

***New Seeds of Contemplation* and John Keats' "Vale of Soul-Making"**

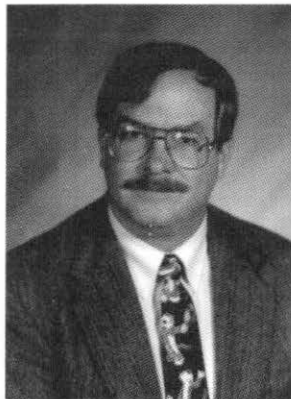
By John Noffsinger

In his letters John Keats explores at least two significant ideas that reverberate 140 years later in Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*. The first idea involves what Keats terms "the uses of the world," while the second involves the traditional opposition between thought and feeling. Unfortunately, because we have almost no record of Merton's knowledge of Keats,¹ there is little evidence to support direct literary or philosophical influence. In his writings Merton rarely alluded to the poet – he mentions Keats only a handful of times in his journals, for example – although as phenomenally well-read as Merton was, he would certainly have had a more than adequate understanding of the kinds of reflection in which Keats engages in both his letters and his poetry. It is clear, however, that both Keats and Merton are preoccupied with how encountering the world helps to shape our individual identities.

When reading the letters of John Keats, we must continually remind ourselves that they are the products of a man who never reached the age of 26. The first letters we have date from 1816, just before Keats turned 21, while his last known letter dates from 1820, shortly after his twenty-fifth birthday. The letters reveal a youthful spirit filled with exuberance, with humor, with a passion for life and for poetry but at the same time reveal a curiously reflective mind driven by an urge and an urgency to find meaning within the scope of ordinary existence.

In a letter to his brother and sister in April of 1819, Keats tries to come to a philosophical understanding of the nature of our experience in the world. He begins by presenting what he views as a traditional but skewed conception of life as one of pure suffering from which we are to be "rescued" by a benevolent deity: "The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is 'a vale of tears' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbit[r]ary interposition of God and taken to Heaven." Not surprisingly, Keats immediately rejects this view as being too limiting: "What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion!" he exclaims. Keats then goes on to enlist a new metaphor that more accurately sums up his mature understanding of the purpose of existence: "Call the world if you Please 'The vale of Soul-making.' Then you will find out the use of the world."²

In this letter Keats explores informally, almost conversationally, ideas that work their way into his poetry, ideas that raise fundamental questions about the nature of identity, the nature of the world, and the relationship between the two. In one of his most famous odes, for



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example, Keats addresses a nightingale and expresses his desire to “fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known, / The weariness, the fever, and the fret / Here, where men sit and hear each other groan ... / Where but to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs.”³ Here in concentrated form we find an image of the world’s inescapable pain. In this ode the nightingale exists as a symbol opposed to the human condition. In Keats’ imagination the nightingale inhabits an idealized world both unaware of and exempt from human suffering. Part of the tension in Keats’ poetry arises from his dual awareness – of a real world in which suffering is inevitable and of an imaginative world which suffering does not penetrate. And yet these two worlds – that of suffering and that of transcendence – are not dualities existing in absolute opposition to one another but rather complementary aspects of the same shared world, for the awareness of pain both tempers and refines the soul: only through the reality of suffering does the poet become sensitive to the exquisite fragility of the nightingale’s song.

Keats’ conception of the world as a “vale of Soul-making” resonates throughout *New Seeds of Contemplation*, for among many themes Merton examines in this work – silence, solitude, the vocation of monasticism – he explores the nature of identity and “the uses of the world.” In *New Seeds* Merton claims that “every moment and every event of every man’s life on earth plants something in his soul.”⁴ In his biography of Merton, Michael Mott reminds us that in 1947 Merton was calling his manuscript “The Soil and Seeds of Contemplation,” and the extension of the organic metaphor in the original title provides even more evidence of Merton’s concern with preparing an appropriate ground for the seeds of spiritual growth.⁵

In his discussion of renunciation in *New Seeds*, Merton acknowledges a world that echoes Keats’ view in the Nightingale ode: Merton claims, “Life in this world is full of pain” (*NSC*, 259). Merton goes on to make an interesting distinction, however: “But pain, which is the contrary of pleasure, is not necessarily the contrary of happiness or of joy” (*NSC*, 259). For both Keats and Merton suffering is an inescapable part of our experience in the world, but both authors also feel that suffering can be transformed and made comprehensible through the process of soul-making. The seemingly imponderable question “Why are we here?” becomes answerable when we consider our experiences in the world as the raw material for the shaping of souls. Given this dynamic interaction, the dualisms of self and world, of body and soul, break down. Throughout *New Seeds* Merton both dramatizes and undermines the human tendency to disengage body and soul and preserve them as separate entities: “It is [a] mistake to identify the outer self with the body and the inner self with the soul. This is an understandable mistake, but it is very misleading because after all body and soul are incomplete substances, parts of one whole being: and the inner self is not a *part* of us, it is all of us. It is our *whole reality*. Whatever is added to it is fortuitous, transient, and inconsequential” (*NSC*, 280). In “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” William Blake also speaks to the ultimate union of body and soul by alluding to the “five Senses [as] the chief inlets of Soul.”⁶ Our capacity to see, taste, touch, smell, and hear does not serve merely as a conduit for experience to enter our consciousness – the life of the senses confirms our existence as embodied souls and thus shapes our inner lives.

In the 1819 letter to his siblings, Keats goes on to elaborate a distinction between “soul” and “intelligence”: “I say ‘*Soul making*’ Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence – There may be intelligences or sparks of divinity in millions – but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself” (*Letters*, 250). In Keats’ view an “intelligence” represents one’s potential for uniqueness, a potential not necessarily realized. In engaging the world, however, intelligence can

transform itself into “soul,” or fully realized individual identity. Keats analyzes what he terms the “three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years. These three Materials are the *Intelligence* – the *human heart* (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the *world* or *Elemental space* suited for the proper action of Mind and Heart on each other for the purpose of forming the *Soul* or *Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity*” (*Letters*, 250). If one were inclined toward both mathematics and oversimplification, these distinctions might suggest an equation: intelligence + heart + world = soul. The interaction of both internal force and external circumstance is necessary to create selfhood, a fulfillment of the potential suggested by the sacred spark within.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton likewise asserts that “the perfection of each created thing is not merely in its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself” (*NSC*, 29). Gerard Manley Hopkins gives wonderful poetic form to this same insight in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”: “Each mortal thing does one thing and the same; / Deals out that being indoors each one dwells; / Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells. / Crying *What I do is me; for that I came.*”⁷ We become more perfect, in other words, more identified with that divine part of ourselves which is God, by “selving” – by reaching out to create the individual uniqueness of our own souls. Divinity shapes the space in which this soul-making occurs, so the act of such creation reflects a sacred imperative. Merton explains: “we are . . . called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity” (*NSC*, 32). Merton even expands the organic metaphor of the book’s title to express the divine source of our flourishing: “*The seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God’s will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity.* To refuse them is to refuse everything; it is the refusal of my own existence and being: of my identity, my very self. Not to accept and love and do God’s will is to refuse the fullness of my existence” (*NSC*, 33). For Merton the necessary task of creating our deepest unique self is bound up with issues of both “sanctity and salvation”: “For me to be a saint means to be myself,” he claims. “Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self” (*NSC*, 31).

But one may legitimately ask the troubling question: how do I find out “who I am and [discover] my true self”? In the 1819 letter Keats raises these same concerns: “How then,” he asks, “are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them – so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each ones individual existence?” Keats’ answer is one with which Merton would concur: “How, but by the medium of a world like this?” (*Letters*, 250). This engagement in the world to create the uniqueness of our individual identities is fraught with difficulty and pain. According to Merton, “To work out our own identity in God . . . is a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears” (*NSC*, 32). While the process is trying, difficult, and obscure, the rewards are the only ones worth having, for, as Merton asserts, souls only emanate from our paying “close attention to reality at every moment” (*NSC*, 32). Encountering the world, in other words, leads to the mystery of the unfolding of our true identity.

In addition to questions of the uses of the world, both Keats and Merton closely examine the interplay between intellect and emotion in determining life’s meaning. At the end of *New Seeds* Merton articulates the paradox we create for ourselves by living in a world that radically separates logic and feeling:

The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity, and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not (*NSC*, 297).

This passage goes to the core of Merton's preoccupation with how to find a joyful mode of living amidst the world's pain. Merton echoes the Romantic notion that rationality distances us from an understanding of life's meaning and purpose. Analytical scrutiny leads us not to deeper insight but to misunderstanding. This seems counterintuitive. Should not analysis yield *greater* understanding of life's purpose? No, Merton claims – dicing life into intellectual bites leads to “sadness, absurdity, and despair.” Merton's answer is to encourage us first to become more aware of and then to join the cosmic dance of creation. We are, of course, already in the dance – Merton simply urges us to attune ourselves to its rhythms and energies. To find ourselves we must forget ourselves. We connect ourselves to the source of life not through intellect but through dance, the bright connection of soul, bone, blood, and world.

Like Merton, Keats also wrestles with the use of the intellect in the search for truth. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey in 1817 he states: “I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive [consecutive] reasoning.” Shortly after this he utters his famous exclamation, “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts” (*Letters*, 37). While this much abused line seems to stake a claim on anti-intellectualism, Keats, like Merton, is groping here for a mode of being that puts us in closer touch with what it means to be human. The subjective state of our feelings connects us forcefully to our true identities, while thoughts disconnect and distance us from this truth. Merton would subscribe enthusiastically to the concept of Negative Capability, which Keats defines in a letter as a state “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (*Letters*, 43). Negative Capability, in other words, allows us to join in the cosmic dance, to accept and celebrate our mysterious kinship with all animate and inanimate beings.

It is clear that Keats' and Merton's common interest in the world as a “vale of Soul-Making” and their preoccupation with thought and emotion coalesce in the theme of human identity. Like Keats in this letter, one of Merton's preoccupations in *New Seeds* is identity, and Merton continually contrasts the “deep self,” “true self,” and “hidden self” – in other words, the unique shape of our individual souls that Merton calls “the person” – with the “false self,” “exterior self,” and “superficial self” of our consciously-constructed egos. Throughout *New Seeds* Merton emphasizes the role of detachment from self as a prerequisite for the inpouring of the experience of God. If we succeed in breaking through the superficiality of external appearances, what is revealed to us is the “hidden majesty” of creation – and our own deep connection to this existential mystery – yet, paradoxically, according to Merton, “this is a majesty we do not *see* with our eyes and it is all within ourselves” (*NSC*, 42).

For a final thought about identity, the “uses of the world,” and the meaning of life, we can turn to Book 2 of *Endymion*, in which Keats presents us with the following impassioned insight into the nature of our experience:

But this is human life: the war, the deeds,
 The disappointment, the anxiety,
 Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,
 All human; bearing in themselves this good,
 That they are still the air, the subtle food,
 To make us feel existence (*Poems*, 118).

In this passage, in compressed and rather abstract language, Keats has taken it upon himself to muse on the purpose of human life. Keats emphasizes the recalcitrance of life, its resistance to our groping attempts to find meaning amidst distress and disenchantment. "What is it all about?" we ask. "What's the point of the struggle?" In *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton presents a beautiful paradox to deepen our understanding of life's meaning: "We awaken, not to find an answer absolutely distinct from the question, but to realize that the question is its own answer" (*NSC*, 4). Framing questions about "the problem of life" itself becomes a symptom of the problem. Life's difficulties make us *feel* existence, and feeling existence is the prerequisite for soul-formation. To awaken to this insight helps open us to the mystery of our connection to our deepest selves, to the world, and to each other.

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1. Merton's Columbia class notebooks, now in the Merton collection at St. Bonaventure University, do include two sets of notes on Romanticism that incorporate material on Keats.
 2. *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 249; subsequent references to "Letters" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
 3. John Keats, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, ed. Clarence deWitt Thorpe (New York: Odyssey, 1935) 350; subsequent references to "Poems" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
 4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 14; subsequent references to "NSC" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
 5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 238.
 6. William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966) 149.
 7. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 51.