufferings and the death of Christ, in order to share with Christ the great work of restoring liberty to mankind and of renewing all things in the

power and sanctity of the Spirit of God.¹²

Conclusion

Each reader of the “Merton text” must decide the degree of success Merton achieved in this great monastic endeavor. Thomas Merton has helped me to understand that the monk is in a singular position to represent the formal doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church while at the same time bearing within himself the sufferings of those unable to believe. As a celibate whose life is consecrated to Christ, the monk can serve as focus for the yearnings of the human heart and the spiritual strivings of those who cannot identify with institutional Christianity, whatever their situation in life.

We monks hold in balance within us a Christianity of paradoxes and polarities. We are both ancient and at the frontiers of the Church in today’s world. Himself a “moral parallax,” the monk is able to view the sin and the sinner from two perspectives, to speak out clearly against the first (for the world needs our challenge) and to respond with love to the second (for the world sorely needs our compassion). For me as monk, to do this is only to be in harmony with myself.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*; ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1977): pp. 62-117; *passim*. For an analysis and interpretation of Merton’s Christology, see my essay “The Christ of Thomas Merton’s *Monastic Peace*,” *Cistercian Studies* 24:3 (1989): pp. 264-274.