

Final Passage

Review of

The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey.
The Journals of Thomas Merton. Volume Seven, 1967-1968.

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The year 1968 dawned portentously for Thomas Merton. His journal entry for January 6, the feast of Epiphany, registers a deep if unspecified sense of foreboding:

Last night curious dreams, perhaps about death. I am caught suddenly in a flood which has risen and cut off my way of escape – not *all* escape, but my way to where I want to go. Can go back to some unfamiliar place over there – where? Fields, snow, upriver, a road, a possible bridge left over from some other dream. (Sudden recollection and as it were a voice: “*It is not a bridge*” – i.e. no bridge necessary!) (34).

Twenty five years after Merton’s strange, sudden death by electrocution at a Red Cross Center outside of Bangkok, one reads these words with an eerie sense of recognition. We know all that this year was to hold for Thomas Merton: the election of a new Abbot, the subsequent loosening of restrictions against travel, journeys to New Mexico, California, Alaska and, finally, to Asia, an exhilarating series of encounters with Asian monastics, a growing sense of integration and clarification of purpose. Then, without warning, death.

Merton, of course, knew nothing of what was to come as he recorded this journal entry on that cold January day. But I cannot help wondering: did this sensitive and perceptive soul perhaps already carry within him some intimation of his own impending death? Or at least a sense that he was embarking upon one of the most significant and defining passages of his life? There is evidence throughout this seventh and final volume of Merton’s journals that he was indeed moving closer, during the last year of his life, to a kind of “breakthrough” (Feb. 8, 1968; 51), a “clean passage” into a “new space or area of existence” (Sept. 11, 1968; 171). However the passage itself was anything but clean. The sense of foreboding expressed in his journal entry for Epiphany of that year suggests the kind of intense struggle he was engaged in, at the deepest psychic level of his being, to become free of the chronic fears and anxieties that so plagued him. Did he realize, even partially, the

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freedom, the “clean passage,” that he yearned for so deeply? The journal, it must be said, provides conflicting evidence on this score. One senses at times Merton’s growing clarity of purpose and self-understanding; but one also encounters throughout a deep-seated self-doubt and a sense of uncertainty about the direction his life was taking. Still, the fact that we can attend to this process so carefully, can trace the subtle texture, the ebb and flow of Merton’s struggle to realize that freedom, suggests why these journals are such a significant addition to his *œuvre*.

Here, amidst an unpatterned record of experiences, reading, encounters, one begins to discern the outlines of a pattern, a pattern not entirely discernible in Merton’s formally published works. I do not want to suggest that the shape and outline of Merton’s life and thought are fundamentally altered by the publication of the journals (though of course the detailed account of Merton’s affair with “M” in the sixth volume, previously available to us only in scattered sources, does add something new to our understanding of this complex man). But the immense detail they provide of the Trappist monk’s everyday life and concerns does deepen considerably one’s sense of the defining patterns of his life and work. In this final volume, at the very end of his life, one of those patterns stands out in bold relief: the desire to find his way home.

Merton’s early autobiographical works, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas*, are filled with a longing for home, for a sense of belonging, for a sense of place. When one thinks of the instability of his early years and of his having been orphaned at such a young age, this longing makes perfect sense. However, like Augustine before him, Merton’s longing for home operated on many levels at once. It was an expression of his desire for an actual place to live, for a community within which he could learn to love; it was also a metaphor for his longing to be reunited with God after a long exile; and a way of articulating his yearning to know himself more honestly and deeply. The Abbey of Gethsemani became for him a genuine home, a place where he was able to ground his own quest for God and self-awareness within a community of other seekers. But as the journals make abundantly clear, Gethsemani was also (and how could it have been otherwise?) the locus of some of his most contentious struggles, with himself and others, struggles that became so acute at times that he considered – again and again – whether he should remain there. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, he found himself considering almost continuously *where* he was being called by God and *what place* would allow him to respond most authentically to that call.

This question emerges with new force during the final stages of his life. That it does so should not be read primarily (certainly not only) as a comment on Merton’s dissatisfaction with Gethsemani in general or specifically as a comment on his unwillingness to continue living under what he perceived to be his abbot’s overbearing authority (for Merton continues to ask these questions even after Dom James Fox retires and Flavian Burns becomes Abbot). Rather it should be seen as one expression of a more fundamental question that occupies him at this point in his life: how can I deepen my own commitment to live a life of genuine integrity?

One way of doing this, apparently, was to pay careful attention to the place where he found himself. Merton’s deep affection for Gethsemani, especially for the woods and the knobs surrounding the monastery, for the birds and animals that live there, for the stars and planets overhead, can be felt on almost every page of the journal. Nor do I think this

affection was incidental to the larger questions of his life at this time. It was one way of answering for himself the question: am I home? Reading carefully through the journal, one gains a surprisingly detailed sense of the living world around the monastery. Moments of vivid awareness, not unlike the experiences of heightened perception of ordinary, physical things that Gerard Manley Hopkins called *inscape*, became increasingly important to Merton's sense of the sacred. They help him ground his own unfolding narrative of faith in a particular place, a place that holds within it so much of his own history. For example, walking outside by St. Bernard's lake on an unseasonably warm day in November, Merton notes how "the sky, hills, trees kept taking on an air of clarity and freshness that took me back to springs twenty years ago when Lents were hard and I was new in the monastery. Strange feeling! Recapturing the freshness of those days when my whole monastic life was still ahead of me" (15). Clearly the place still speaks to him. A little more than a month later, on January 4th of the new year, Merton appears to rededicate himself to Gethsemani: "I said Compline and looked at the cold valley and tasted its peace. Who is entitled to such peace? I don't know. But I would be foolish to leave it for no reason" (33).

Yet he *does* think about leaving Gethsemani, more and more seriously, throughout the final year of his life, not only because of dissatisfaction with the place, or unhappiness with the community, or disillusionment with monasticism (though all of these do factor into his thinking) but also because of something less easy to name or define, something beckoning him forward – toward new horizons in his life and, possibly, toward a new place. Such questions, about whether to stay or whether to leave, are part of a continuous conversation Merton engages in with himself from the early 1950s onward. But they take on a particular urgency during this period of his life. It is not easy to say why this is so. Certainly it has something to do with new opportunities for travel made available to him after the election of Flavian Burns as Abbot. But I think it is more than this. Gethsemani had become a problematic place for Merton, in part because of his diminishing sense of privacy (for which he himself had to take some responsibility), in part because of the increasing clamor around the hermitage – machinery, gunfire from hunters, etc.– and in part because of his growing sense of uncertainty about how much he still had in common with the monastic community there. This latter question, having less to do with particular interpersonal difficulties at Gethsemani than with Merton's own evolving sense of what a monastic vocation, especially *his* vocation, might be, led him to begin exploring new possibilities – in New Mexico, Alaska, California and finally Asia. One senses during this last turn of his life that Merton was seeking not so much a new or different *place* (at least not for its own sake) as he was seeking a renewed awareness of his own deepest center – which is its own kind of place, I suppose, but a profoundly interior place that cannot be easily or simply mapped onto a particular landscape.

This perhaps helps to explain why his responses to the places he encounters during the last months of his life are so fundamentally equivocal, why his heart and imagination seem to leap at the sight of these new places as if he were rediscovering some long lost parts of himself and why he nevertheless hesitates, wondering whether he will ever really find what he is looking for. Can any place, he seems to ask, fill or address the aching longing for home that has been his constant companion these many years? Perhaps not. Perhaps he is destined, as he says, to remain homeless. But this does nothing to quench the longing he feels to ground this desire in a palpable place.

My own sense from reading these journals is that, during this last year of his life, Merton felt pulled in two directions at once: toward a more grounded existence in a particular place and toward a freedom and emptiness possible only to the one who has forsaken all attachments. Is this a contradiction? Perhaps. But I think it is better understood in terms of what the medievals called a *coincidentia oppositorum*, that fruitful conjoining of opposites that creates a richer, complex (if still paradoxical) whole. One must take seriously the *kataphatic* dimension of Merton's quest, the part of him that seeks to ground his spiritual longing in careful attention to the physical world, in a deepening affinity for the sacramental character of particular places. Yet Merton is also someone long attracted to the *apophatic* tradition, the *via negativa* as it is sometimes called, with its sense of the need to leave behind all images, all language for that mysterious place of unknowing where God dwells in silence and emptiness. For Merton, there was no contradiction in embracing both these paths simultaneously.

As he prepares to depart for Asia, this tension between place and placelessness, the palpable and the ungraspable, the known and unknown deepens. His attention is now clearly focused on "a new path . . . opening up." But it is a path whose direction and trajectory remain mostly unknown to him. Where he *will* end up is difficult to say. On July 29th, he writes: "[I]f I can find somewhere to *disappear* to, I will. And if I am to begin a relatively wandering life with no fixed abode, that's all right too. . . . What really intrigues me is the idea of starting out into something unknown, demanding and expecting nothing very special, and hoping only to do what God asks of me, whatever it may be" (148).

A relatively wandering life, with no fixed abode. These words characterize precisely the final months of Thomas Merton's life – not only in the sense that he was increasingly on the move, but also because his interior journey was now unfolding with fewer and fewer fixed markers. I think of those portentous dreams of early January, with their images of rising tides cutting off the dreamer's way of escape (not *all* escape, but the way to where he wants to go), of a restless search for a way out, the initial sense of relief at finding a bridge, then the sudden realization: "*It is not a bridge* – i.e. no bridge necessary!" No bridge necessary because, as Merton notes later, just prior to his departure for Asia, "there is no place left" (175).

On November 16, Merton found himself in Darjeeling, staying at the Mim Tea Estate. A little more than a week earlier, he had concluded the last of his three momentous audiences with the Dalai Lama. Now he was resting, struggling to absorb the meaning of that encounter and trying to recuperate from a chronic, lingering cold. Here he meets Chatral Rinpoche whom Merton calls the "greatest *rinpoche* I have met so far. . . ." Their long discussion, mostly, Merton says, about "*dzogchen*, the ultimate emptiness, the unity of *sunyata* and *karuna*, going 'beyond the *dharmakaya*' and 'beyond God' to the ultimate perfect emptiness," moved him deeply. He notes: "The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow *on the edge* of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it" (278). A little more than two weeks later, Merton was in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), standing barefoot in the wet grass before the huge, smiling Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, absorbed in the deep silence, sensing perhaps that he was being drawn over the edge into that great realization, drawn into that place where "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion" (323). Less than a week after that he was dead.

In the end Thomas Merton did make it home. A simple white cross marks the place of his burial at Gethsemani, there among his brother monks. But his journey home was anything but simple. His final passage, on a United States Air Force jet from Vietnam filled with the bodies of American soldiers killed in the war, seems a fittingly ambiguous symbol for one who expressed so eloquently in his own life and writing such deep solidarity and compassion for the suffering and marginalized. Here at the end as he winged his way home, he seemed, like the soldiers he accompanied, strangely homeless. But I take comfort in this ambiguity. It strikes me as so much like my own condition, like the condition of so many I know: caught between one place and another, hungering for a place to call home, longing to give ourselves over to the as yet unknown horizon opening up before us.

Earlier that year, Merton had been reflecting on his need to deepen still further his own understanding and practice of monastic solitude. He was reflecting especially on “the idea of solitude as part of the clarification which includes living for others: dissolution of the self in ‘belonging to everyone’ and regarding everyone’s suffering as one’s own . . . To be ‘homeless’ is to abandon one’s attachment to a particular ego-self – and yet to care for one’s own life . . . in the service of others. A deep and beautiful idea” (135). Indeed.