

# Inseeing and Outgazing: The Shared Vision of Thomas Merton and Rainer Maria Rilke

By **Paul M. Pearson**

## *Introduction*

Thomas Merton, in the words of his friend Guy Davenport, was a truly ecumenical spirit. When he wrote about the Shakers, he was a Shaker. He read with perfect empathy: he was Rilke for hours, Camus, Faulkner. . . . I wonder whether there has ever been as protean an imagination as Thomas Merton's. He could, of an afternoon, dance to Bob Dylan on a Louisville jukebox, argue an hour later with James Laughlin about surrealism in Latin American poetry, say his office in an automobile headed back to Gethsemani, and spend the evening writing to a mullah in Pakistan about techniques of meditation.<sup>1</sup>

Merton was a man who could be fascinated, deeply fascinated, with an innumerable range of topics. One has only to look at some of his collections of essays, his letters and his journals to get some inkling of this. Extraordinary enthusiasms characterised Thomas Merton. But many of these enthusiasms could be short-lived.

In contrast, there are certain names, places and themes which seem to reoccur throughout the life of Thomas Merton – writers and thinkers whom he read in his youth and then returned to in his last years. For example, Merton defended Gandhi in a debate at Oakham and then, in the sixties, returned to write about him and to publish a collection of his writings. Two figures who particularly stand out are the poets William Blake and Rainer Maria Rilke. Merton first encountered the poetry of Blake when he was a schoolboy in England, having been introduced to him by his father Owen. At Columbia Merton wrote his M. A. thesis on Blake and then, in the sixties, he gave lectures to the monks at Gethsemani on Blake and published a final essay on him in 1968. Merton's interest in Blake has been explored in a number of places<sup>2</sup> so I want to concentrate on his interest in Rainer Maria Rilke, which has received much less attention.



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### *Merton's Interest in Rilke*

Merton's earliest reference to Rilke can be found in *Run to the Mountain*,<sup>3</sup> where he includes Rilke's name among one of his frequent lists – a list of the authors he is reading. From then onward Rilke's name occurs sporadically throughout Merton's work. A number of periods in particular stand out. At the close of 1949 Merton was reading Rilke's poetry and his journals and wrote to his publisher James Laughlin about the joy he found in reading Rilke.<sup>4</sup> Michael Mott also suggests that at this stage the question of Merton publishing his own journals came up “naturally from reading Rilke's”<sup>5</sup> journals. Reading Rilke in December of 1949, two things in particular struck Merton – his solitude and the power of his writing. On the latter Merton comments: “Rilke's notebooks have so much power in them that they make me wonder why no one writes like that in monasteries.”<sup>6</sup> More importantly Merton comments on Rilke's “real solitude,” saying he is “abashed” by it but adding that he admires it whilst “knowing . . . it is not for me because I am not like that.”<sup>7</sup> Merton makes a number of references to Rilke through the course of the fifties but it is in the sixties that Rilke's influence on Merton is most marked.

Merton returned to read Rilke's poetry and journals in the sixties, finding in him a like voice. John Howard Griffin records that Merton “began a serious and prolonged study of Rilke in the autumn of 1965, reading Rilke's poems aloud, then singing them, improvising *lieder*.”<sup>8</sup> The fruit of Merton's study can be seen in a number of conferences he gave at Gethsemani in early 1966. These conferences are available on cassette<sup>9</sup> and, along with Merton's conferences on Faulkner are some of the best conferences he gave.

### *Two Similar Biographies*

Before moving on to examine Rilke's influence on Merton I think it is worth looking briefly at some of the similarities between the lives of these two men, similarities which I am sure did not escape Merton's attention and which may at times have contributed to Merton's empathy for Rilke.

Rilke was born in Prague in 1875 and died at the age of fifty-one in 1926. Merton was born in Prades in 1915 and died 53 years later in 1968. Both men died relatively young and in the prime of their writing careers and yet they both had some sense that they would die early. Their final works reflect the completeness of their life's work and the unity they both sought in their lives.

Merton and Rilke were both wanderers and explorers, in a physical sense and a spiritual sense. *The Seven Storey Mountain* traces Merton's journey beginning when he was “barely a year old”<sup>10</sup> and ending in the strict enclosure of the Trappist monastery. Merton's entry into Gethsemani did not mark the end of his searching. His spiritual journey continued along with his yearning to live in a more perfect place – the west coast of the United States, Alaska, Mexico, Latin America. His yearnings during his time at Gethsemani finally found expression in his Asian journey and even then his plans to travel continued as

he wrote to Donald Allchin from Asia in November 1968: "I am now trying to get permission to return via England in May. Can we do Wales then?"<sup>11</sup> Rilke's life is also an account of endless wandering and searching. He was "a European wanderer, travelling restlessly without a country, taking and adapting what suited him," a "citizen of intellectual Europe,"<sup>12</sup> as Valéry called him.

Both men came from unstable family backgrounds. Merton's mother died when he was six and his father when he was fifteen. He paints a stern portrait of his mother whilst attributing to his father a stature he only ever lived up to in Merton's imagination. The picture that emerges of Rilke's childhood is bizarre. Rilke's father never lived up to his wife's expectations and Rilke used illness as a means to escape from being the consolation of their private disappointments. He had little contact with other children. His parents separated when he was nine, with his mother going to live with her lover in Vienna. Rilke, like Merton, was sent away to boarding school, his descriptions of which are reminiscent of Merton's descriptions of his time in the French lycée. Both men attributed a lifelong sense of homelessness to their childhood years.

The beginnings of the literary careers of both Merton and Rilke can be seen in their childhoods. Rilke's earliest poems, dating from 1888 when he was only thirteen or fourteen years old, have revealing titles such as "The Grave," "Resignation," and "The Cemetery." Similarly Merton's earliest writings date from 1929 when he was only fourteen. For the remainder of their lives both men would continue to write endlessly, almost compulsively – poetry, semi-autobiographical novels, journals, and essays. Merton and Rilke were both great correspondents, and the following description of Rilke by J. F. Hendry I find equally applicable to Merton: "correspondence was his chief means of communication with a very large circle of friends and readers, vital to his poetry in the way that reviews, essays or lectures are for other poets."<sup>13</sup> Continual study was important for both men and they would both draw up plans for study and lists of the work they intended to undertake.

The final biographical similarity between Merton and Rilke which I want to highlight is the difficulties they both experienced in their relations with women. Both men struggled with what they perceived as their inability to love. Merton wrote in the late fifties that his "worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being truly able to love."<sup>14</sup> This was resolved for Merton in his final years through his relationship with Margie, where he found he could "love with an awful completeness"<sup>15</sup> and, as Michael Mott has pointed out, Merton "never again talked of his inability to love, or to be loved."<sup>16</sup> In 1913 Rilke could write of his inability to love, saying:

I am no lover at all, it touches me only from the outside, perhaps because no one has ever really shaken me to the depths, perhaps because I do not love my mother. . . . All love is an effort for me, performance. . . . [O]nly in relation to God do I have any facility, for to love God means entering, going, rising, resting and always being in God's love.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Merton, it is not evident whether Rilke ever resolved his inability to love. Certainly after the elegies, which were “less a discovery of a new land than a return to the old, and an attempt to face final reality,” Rilke was “afraid of death no longer.”<sup>18</sup> For Rilke the rose had been the symbol of his love; the epitaph on his tomb made the rose his symbol of eternal life as well:

Rose, o pure contradiction, joy,  
To be no one’s sleep, under so many  
Lids.<sup>19</sup>

There are many other biographical interests it would be possible to explore between Merton and Rilke<sup>20</sup> but the question I now want to examine is why Merton remained so interested in Rilke’s work throughout his life and especially in his last years.

### *Seeking to Ask the Right Questions*

I believe there are a number of reasons which account for this attraction and the first comes from the biographical similarities I have drawn between them. I think Merton would have felt empathy for someone with such a similar background. Rilke had an almost compulsive need to write and, more importantly, to write about his own personal experience, his yearnings, his difficulties, and his spiritual quest. Reading Rilke’s poetry and journals would have encouraged Merton in his own writings and would have given him a precedent for writing about himself. Self-exploration – autobiography – was still a relatively new literary form at the time Merton wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Secondly, Merton would have been attracted by Rilke’s themes of loneliness and solitude. As already mentioned, Merton wrote in 1949 that he admired Rilke’s “real solitude” whilst knowing it was not for him. Yet, at this time, Merton was already wishing for the solitary life but – and here is the difference between Rilke and Merton at this point – Merton was “seeking” solitude whereas Rilke “did not *want* it or go looking for it. It found him.”<sup>21</sup> Merton would continue looking for solitude for many years. When a hermitage was eventually made available to him in a fire lookout at Gethsemani in 1955 he turned it down because he didn’t feel he was ready for the strictness of the solitary life being offered to him. Ten years later, when Merton did eventually embrace the hermit life at Gethsemani, Rilke once more grew in importance for him as he came to understand the solitude he had found and as his early feelings of loneliness at the hermitage were gradually transformed into solitude. Michael Mott remarks that “as Merton discovered different levels of solitude, he rediscovered the solitude of the artist and writer, and Rilke became more important to him than ever.”<sup>22</sup> As Rilke had been “found by solitude” so, over the years, Merton gradually allowed solitude to “find” him, paradoxically discovering it in the places he least expected to find it – in his writing and in his work as Master of Scholastics and Master of Novices.

This brings me to the third reason for Merton’s attraction to Rilke. Merton saw him as one of a number of poets and writers to whom modern people were turning with their

questions about the spiritual life as in past ages they had turned to monks and mystics. Merton believed that Rilke was asking the right questions on a deep level and, for this reason, Merton felt Rilke was one of a number of people outside the church who were filled with prophetic speech, and so fulfilling the function of the monk in the modern world.

The reason Merton believed Rilke was filled with prophetic speech brings me to the fourth and probably the most important reason why Merton was attracted to Rilke. Merton's "serious and prolonged study of Rilke" bore fruit in a number of conferences he gave to the monastic community at Gethsemani. In these lectures Merton presents Rilke as one of the best poets of his period and uses Rilke's poetry to speak to the monks about poetic experience and its contribution to religious experience. Rilke's poetic view of reality is "inseeing" – a deep encounter between the poet and his subject, getting right into the center of the subject, right into the heart. It involves empathy to experience what the other person experiences. In one conference Merton describes the way Rilke gets into the very center of the thing he is describing. Taking a dog as an example, he says this inseeing involves getting into

the dog's very centre, the point from where it begins to be a dog, the place in which, in it, where God, as it were, would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished in order to watch it under the influence of its first embarrassments and inspirations and to know that it was good, that nothing was lacking, that it could not have been made better.<sup>23</sup>

This inseeing Merton describes as a form of contemplation, a way of looking. Inseeing involves an "inner event in the person who sees, and it takes place in this encounter with something else, it's not just a subjective thing."<sup>24</sup> This contact with reality, Merton goes on to say, is essential to the spiritual life as God is mediated through other things in this life, through reality, through creation. "This encounter with reality reveals to us our own existence, our selves and the meaning of our own life and the direction of our own life."

### *Rilke's Influence on Merton*

Besides his extolling Rilke to his brethren at Gethsemani, we can also see Rilke having a deeply personal effect on Merton at this time. Over the course of Merton's journals there is a growing awareness of the natural world around him and alongside this an awareness of the wider world outside the monastery. Merton's reflections in his essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros" are an excellent example of this parallel development. In *A Vow of Conversation* there is a growing number of references to the deer in the woods surrounding the hermitage.<sup>25</sup> In one example Merton describes how "a deer sprang up in the deep bushes of the hollow, perhaps two. I could see at least one in the moonlight";<sup>26</sup> later on in *Vow* he notes: "as the sun was setting, I looked up at the end of the field where I had sat in the afternoon and suddenly realized that there were beings there – deer. In the evening light they were hard to descry against the tall brown grass, but I could pick out as least five."<sup>27</sup> In Merton's final entry in *Vow* two pair of deer who "were not afraid" lead Merton to reflect on

the “‘deerness’ that sums up everything and is sacred and marvelous.” Reflecting on these deer in language highly reminiscent of the language he used in his lectures to the monastic community Merton goes on to describe this “deerness,” saying: “The deer reveals to me something essential, not only in itself, but also in myself. Something beyond the trivialities of my everyday being, my individual existence. Something profound. The face of that which is both in the deer and in myself.”<sup>28</sup> Here Merton is speaking of the deer in exactly the same way as in the example he had given in his monastic conference of Rilke describing a dog.

In writing of the deer in *Vow* Merton is inseeing in the same way as Rilke, an inseeing which has really become “an inner event” for him and which helps to reveal to him his “own existence” along with the meaning of his life. This reflects Merton’s ongoing journey of self-discovery, part of his search for his true self. The deer, as George Kilcourse<sup>29</sup> has suggested, become one of the metaphors Merton uses for his true self. Merton’s writings of the final months of 1965 contain many of the themes that feature in *Vow* including further references to the deer.

### *Inseeing and Outgazing*

The inseeing Merton highlights in the writings of Rilke relates to a number of other ideas Merton was pursuing in the late fifties and sixties. This view of reality attracted Merton to various writers and groups. His attraction to both the Shakers and the Celtic monks was, I believe, partly due to their sacramental vision of the world, which involved a way of looking at creation similar to the inseeing of Rilke. Merton wrote that the Shakers both in their work and their worship were “attuned to the music intoned in each being by God the Creator” and when he came to lecture on the meaning of the *logos* for the Greek Fathers Merton takes the craftsmanship of the Shakers as an example: “in a Shaker table or bed, you see the *logos* of a table or a bed, its ideal form, the shape which reveals and fulfils its purpose.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly we could think of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ idea of “inscape,” Edwin Muir’s “profound metaphysical concern . . . for the roots of being,”<sup>31</sup> or Louis Zukofsky’s “Paradise Ear.” It is also a pattern reflected in Merton’s poetry where he develops what Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr has called his “zen consciousness” – becoming the “subject of the object.”<sup>32</sup> Merton’s 1963 collection of poetry, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, contains some excellent examples of this, poems such as “Song for Nobody,” “Song: If You Seek . . .,” “Night-Flowering Cactus,” “Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing” and “O Sweet Irrational Worship”:

I am earth, earth  
My heart’s love  
Bursts with hay and flowers.

I am a lake of blue air  
 In which my own appointed place  
 Field and valley  
 Stand reflected.  
 I am earth, earth

Out of my grass heart  
 Rises the bobwhite.  
 Out of my nameless weeds  
 His foolish worship.<sup>33</sup>

In an essay in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Merton points to a “Buddhist flavor”<sup>34</sup> in some of Rilke’s poetry. Referring to the *Duino Elegies* he indicates a development in Rilke where “inseeing,” through the poet’s total identification with his object, is transformed into “out-gazing.” This “out-gazing” is a return to the child-likeness of a paradise consciousness where the individual ceases to be merely a spectator – looking at things, ignoring them, annihilating them, negating them – but, instead, “accepts them fully, in complete oneness with them. It looks ‘out of them,’ as though fulfilling the role of consciousness not for itself only but *for them also*”<sup>35</sup> – and we see this in Merton’s own “inseeing” and “outgazing” especially in his journals, his letters and in his poetry.

### Conclusion

Merton’s attraction to the life and writings of Rilke is understandable. Both writers were essentially journal writers and poets and Rilke’s central themes of love, death, suffering, loneliness and “inseeing” were themes important to Merton at this time. In Rilke Merton found a writer who he felt was asking the right questions on a deep level. Through this Rilke was filled with prophetic speech and was one of the people outside the Church whom Merton regarded as an important voice. Besides the professional attraction, because of the similarity in their work, there is also, I believe, a more personal attraction. In Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, his writings about love appealed to Merton as he struggled with his own “lack of love” and this is reflected in Merton’s conferences on Rilke where he speaks of learning to love as the hardest of all the tasks in the monastery, and of solitude as central to love. Finally, Merton saw that Rilke’s life, like his own, was a struggle. Like Merton, Rilke looked for answers as to the way in which he was to function in life so as to make his life a coherent struggle rather than an incoherent one. Merton suggests in one of his lectures that Rilke eventually achieved this in the *Duino Elegies*. Similarly Merton spent his whole life struggling to unite the paradoxes in his own life. He achieved such a unity in his epic poem *The Geography of Lograire*, uniting North, South, East and West, all times and all cultures, with his own personal story in one great universal vision.

1. Guy Davenport, "Tom and Gene," in Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton* (New York: Timken, 1991) 34.
2. Thea van Dam, "Thomas Merton's Journey with William Blake," *The Merton Journal* 4 (Easter 1996) 2-10; Lynn Paul Elwell, "The William Blake-Thomas Merton Connection," paper delivered at the Fourth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY (June 1995); Michael W. Higgins, "Monasticism as Rebellion: Blakean Roots of Merton's Thought," *American Benedictine Review* 39 (June 1988) 177-88; and Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Journey of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998).
3. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995) 220.
4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986) 605 n. 203.
5. *Ibid.* 257.
6. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996) 380.
7. *Ibid.* 377.
8. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 50.
9. *Love and the Search for God*, Credence Cassettes AA2078 (1988); *Natural Contemplation*, Credence Cassettes AA2077 (1988); *Poetry and Contemplation*, Credence Cassettes AA2076 (1988); *The Coherent Life*, Credence Cassettes AA2802 (1995).
10. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975) 3.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 31.
12. J.F. Hendry, *The Sacred Threshold: A Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983) 171.
13. *Ibid.* 61.
14. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996) 187.
15. Griffin 92.
16. Mott 438.
17. Hendry 92.
18. *Ibid.* 160.
19. *Ibid.* 150.
20. Merton and Rilke both had many literary interests in common; they both admired Cézanne, were greatly attracted to Russia and had contacts with Pasternak. Both men were "francophiles." Finally, I would suggest, both Merton and Rilke would fit into the "four" position on the Enneagram.
21. *Entering the Silence* 377.
22. Mott 430.
23. *Natural Contemplation*, transcribed by the current author.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Thomas Merton, A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988).
26. *Ibid.* 115.
27. *Ibid.* 130.
28. *Ibid.* 208.
29. George Kilcourse, "'A Shy Wild Deer': The 'True Self' in Thomas Merton's Poetry," *Merton Annual* 4 (1991) 103.
30. Canon A. M. Allchin, "The Importance of One Good Place," *Cistercian Studies* 14 (1979) 95.
31. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) 29.
32. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Noonday Press, 1967) 246.
33. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 344-45.
34. *Mystics and Zen Masters* 244; Merton goes on, however, to distinguish clearly between the "pure consciousness" of Zen and the "poetic consciousness" of Rilke.
35. *Ibid.* 245.