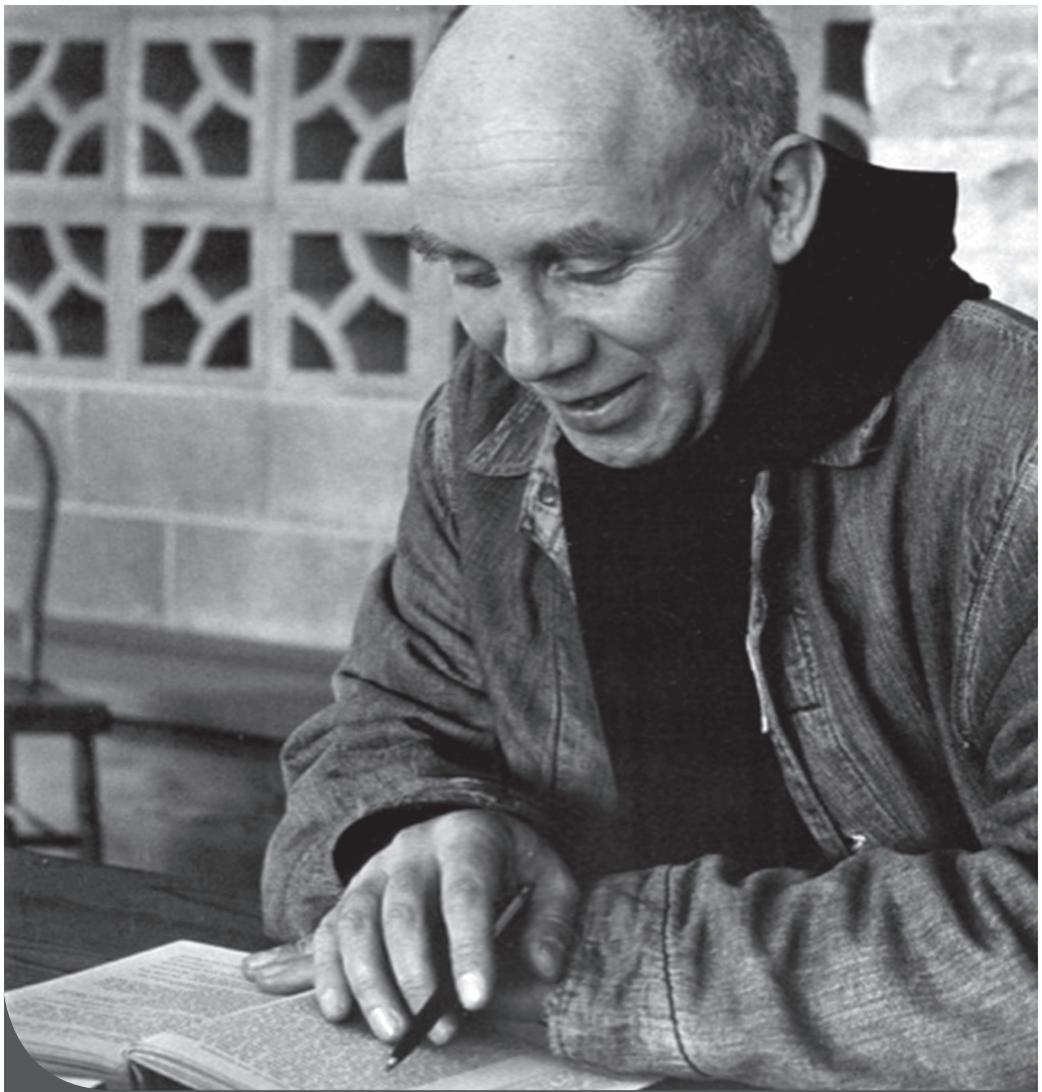


Gary Hall • Detlev Cuntz (Eds.)

Guard the human image for it is the image of God

Essays on Thomas Merton





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Vier-Türme-Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie. Detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

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German edition / deutsche Ausgabe:

Das Menschenbild als Abbild Gottes bewahren

ISBN 978-3-7365-0219-2

1. Edition 2019

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Production: Benedict Press, Vier-Türme GmbH, Münsterschwarzach

ISBN 978-3-7365-0260-4

www.vier-tuerme-verlag.de

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Foreword

Guard the human image for it is the image of God

We gathered from several European nations, as many of us had gathered four years previously at Münsterschwarzach, when the community so generously hosted our conference celebrating the centenary of Thomas Merton's birth. This time we were marking fifty years since his death on 10 December 1968.

Speculation about the circumstances surrounding that death, at a conference of Catholic religious leaders meeting in Bangkok, continues to this day, fuelled by recollections of the tensions which marked a heady era. In the Spring of 1968, Merton was reflecting on a year already marked by brutal war in Vietnam, an escalating nuclear arms race, fierce racial conflict, the assassination of Robert Kennedy and then of Martin Luther King. On 6 April, 1968, he wrote in his journal:

So the murder of M. L. King – it lay on the top of the traveling car like an animal, a beast of the apocalypse. And it finally confirmed all the apprehensions – the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year. That the things are finally, inexorably, spelling themselves out. Why? Are things happening because people in desperation want them to happen? Or do they have to happen? Is the human race self-destructive? Is the Christian message of love a pitiful delusion? Or must one just “love” in an impossible situation? And what sense can possibly be made by an authoritarian Church that comes out 100 years late with its official pronouncements?

Eight months later, Merton was dead. Fifty years on, we gathered under his call to “guard the human image for it is the image of God”. With particular attention to his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *Raids on the Unspeakable*, we celebrated Merton’s life and work, whilst facing with him some global crises and trends, including re-emerging patterns of nationalism, xenophobia, populism and confrontational rhetoric.

The following began as presentations – some in German, some in English, one a playful blend of both – at an occasion marked by companionship and mutuality, conversation and laughter, prayer and feasting. We offer them in gratitude for our hosts and all who travelled to make the event, and in hope that they contribute to continuing the conversation.

We are indebted to all who have helped to make the conference and this booklet happen, especially to Br. Jakobus Geiger OSB, Br. Patrick Karch OSB and the staff of the abbey guesthouse, to Br. Dr. Ansgar Stüfe OSB und Dr. Matthias E. Gahr from Vier-Türme-Verlag and our translators F. Otto Betler OSB, Irmgard Deifel and Herta Sieber.

Special thanks go also to the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) for the generous financial support.

Gary Hall and Detlev Cuntz
Pentecost 2019



*Some of the speakers and translators of the Thomas-Merton-Symposium
January 2019 in Münsterschwarzach, left to right:*

Pastor Dr. Gary Hall, Pater Otto Betler OSB, Detlev Cuntz, Hertha Sieber,
Dr. Małgorzata Poks, Irmgard Deifel, Abbot Michael Reepen OSB, Pater Dr. Kosmas Lars
Thielmann OCist, Andreas Ebert, Dr. Dr. h.c. Wunibald Müller, Pater Dr. Anselm Grün OSB

Greetings and Welcome

Thomas Merton lived as a Trappist monk, as we monks of Münster-schwarzach, according to the rule of Saint Benedict. So I would like to read to you from Chapter 53 – “From the reception of the guests”:

- ¹ *All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35).*
- ² *Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith (Gal 6:10) and to pilgrims.*
- ³ *Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love.*
- ⁴ *All humility should be shown in addressing a guest on arrival or departure:*
- ⁵ *By a bow of the head or by a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them.*
- ⁶ *The abbot with the entire community shall wash their feet.*
- ⁷ *After the washing they will recite this verse: God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple (Ps 48:10).*
- ⁸ *Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them especially Christ is received; our natural privileging of the rich means that they are used to our respect.*

So one should receive the guests according to the rule of Saint Benedict. I want to spare you taking off your shoes now and washing your feet – but what Benedict meant, we take very seriously! With this in mind, I would like to welcome you dear guests to the Symposium on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton here in the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach. With you Christ is welcomed again into the monastery, for that we are grateful and we try (!) to receive you like Christ.

Who is the human being who loves life and wishes to see good days?

asks Saint Benedict in his Rule.

When you hear that and answer “I”, then God says to you: Do you want true and everlasting life, Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from cheap talk! Avoid evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it!

Thomas Merton was such a human being who wanted to live well, and wanted to see good days, so he went to the monastery and became a monk. In silence, by choosing silence, he breathed the presence of God. This is the basic habit of us monks: the constant being in the presence of God – which makes God visible in the world today.

Thomas Merton said:

Monks must resemble trees that live silently in darkness and purify the air through their life-giving presence.

How urgently the world needs this cleansing, how urgently it needs contemplation, but also the action that witnesses and testifies – as it was given to Thomas Merton by his writing!

The world, which seems to be drifting apart in all areas, needs to hear with the ear of the heart, as Saint Benedict says, the deep listening to one another, and in this sense the obedience that Saint Benedict meant.

I wish you all this listening with the ear of the heart in these days of the symposium!

PAUL M. PEARSON

Greetings from Kentucky

As Resident Secretary of the International Thomas Merton Society I send you greetings from the Directors, the Board, and the members of the International Thomas Merton Society; from the Faculty, Staff and Students at Bellarmine University, the home of the Thomas Merton Center, the official repository of Merton's literary estate; and from the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust.

As you gather this weekend at the Benedictine Abbey of Münster-schwarzach recalling Merton's words from *Raids on the Unspeakable* – “**To be human in this most inhuman of ages**” – I'm reminded both of the challenge Merton presents to us and the message of hope he gives us, reminding us that, “Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable [...] The goodness of the world, stricken or not, is incontestable and definitive. If it is stricken, it is also healed in Christ.” It is our responsibility to “guard the human image for it is the image of God”, to keep our focus on that spark of God in creation, and to never lose sight of that “cosmic dance which [...] beats in our very blood”, of the hidden ground of love within every one of us.

May Thomas Merton's message of hope be enkindled in the hearts and minds of each of you this weekend.

Paul M. Pearson

January 2019

Attention to Language

Introduction

Thomas Merton was a master of language. When we are talking about Thomas Merton this weekend, it will be good to remind ourselves of how carefully he approached language. Before I say anything about language, I wish to quote Thomas Merton himself. In an aphorism he once wrote:

If a writer is so cautious that he never writes anything that cannot be criticized, he will never write anything that can be read. If you want to help other people you have got to make up your mind to write things that some men will condemn.¹

Merton wrote such that he was heavily criticized by conservative Christians. But that is exactly why he was able to help so many people. He had the courage to express the truth in a society that would rather follow illusion and ideology.

Yet another word from his aphorisms:

If you write for God you will reach many men and bring them joy. If you write for men – you may make some money and you may give someone a little joy and you may make a noise in the world, for a little while. If you write only for yourself you can read what you yourself have writ-

.....

1 Thomas Merton *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Copyright by the Abbey of Gethsemani Inc., published by New Directions Book, New York/USA 2007, 105. Hereafter in the text NSC

ten and after ten minutes you will be so disgusted you will wish that you were dead. (NSC 111)

Thomas Merton did not write for himself, and also not to win acclaim from people. He wrote in order to let the truth shine. And for him that was writing for God.

1. Saying - talking - speaking

In German we have three words for “speech”. When I “say” (*sage*) something, then I illustrate something. And everyone can take that in complete freedom according to what she sees and knows. “Saying” also includes “recounting” (*erzählen*). In recounting (*Erzählung*) an image emerges that we look at and allow to work on us. Looking – so says Martin Heidegger – leads to freedom. Saying and recounting are therefore rather comfortable. They make us freer.

With “talking” (*reden*) we hear in German the words for “consider” (*berechnen*) and “justify” (*begründen*). “Talking” (*reden*) means: giving reasons. The word thereby is related in German to “advise” (*raten*) in the sense of making intellectually sensible. The wordplays in German for “talking” reveal also the shadow side and aggressiveness in talking. “He talked a hole into my stomach.” Someone wants to “have a talk with me” in order to correct me or convince me. Or somebody wants to “talk me out of or into” something. When we only talk, it is “just talk” or chit-chat.

A “conversation” (*Gespräch*) happens only when we speak. The German word for “speak” (*sprechen*) comes from the word for “burst” (*bersten*). Something bursts out of me. It always means a personal speaking, a speaking that comes from the heart. Friedrich Hölderlin describes the mystery of speaking thus::

*Much has man (Mensch) experienced
Named many of the heavenly ones
Since we have been a conversation
And able to hear one another*

In order for a conversation to take place, one needs an experience. I don't speak about just anything, I speak out of the experience I have had with myself and with other people. For Hölderlin, speaking always opens up the heaven above us. We do not only speak with each other, we become a conversation. A conversation comes into being, a conversation that binds us to each other at our depths. However, good listening belongs to this kind of speaking. I don't just listen to the other, I hear from him, I hear the person himself. To a conversation belongs asking and answering. The German word "question" (*Frage*) has the same root as "furrow" (*Furche*). I don't interrogate the other, I don't press him with my questioning; rather I plough a furrow into his field. Thus the field of the other can yield fruit. And that requires an answer. Both the German "Antwort" and the English word "answer" come from "anti" meaning "in the face of" the one with whom I speak. I do not give an abstract answer, but rather I speak a word in which I look the other in the face. I can thereby speak only words that are honest, so that I can look the other openly and honestly in the eye.

Thomas Merton is allergic to people who give answers too quickly. In an aphorism he once wrote:

What about the men who run about the countryside painting signs that say "Jesus saves" and "Prepare to meet God!" Have you ever seen one of them? I have not, but I often try to imagine them and I wonder what goes on in their minds. Strangely, their signs do not make me think of Jesus, but of them. Or perhaps it is their Jesus who gets in the way and makes all thought of Jesus impossible. They wish to force their Jesus

upon us, and He is perhaps only I projection of themselves. (NSC 106–107)

2. The healing power of Language

With what he said, Thomas Merton wanted to lead people to an experience of God and to a healthy attitude about themselves. His writing stands in the tradition of the Greek philosophers. Plutarch talks about the philosopher Antiphon, who developed a relief from sufferings via his poetry and art. He had a sign outside his therapeutic practice that said he could heal sickness through words. This ability to heal through words was developed by the Evangelist Luke in his Gospel. Luke was believed in antiquity to have been a physician. He so wrote, that people suffering from internal and external illnesses experienced healing and comforting power in his words. He had learned this healing power of speech from Plato, known as the father of catharsis: purification and healing of the soul through talking.

These days we often experience a wounding language. It is an aggressive, condemning language that disrespects the human person, a language that consciously spreads “fake news”, which openly lies just to win people. This language makes a person sick. And it creates an aggressive atmosphere in society. The Fathers of the Church say: With language we build a house. Through brutal language, our society will become ever more a house in which nobody feels at home, a cold house in which we freeze.

With his words Jesus built a house in which people wanted to live. The disciples said of him: “Were not our hearts burning in our breasts, as he spoke with us on the way?” (Lk 24:32) Jesus spoke a warming language, a language which came from the heart. And Jesus said of his own speaking: “You are already clean through the word which I spoke to you.” (Joh 15:3) Jesus speaks in a way that people feel purified and become

free from the tarnish which darkens their spirit and makes them sick. Through Jesus words people come into contact with the original and pristine image that God himself made of them. That heals them from all self images that make them sick.

Thomas Merton made an effort to use healing, pure, and clear language. He did not simply write, but rather he was very careful about his writing. Perhaps writing was a healing process for himself. In writing he could express what was in him, and clarify what was sometimes still diffuse in his head and swimming around. Since he could clarify it for himself, he could help countless readers to clarify their own thoughts and come into contact with themselves and with their true self.

3. Language as Refuge

Language makes one at-home. The Jewish poet Hilde Domin calls language “the last refuge”. And she wanted to defend this at-home-ness with her words. One could also say that about the books that Thomas Merton wrote. With his words he wanted to give spiritual seekers a refuge from the meaningless noise to which they are exposed in society – a safe and good place where they can feel at home.

Jean Paul once wrote: “In the poet humanity comes to reflection and to speech. Therefore he easily awakens them again in others.” The healing power of language consists in awakening people from their illusions, which make them sick. Hilde Domin recognized this healing power of language directly in poems. She believes that poems belong “to the best that we have. To that which rescues humans in their humanity.” Poems protect the human being and rescue him from the grasp of utility. Then the human can be who he is. Poets – so believes Hilde Domin – sharpen language and protect it from being misused.

Thomas Merton himself wrote poems. And in the aphorisms he reflected upon what makes a Christian poet:

The poet enters into himself in order to create. The contemplative enters into God in order to be created. A CATHOLIC poet should be an apostle by being first of all a poet, not try to be a poet by being first of all an apostle. For if he presents himself to people as a poet, he is going to be judged as a poet and if he is not a good one his apostolate will be ridiculed. (NSC 111)

Thomas Merton did not just want to write pious books, he wanted so to write them, that they touch people with their language. He wanted to speak a language which would stand up to the judgment of people—a good and healing language, but a language that laid bare the truth. And the truth is not comfortable for every person. Heidegger called language “the house of being” and also the “protector of being”. Thomas Merton with his language allowed true being, the original being to become visible. He did not write about God, but rather his language allowed God to be experienced.

Conclusion

Like every author, Thomas Merton created a reality with his writing. The word makes things new. “Everything came into being through the Word” John’s prologue tells us (Joh 1:3). Merton’s language does something inside people. Whoever writes accepts a responsibility for his reader. And he influences the language of society with his language. In his writing Merton realized and accepted his responsibility for the people of his time. In so far as we today bring his writings closer to people, we accept responsibility for our society. So I wish for all participants in this symposium that through reflection on the language of Thomas Merton, we ourselves will become sensitive to a language that is healing for our

society today. Insofar as we, like Merton, make the effort to speak an honest, clear, pure, and encouraging word, we make a contribution which does not further corrupt society with even more brutal language. Rather we learn again to build a house with our language, in which a seeking, fearful, worrying humanity finds refuge and feels at home.



Translation by P. Otto Betler OSB

Thomas Merton on the Gifts of a Guilty Bystander

A note on Merton's language: Merton was a man of his time and wrote before inclusive language was the norm in public discourse. He used masculine pronouns both for God and for human beings. As a scholar, I cannot alter primary sources with which I work. So if Merton's "exclusive language" grates in your ear (as it does mine), please do a little "work of translation" in your heart. Thank you.

Introduction

We begin with confession: We are all guilty bystanders; all implicated in systemic evil; all beneficiaries of unjust economic systems. Many of us live far from the epicenters of human suffering. We aspire to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, but none of us is guiltless.

Merton spoke eloquently in an earlier era when the conscience of our country was waking up to our complicity in racism, poverty in Appalachia (where I am from) and the rural south, the horrors of Vietnam, when we were "going for the gold" in the nuclear arms race, barely aware of the threat of ecological disaster Rachael Carson (with whom Merton corresponded) signaled in her book *The Silent Spring*¹, and on the cusp of a new wave of feminism. In the 1960's America was, as Merton scholar Lawrence Cunningham once remarked, "having a collective nervous breakdown".

1 See Monica Weis, SSJ, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2011).

Merton lived in rural Kentucky far from places of power and protest. He was cosseted in a monastery, a place of physical safety where he was fed and clothed (however basically), had access to good medical care, and knew he would be looked after in old age. Merton had all the things many in the USA today only dream of. Yet Merton was a bystander whose correspondence and writing indicate he understood his guilt, his complicity in the troubles of his times. This is particularly evident in his correspondence with the social activist and feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a correspondence worth reading as she harshly confronts him personally, politically, and in no uncertain terms with his comfort and complicity. He responds with remarkable gentleness and comprehension.²

In fact, Merton was literally “a voice in the wilderness”, not unlike John the Baptist with whom one could draw many parallels. It was precisely his remote geographical location and his vocation as monk from which his authority derived. His marginal position in the “monastic wilderness” gave him authenticity. It was why public figures like the Berrigan brothers, Jim Forest, and other voices for peace and justice sought his counsel. In the midst of his prophetic writings on social justice, war, and weapons, Merton also longed for greater solitude, for a hermitage, to withdraw farther from the mainstream than he already was.

Was, as Professor Ruether implied, being a Christian monastic, a hermit escapist? In his desire for greater solitude, was Merton turning his back on the needs of the world he had *already* left in 1941? Is there a contribution a hermit (a term I am using metaphorically and allusively for one who chooses marginality, not just for a vowed solitary) can make to alleviate the evil and suffering in God’s world? Merton thought (and

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2 *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Mary Tardiff, OP, ed) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995).

I think) that the hermit, the “fringe person”, has a crucial role to play among (not apart from, but *among*) the guilty bystanders. After introducing Merton’s positive view of monastic solitude, I suggest that Merton taught and exemplified two gifts of the guilty bystander: marginality and hospitality.

Before we turn to those ideas it is important to note briefly two basic premises. First, Merton believed in the reality of an unseen world, a spiritual realm that it has effects on the known, material world. This is perhaps not scientific or contemporary thinking, but it reflects the basic stance of Christian theology since its inception and certainly the historical trajectory of Christian monasticism and, more generally, spirituality. It means, for example, that prayer has its own kind of power.

Second, in an informal talk given in Calcutta, India in October, 1968, Merton explicitly equated “monk” and “marginal person” as I do in this talk. He termed the monk a marginal person, “no longer an established person with an established place in society.” “The monk is essentially outside of all establishments. He does not belong to an establishment. He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening the fundamental human experience.” Merton says he speaks as and for “all marginal persons who have done this kind of thing deliberately.”³

Merton goes on to equate “The marginal person, the monk, the displaced person, the prisoner” all of whom “have absolutely no established status whatever.” (AJ 306) In notes for a second Calcutta talk, “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue”, Merton writes that “the term “monastic” is applied in a broad way” to “A certain distance or detachment from the “ordinary” and “secular” concerns of a worldly life”. (AJ 309)

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3 *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (N. Burton, P. Hart & J. Laughlin, eds) (NY: New Directions, 1973/75) 305. Hereafter in the text AJ-

In the reflections that follow “monk” does not imply a male, vowed religious, but, more broadly, any person, male or female, monastic or lay, who has *chosen* marginality, who is a “guilty bystander” and who, thereby, can offer special gifts.

The Positive Role of the Bystander

I suggest we understand “bystander” as shorthand for Merton’s position as a monk, and especially for his desire for the life of an anchorite or hermit, a life he undertook fully in 1965. In one of Merton’s best essays, one with enormous implications for Christians *in* the world, the introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert* (a collection of the sayings of the 4th C. desert Christians), Merton explains that the desert Christians “believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.”⁴

They went to the desert, not because they hated the world, but, paradoxically, because they loved it.

The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck, did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground [...] they had not only the power but [...] the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them.” (WD 23)

Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation* “the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men”⁵

.....

4 Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert* (NY: New Directions, 1960) 3. Hereafter in the text WD

5 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (NY: New Directions, 1961) 52. Hereafter in the text NSC

This is what Archbishop Desmond Tutu said in his extraordinary dialogue with H.H. the Dalai Lama: “You show your humanity [...] by how you see yourself not as apart from others but from your connection to others.”⁶

For Merton, a desert hermit is a particular kind of “bystander.” As we know, in classical and *koine* Greek, “desert” (*eremou*) is not a geographic term, but a sociological one. A desert is an uninhabited place, and therefore a dangerous one, a lonely place to which one withdraws to be nearer to God and thereby closer to other human beings. Merton wrote in NSC: “The more I become identified with God, the more will I be identified with all the others who are identified with [God].” (NSC 65) The desert is the place from which the “guilty bystander”, one implicated by conditions in the world, but one who has voluntarily drawn apart from it for its sake, offers two important gifts: marginality and hospitality.

The Gift of Marginality

The monastic, the recluse, the solitary, the “bystander”, voluntarily chooses his or her marginality. She “opts” out of the “rat race”. To be marginal is to be on the border, on the edges, not at the center of things. The person who chooses marginality is not excluded from, but lives outside the mainstream. This gives him or her perspective on that mainstream. The marginal person is like the referee in a football match. He sees what the players can't because they are so involved in the game. The marginal person is like someone on the sidelines or in the stands of a match. She can see what the players can't. Persons on the margins of a society can serve as its conscience because, from that perspective, they can see society more clearly. A gift of the “bystander” is the ability to see the

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6 H.H. the Dalai Lama & Archbishop Desmond Tutu (with Douglas Abrams), *The Book of Joy* (NY: Avery/Penguin-Random House, 2016) 115.

mainstream clearly, and, *if* (an important condition) he understands his complicity and guilt in what he sees, can serve as its conscience.

In his essay *The Solitary Life* Merton says the hermit or marginal person puts “us on our guard against our natural obsession with the visible, social and communal forms of Christian life which tend at times to be inordinately active, and become deeply involved in the life of the secular non-Christian society”.⁷ The bystander or marginal person has a certain detachment or freedom from the “givens” of a society or culture. He or she understands that the way things are isn’t necessarily the way things have to be. Such people “out of pity for the universe, out of loyalty to mankind, and without a spirit of bitterness or of resentment, withdraw into the healing silence of the wilderness, or of poverty, or of obscurity, not in order to preach to others but to heal *in themselves* the wounds of the entire world.” (MJ 153; italics mine) The bystander heals herself for the sake of the sickness of the world and can thereby become its physician.

This position of “marginality for others” is implicit in what Merton says in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “Christian social action must liberate [...] from all forms of servitude whether economic, political, or psychological.”⁸ One does this by naming the servitudes, and one *can* do it because she has seen and rejected them in herself. Merton admonishes, “instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another.” (NSC 122)

.....

7 Appears in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, (Patrick Hart OCSO ed.) (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1977) 151. Hereafter in the text MJ

8 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (NY: Doubleday/Image, 1965/68) 83. Hereafter in the text CGB

The gift of a chosen marginality, whether that is actual and geographical or psycho-spiritual, is the gift of perspective. It gives one the ability to see and to say “the emperor has no clothes on”, or “the way we have always done it isn’t the just and merciful way.” What in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* Merton calls “the monk’s chief service to the world” is precisely the marginal bystanders’ gift: “this silence, this listening, this questioning, this humble and courageous exposure to what the world ignores about itself – both good and evil.”⁹ The hermit, the marginal person, the bystander “has all the more of a part to play in our world, because he has no proper place in it.” (MJ 157)

The Gift of Hospitality

When a monastery is mentioned, many think of monastic hospitality (like that shown at this conference). Historically, Christian monasteries are places where travelers, strangers, and pilgrims have been taken in, protected, and treated as Christ.¹⁰

In a world of suspicion and fear this is a powerful witness. But the monastery is not only a place of physical refuge, because the monastic heart is the reception room for the troubles of the world, and especially for those who are “lost.” The true monks (a gender inclusive term) are among the most loving and least judgmental of people. The monk opens her heart to the wanderer because she sees in him, although perhaps in disguise, her brother Jesus. I remind you that Merton’s marginality was rooted in his life as a monk, and that in his October, 1968 Calcutta talk he used the terms “monk” and “marginal person” synonymously.

9 Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1969/2018) 11. Hereafter in text CMP

10 See *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter 53 “On the Reception of Guests”

Perhaps ironically, the marginal person is one who invites the whole world in. He or she *becomes* the hostel and hospice for others, the place of refuge and of healing, perhaps healing for the terminally ill. (In English, a “hospice” is a hospital or place of care for the dying.) Marginality chosen for the love of the other is always manifested in hospitality, and, at root, hospitality is about healing. The Latin root of hospitality, *hospitalis*, means “of a guest”, and *hospes*, means “host”. As you know, in German “hospitable” is *gastfrei*, and “hospitality” is *Gastfreundschaft* or *Gastlichkeit*. The etymology of the words suggests the relatedness of host and guest.

The marginal person understands hospitality in two senses. First, it is understood in terms of place in the world. We are all the world’s guests. As Benedictine Br. David Steindl-Rast teaches, our very lives are gifts. We are God’s guests in the world, and, as good guests, should be grateful to the host and care for the house and the household. Second, the marginal person is to host others, is charged with their safety, care, and nurture. We, the guilty bystanders and marginal people, are to treat others as graciously as we have been treated. As Merton wrote in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, our action must “spontaneously manifest itself in a habitual spirit of sacrifice and concern for others that is unfailingly generous”. (CMP 87–88) The true host is that rare soul who puts the good of the other (the guest), or the good of the whole (the community) before his or her own.

In his discussion of the desert Christians Merton described the attitude of the monk: “Love means an interior and spiritual identification with one’s brother so that he is not regarded as an “object” to “which” one “does good”. “Love takes one’s neighbor as one’s other self, and loves him with [...] immense humility and discretion and reserve and reverence”. (WD 18) Hospitality of the heart is an important way of love. Indeed, Merton suggests it is an important way *God’s* love enters the world. In

the August, 1967 “Letter on the Contemplative Life” he writes “we exist solely [...] to be the place He [God] has chosen for His presence, His manifestation in the world, His epiphany.” “It is my love for my lover, my child, my brother, that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself. Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty.” (MJ 172)

The marginal person is the host who invites the stranger in and whose very self offers sustenance and healing *because the hospitable person is a conduit of God’s love to the world*. Writing in *Thoughts in Solitude* about “the mystery of our vocation”, Merton said exactly this. It is “not that we cease to be men in order to become angels [...] but that the love of my man’s heart can become God’s love for God and men, and my human tears can fall from my eyes as the tears of God [...] We can go out to them [...] loving them with something of the purity and gentleness and hiddenness [sic] of God’s love for us.”¹¹ In closing this section of *Thoughts in Solitude* Merton explicitly links this hospitality of heart with marginality: “This is the true fruit and the true purpose of Christian solitude.” (TS 124)

Merton’s language of hospitality and household remind one of St. Paul’s frequent use of household and domestic metaphors to describe both the Christian community and Christians’ relationships to each other. Merton’s idea is similar. Knowing we are “guests of God”, we respond to God as good guests, enter, and then, paradoxically, invite God into our hearts. (Jesus *did* say, “Behold I stand at the door and knock.” Rev. 3:20) Then, as Merton so amazingly puts it “we all become doors and windows through which God shines back into His own house.” (NSC 67) We become “lights of the world.” (Matt. 5:14, and see 5:16) And this can happen because, as Merton wrote in *New Seeds*, God has already come down from heaven and found us. (NSC 39)

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11 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Noonday, 1977) 123-124. Hereafter in the text TS.

A chosen marginal stance or attitude puts one “at the fringe” not only of society, but of domestic and familial life. It is not only the “family” towards which one must manifest the radical hospitality of the open heart, but toward everybody. As God’s guests, we become the world’s hosts, inviting them all in. Marginality leads to hospitality which makes of us doors and windows through which God’s light can illuminate this darkening time.

Conclusion

Merton profoundly understood that in our complex world, we are all guilty bystanders. But this positions us to be agents of healing in an ailing age. Having recognized and confessed our guilt, having taken it on and then put it down if you will, the “scales have fallen from our eyes.”¹² We see reality much more clearly. We become bystanders who have two gifts to offer: our marginality and our hospitality.

No longer embroiled *in* the processes and procedures of “the world” (which, of course, includes ecclesial institutions), we see that world more clearly. What we see is basically a world operating on models of scarcity, and therefore acting with anxiety and fear which lead to inhospitality. But, the bystander has come to realize, as Merton wrote in his letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, that “God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the *voice of the stranger*.” (Italics in the original.) “God must be allowed the right to speak unpredictably.” “We must find him in our enemy, or we may lose him even in our friend.”¹³

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12 Guilt is a burden Christ’s Cross lifts from the Christian.

13 *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (NY: New Directions, 1977) 384. Hereafter in the text CP.

Thus the gift of marginality leads inexorably to the gift of hospitality. The marginal person sees what Merton called the “desperate need for reconciliation with God in and through reconciliation with his brother.” (CMP 143, italics in the original) Reconciliation can occur when someone chooses hospitality and openness over suspicion and fear, when someone chooses to “invite the other in.” Just as the inward way of prayer inevitably leads outward, the *raison d'être* of Christian marginality is opening to the other, radical hospitality, especially hospitality of heart.

I do not know what Merton might suggest hinders such hospitality, but I suspect it might involve two attitudes. The first he called “an activist spirit” which “seeks to evade the deep inner demands and challenges of the Christian life in personal confrontation with God.” (CMP 143) Marginality is a fruit of the contemplation and prayer which must be priorities for bystanders. Action must proceed from contemplation and prayer if it is to be healing. The second hindrance is related. It is the sense that all this is *our* work rather than God’s work in and through us. “We must”, Merton wrote in *New Seeds*, “live by the strength of an apparent emptiness that is always truly empty and yet never fails to support us at every moment.” (NSC 62) “None of this can be achieved by any effort of my own”, (NSC 63) Merton continued, but God Who “utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself” (NSC 37) can transform our guilt into gifted bystanding when we realize that our “life is a listening. His is a speaking.” (TS 74)

Lines from Merton’s poem “The Quickening of St. John the Baptist” describe with great precision and beauty the role of the guilty bystanders in the cosmos and in God’s plan:

*We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
With ears attending to the skies we cannot understand:
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world’s frontier. (CP 201)*

A “far frontier” is a marginal place, “a place between” that bridges others. We guilty bystanders have been planted precisely there. Passive voice. It was something done to us. We choose marginality, to be guilty bystanders, and then are planted to watch, to perceive, to be vigilant, to be hospitable to those who find themselves with us, and to invite others to join our marginality for the sake of healing the whole.

Overcoming Dualism – Unifying Experiences in Thomas Merton’s Dream Life



Dedicated to my beloved and venerated mentor
and friend, Richard Rohr

Thomas Merton was a wide-awake and enormously productive “guilty bystander”, an observer and commentator of the daily events in the *outside world*, a prophet and visionary.¹ At the same time, he was someone who explored the *inner world*, carefully recording and competently interpreting his own (and sometimes others’) dreams. In daytime, he also had mystical and clairvoyant experiences once in a while that softened and healed his inner turmoil, because in those moments he experienced himself, God, and the world as being one.

Groundbreaking was such an experience in 1958. On March 18 that year, during a visit to Louisville in order to run some errands, Merton has a central vision which dissolves his inner tension between monastic life and contemporaneity in the “world” once and for all. It marks the threshold to his last ten years of life so to speak, during which his conscience, with his striving for wholeness and totality, should shift several times and gradually leave many kinds of dualism behind:

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1 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Gethsemani/Kentucky 1965; New York/New York, 2014

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness [...] This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.²

This experience turns Merton's earlier concept of a specially blessed monastic lifestyle upside down. Nevertheless, he remains a monk by giving his call a new interpretation: this experience of human unity makes him a representative for *all* people. No wonder it happens neither at church nor in his hermitage, but in the middle of the bustle of the big city. However, it does not lead him into political activism as some of his politically engaged friends would have wished for, but back into his new and more deeply understood loneliness.

Dreams and archetypes

This experience is a kind of biographical colon. What follows in Merton's biography is the consequent overcoming a series of dualisms: first of all the polar opposition between male and female, and, in his last years, the contrast between Christian and Eastern spiritual ways. At the end, there is also the encounter with the divine (inner) child as one of the symbols of the True Self. This development manifests itself in Merton's dreams. He entrusts many of them to his diaries – with precise perception of even the finest nuances.

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2 *Conjectures*, 153-154.

Dreams play a prominent role in the Hebrew and Greek Bible. Just think of the dream of the patriarch Jacob of the stairway to heaven (Genesis chapter 28) or the dreams and dream interpretations of his son Joseph (Genesis chapters 37, 40 and 41). In the book of Job, dreams at one time are considered “the second language of God”³. The Hebrew wisdom literature sheds light on the idea that dreams serve our healing and becoming whole.

In the New Testament, God reveals himself through dreams to Joseph, the husband of Mary, and to the magi from the East (Matthew chapters 1 and 2). Pilate’s wife, because of a nightmare, wants to prevent her husband from putting Jesus, the “righteous one”, to death (Matthew 27:19). Peter and Paul are motivated by striking dreams to take new steps (Acts chapter 10 and 11: Peter through a dream overcomes the dualism between “pure” and “unclean”; Acts 16:9f. Because of a nocturnal vision, Paul dares to take the missionary step to Macedonia and thus to Europe). Dreams broaden horizons and prepare for developments and ever fuller integration.

However, there is no lack of warnings in the Hebrew Bible against paying *too* much gullible attention to each and every dream, or misusing them to underpin one’s own ego agenda. In Jeremiah 23:28, for instance, the prophet warns in the name of God about the false prophets who call upon dreams to flatter the rulers: “A prophet who has dreams, let him tell dreams; but whoever has My Word may preach My Word rightly.” Dealing with dreams needs a lot of “discernment of the spirits”!

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3 “God does speak - now one way, now a second way - though no one perceives it. In dreams, in nightly visions, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn them from wrongdoing and keep them from pride, to preserve them from the pit, their lives from perishing.” (Job 33:14-18).

The late US Benedictine nun Suzanne Zuercher, a clinical psychologist and a teacher of the Enneagram, compared dreams with photo negatives saying that whatever is light and in the center at daytime consciousness becomes dark in our dreams; the things we are rather unconscious of, however, become visible and call for our mindful attention.⁴ Paying attention to our dreams is first of all “shadow work” by overcoming the gap between our daytime self-image and “the other side” of ourselves that we tend to avoid.

Merton’s dream interpretations are reminiscent of Carl Gustav Jung’s approach. For C. G. Jung, most dreams serve to process the day that has gone. Additionally, Jung names “great”, archetypal, precognitive, repetitive, lucid and compensatory dreams. Merton interprets his own and other peoples’ dreams intuitively rather than methodically. Looking at his dream notes, however, one can say that his own dreams are outstanding examples of the manifestations of “archetypes”, especially the “anima” described by Jung.

For Jung, archetypes are basic structures of the collective human psyche. They are *a priori* and independent of any epochal and cultural formation. They exist in all human beings, and show themselves primarily in concrete dream images (and in many fairy tales), even though the details of those images may vary individually and culturally.⁵ The archetype of the shadow (not conscious or repressed soul parts), for example, can show

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4 See Suzanne Zuercher, *Using the Enneagram in Prayer*. Out of print; German edition: *Ankommen im Einssein: Beten mit dem Enneagramm*, Munich 2009, 60. Suzanne Zuercher has also written a short biography of Thomas Merton as a “typical” Enneagram FOUR personality. The Enneagram is a psychological-spiritual typology describing nine basic patterns of human motivations and behaviour. Suzanne Zuercher, *Merton: An Enneagram Profile*, Indiana, 1969. See also Rohr’s and Ebert’s description of pattern FOUR in Thomas Merton: Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective*, New York 2001, 113f.

5 Compare Carl Gustav Jung: *Aion: Beiträge zur Symbolik des Selbst*. In: *Gesammelte Werke* 9/2, § 13.

itself as an emergence of a “dark double” or enemy. “Anima” and “animus” refer to opposite-sex parts and areas inside the soul of a man or of a woman. In dreams, Anima and Animus can appear bright and life-promoting but also dark and destructive. Archetypal symbols of the anima are, for example, the (inaccessible) ideal lover or – as in Merton’s anima dreams – *Sophia* (divine wisdom). The archetype of the “Self” is the center of the psyche, encompassing ego awareness as well as the unconscious, and representing the totality of the human soul. One sub-aspect of the Self that emerges toward the end of Merton’s life, especially in one of his “great dreams”, is the “Divine Child”.⁶

“Proverb”: Merton’s Anima

Shortly before his central vision in Louisville, Merton’s anima dreams begin to become prominent, dreams where female figures turn into signposts inviting him to grow. Each of these dreams marks a new level of transformation and integration.

As a young monk, Merton had developed a deep Marian devotion. His own stern mother had died when he was seven. The lack of maternal love had led him to grueling doubts regarding his own lovability and ability to love. But such a devotion to the Mother of God was overlaid by dogmatic theories such as the Immaculate Conception or the physical assumption of Mary into heaven, and therefore could only be a first step of healing the feminine in Merton. In his dreams, Mary is increasingly transformed into an aspect of the *Hagia Sophia*, the Holy Wisdom, the eternal feminine.

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6 Carl Gustav Jung: *Aion: Beiträge zur Symbolik des Selbst*. In: *Gesammelte Werke* 9/2, §§ 43-126 and 287-418

On February 28, 1958, just before the mystical vision in Louisville, Merton has the first of his “Proverb” dreams. It takes him to one of the places of his childhood, to Douglaston/Queens, where his mother’s parents had lived:

*On a porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let me go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect “She belongs to the same race as St. Anne.” I ask her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it – perhaps others have mocked her for it.*⁷

The porch is the traditional place of dating for (young) couples in the USA. At the same time, it is the threshold to the house. The embrace of Merton by the young Jewish girl of 14 years is not primarily sexually connoted, but (in Jung’s terminology) an internal junction of the male and the female principle. The girl is called Proverb, “word of wisdom”. This is an indicator that she manifests a specific aspect of the *Hagia Sophia*, Divine Wisdom, who is an emanation of God playing before the Creator from the beginning of the world.⁸

Proverb is to become Merton’s spiritual guide in the following years. The fact that she does not like her name might indicate that initially there are

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7 Thomas Merton, *A Search For Solitude*, Merton Journals Vol. III, 176.

8 “The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. When there were no watery depths, I was given birth, when there were no springs overflowing with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.” (Proverbs 8:22-31)

still some elements of rejection of the feminine and the Jewish in Merton. We must recall that all “objects” and persons in a dream are first of all aspects and personifications of certain parts of the dreamer’s personality. The dreamer then recalls that Proverb belongs to the same “race” (sic!) as Saint Anne, the legendary grandmother of Jesus, whom Merton particularly venerated. Note that this dream is located on the threshold of the house of Merton’s own grandmother. Even more remarkably, the virgin Mary was a Jewish girl and probably not much older than 14 when she received Jesus. She also was a “proverb”, a manifestation of the eternal wisdom of God, Sophia. Proverb in Merton’s dreams represents the human side of the Mother of God. Merton, soon after this dream, begins to write letters to his dream girl, Proverb. The first of these letters dates from March 4, 1958, four days after the dream itself had occurred:

How grateful I am to you for loving in me something which I thought I had entirely lost, and someone who, I thought, I had long ago ceased to be. And in you, dear, though some people might be tempted to say you don’t even exist, there is a reality as real and as wonderful and as precious as life itself [...] I think what I most want to say is that I treasure, in you, the revelation of your virginal solitude. In your marvelous, innocent, love you are utterly alone: yet you have given your love to me [...] Dearest Proverb, I love your name, its mystery, its simplicity and its secret, which even you yourself seem not to appreciate.⁹

This dream marks Merton’s growing willingness to accept and integrate the female, something his “hard” mother had prevented him from doing. Proverb’s “virginal solitude” once again brings to mind the young Jewish girl Miriam/Mary. Merton had probably initiated the integration of the virginal anima Mary long ago when he entered the Trappist mo-

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9 Thomas Merton, *A Search For Solitude*, Merton Journals Vol. III, 176.

nastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani and chose Mary as his second name as many Trappist monks used to do.

With a more conscious openness for his own female side, the older Merton is transforming from a world-denying heroic ascetic to a more serene “Mensch” and human being. Monk becomes man – and thus follows in the footsteps of God, who did not despise the world, but loved humanity and took on human flesh himself. A graffiti of the 1980s put it this way: “Do like God, become human!” The Proverb dreams and the Louisville experience unleash *joie de vivre* and an enormous creativity in Merton. In his last letter to Proverb, he writes on March 19, 1958:

I have kept one promise and I have refrained from speaking of you until seeing you again. I knew that when I saw you again it would be very different, in a different place, in a different form, in the most unexpected circumstances. I shall never forget our meeting yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and Truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child, sent to me by God.¹⁰

How this reunion happened, we cannot be sure – ether in other dreams not recorded or in encounters with women in Louisville. Shortly after his dream, Merton visits his painter friend Victor Hammer and is deeply captivated by a triptych Hammer has painted, depicting the coronation of a young man by a young woman. After this stirring experience he writes to Hammer: The “feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of the creative realization of the glory of the Father ...”¹¹ This picture becomes the impetus for his own four-part poem *Hagia Sophia*, which is dedicated to the canonical hour prayers of Lauds, Prime, Terce, and Compline, and at the same time to the Blessed Mother, to Holy Wisdom and to the Eternal Female. At Pentecost 1961, this cycle is fi-

10 Thomas Merton, *A Search For Solitude*, Merton Journals Vol. III, 182.

11 Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Boston 1984), 312.

nally completed. The first part (“Dawn: The Hour of Lauds”) contains what seems to be a clairvoyant vision of what Merton would experience in reality eight years later, in March 1966, through his encounter with the young nurse, Margie Smith:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom [...] This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom. I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity. Let us suppose I am a man lying asleep in a hospital [...] At five-thirty in the morning I am dreaming in a very quiet room when a soft voice awakens me from my dream [...]. It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth [...] In the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of Spirit.¹²

The second part (“Early Morning. The Hour of Prime”) describes Holy Wisdom as the incarcerated and silenced inner child:

[...] We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people, and who says nothing. She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner. Not that she is strong, or clever, but simply that she does not understand imprisonment.[...] All that is sweet in her tenderness will speak to him on all sides in everything, without ceasing, and he will never be the same again. He will have awakened not to conquest and dark pleasure but to the impeccable pure simplicity of One consciousness in all and through all: one Wisdom, one Child, one Meaning, one Sister.

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12 Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, mimeographed Typescript, Gethsemani/KY, 1962, without page numbers. Also see: <https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2013/08/16/poetry-hagia-sophia-by-thomas-merton/>.

In the third part of the cycle, the reference, albeit indirect, to Lady Julian of Norwich, is notable. The 14th-century English recluse and visionary was the first one to refer to Jesus as “our mother”. She increasingly becomes Merton’s favorite saint, replacing the manly hero and saint of his young years, John of the Cross.¹³ Her message is love, a paternal-maternal God, who turns towards us unconditionally and mercifully – and nothing else. Lady Julian’s conclusion is more and more shared by Merton himself: “Everything will be well. And every manner of things will be well!”¹⁴ This trusting in the Happy End of everything can be found between the lines of the third passage (“High Morning. The Hour of Tierce”) of “Hagia Sophia”:

The Sun burns in the sky like the Face of God, but we do not know his countenance as terrible. His light is diffused in the air and the light of God is diffused by Hagia Sophia. [...] All the perfections of created things are also in God; and therefore He is at once Father and Mother: As Father He stands in solitary might surrounded by darkness. As Mother His shining is diffused, embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light. The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia. We call her His “glory.” In Sophia His power is experienced only as mercy and as love. (When the recluses of fourteenth-century England heard their Church Bells and looked out upon the wolds and fens under a kind sky, they spoke in their hearts to “Jesus our Mother.” It was Sophia that had awakened in their childlike hearts.)¹⁵

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13 Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, New York 1994, 4.

14 In *Conjectures* Merton writes about Julian: “One of her most telling and central convictions is her orientation to what one might call an eschatological secret, the hidden dynamism which is at work already [...] Actually her life was lived in the belief in this “secret”, the “great deed” that the Lord will do on the Last day, not a deed of destruction and revenge, but of mercy and of life, all partial expectations will be exploded and everything will be made right.”, *Conjectures*, 210.

15 Hagia Sophia

Finally, at sunset, in the fourth and final part of the cycle, in the hour of compline, the “Salve Regina” is heard, praising the heavenly Queen. Mary is for Merton “a personal manifestation of Sophia”. She is

*“not a Creator, and not a Redeemer; but perfect Creature, perfectly redeemed [...] It is she, it is Mary, Sophia, who in sadness and joy [...] sets upon the Second Person, the Logos, a crown which is His Human Nature [...] She crowns Him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty.”*¹⁶

Almost three years after the final draft of the Sophia poem, on March 10, 1964, one of Thomas Merton’s dreams reveals another aspect of Merton’s weak and wounded anima:

*Last night I dreamed that a distinguished Lady Latinist came to give a talk to the novices on St. Bernard. Instead of a lecture, she sang in Latin meters, flexes and puncta [...] The novices were restive and giggled. This made me sad. In the middle of the performance the late abbot Dom Frederic, solemnly entered. We all stood. The singing was interrupted [...] Where did she come from, he asked. “Harvard”, I said in a stage whisper which she must have heard. Then the novices were all on a big semi, loaded on the elevator, I don't know how, to go down from the top of the building. Instead of the Latinist coming on the elevator, I left the novices and escorted her down safely by the stairs: but now her clothes were all soiled and torn. She was confused and sad. She had no Latin and nothing much to say. I wonder what this dream is about. Is it about the Church? Is it about the liturgical revival ...*¹⁷

16 Hagia Sophia

17 Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, Merton Journals, Vol. V, 89.

Indeed. Maybe the lady represents the old and venerable Roman Church before Vatican II. Merton himself loved the Latin liturgy. Until the end of his life he read the breviary in Latin, although in principle he affirmed most liturgical innovations. The tension between tradition and modernism is a permanent split in the Roman Church up until today. Merton experienced this tension in himself and suffered from it. He did not really succeed in overcoming *this* dualism. The late abbot represents a rigid, formalistic tradition that has no future. The singing Lady teacher, however, represents the mystical *soul* of tradition. The novices have lost touch with both aspects of tradition, giggling and crowding the “modern” elevator. Merton cannot integrate the Latinist Lady into the community, reconcile tradition and present. He leads the stained and ragged lady down the stairs and is a witness of the decline of both, tradition and modernity at the same time.¹⁸

Half a year later the face of his anima changes again. On November 19, 1964, Merton dreams of a Chinese princess:

Last night I had a haunting dream of a Chinese princess which stayed with me all day. (“Proverb” again) [...] This time she was with her “brothers”, and I felt overwhelmingly the freshness, the youth, the wonder, the truth of her; her complete reality, more real than any other, yet unobtainable. Yet I deeply felt the sense of her understanding, knowing and loving me, in my depths – not merely in my individuality and everyday self, yet not as if this self were utterly irrelevant to her. (Not rejected, not accepted either.)¹⁹

This dream probably marks Merton’s growing fascination for the spirituality of the Far East, especially for (originally Chinese) Zen Bud-

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18 See also: Thomas Waldron, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton*, New York/Mahwah 2011, 89ff.

19 Merton, *A Vow of Conversation*, New York 1988, 101.

dhism. By 1962, Merton had begun to learn Chinese. Towards the end of his life, his soul is ready to overcome the dualism between West and East, Christianity and Buddhism. He corresponded with several spiritual teachers of the East. In this dream, he meets his Eastern anima, which again vitalizes him and invites him to continue to grow and mature while remaining creative and alive.

Merton's last anima dream, on February 4, 1965, deals with the Mother archetype. Any access to "the mother" was blocked in Merton for a long time – or exclusively projected onto Mother Mary.

Last night I had a curious and moving dream about a "black mother." I was in a place somewhere I had been as a child [...] I realized that I had come there for a reunion with a Negro foster mother whom I had loved in my childhood in the dream. Indeed it seemed, in the dream, that I owed my life to her [...], as if from her had come a new life [...] and what I recognized was not her face but the warmth of her embrace and of her heart, so to speak. Then we danced a little together, I and my black mother.

Merton meets in the dream a fictional black foster mother, which he never really had, but who had loved him in his dream consciousness more than his real mother. Her face is ugly and as stern as his mother's, but warmth flows from her. Both hug and dance. The key is a mutual affection.

The message of Merton's Anima dreams is integrative. It's about the ever-expanding unity that Julian of Norwich had called "oneing". With the Jewish girl, Proverb, it is the abolition of the Christian-Jewish and the male-female split, with the "Lady Latinist" it is the struggle for the reconciliation and integration of tradition and modernity in the church. The Chinese girl stands for the wedding of West and East. The black mother might represent the overcoming of racism, and is also an invitation

to reconcile with the archetypal Mother. The black mother allows him to look beyond her ugly and stern facade. Merton feels warmth and affection, a love that presumably also lived in the heart of his physical mother, but which she had not been able to express.

The peak of Merton's anima integration is obviously the very real love between him and the young nurse Margie Smith, whom he met during one of his numerous hospital stays. Never before had Merton experienced such overwhelming love. This applies to the affairs of his early youth, including the woman with whom he had probably fathered a child he had never really cared for. Merton foreshadowed his love with M. in his Hagia Sophia cycle. The undeniable love for the young woman and her love for him awaken his creativity, vitality, and art of poetry. Love animates and confuses him. He would love to spend the rest of his life with M., but he is a celibate monk and she is engaged to someone else. He breaks the rules of the order anyway, makes secret phone calls with her, meets her. All of this may be his final step to his own "incarnation". This love is not just spiritual and platonic; it is erotic. Yet Merton knows that this love will be "amputated" before it really starts. For months they both struggle to see if and how they can somehow live this love. In the end, Merton painfully chooses the path of staying celibate; after this encounter however his own doubts about his lovability and loveability cease once and for all.

Wedding of East and West

The last dreams that Merton has written down no longer deal with his anima. His anima integration has exceeded its zenith with his concrete and real encounter with love although the Anima stays present in some of his dreams. Merton's longing for the unification of Western and Eastern spirituality becomes more prominent than ever before. At the beginning of his trip to Asia, Merton noted on November 5, 1968:

Last night I dreamed that I was, temporarily, back at Gethsemani. I was dressed in a Buddhist monk's habit, but with more black and red and gold, a "Zen habit", in color more Tibetan than Zen [...] I met some women in the corridor, visitors and students of Asian religion, to whom I was explaining I was a kind of Zen monk and Gelugpa together, when I woke up.²⁰

In this dream, the synthesis of East and West becomes manifest. Merton has understood that God can be found in many ways, and Christianity is only one of them. Merton remains a Christian and a monk of Gethsemani, and is at the same time a Buddhist. Interestingly, it is women again, anima figures, who are his conversation partners – in the hallway of a men's monastery! On the 19th of November, exactly three weeks before Merton's death, another dream follows which also deals with the unification of East and West:

Last night I had a curious dream about Kanchenjunga. I was looking at the mountain and I was pure white, absolutely pure, especially the peaks that lie to the west [...] And I heard a voice saying – or got the clear idea of: "There is another side to the mountain." I realized that it was turned around and everything was lined up differently; I was seeing it from the Tibetan side [...] There is another side of Kanchenjunga and every mountain – the side that has never been photographed and turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing.²¹

Here, again, the integration of opposites occurs. The invisible shadow side of things is the only side that is worth seeing. But it cannot be photographed and sold to tourists. Regarding Merton's analysis of Eastern re-

20 Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, Journals Vol. VII, 255. The Gelug School is the youngest of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

21 Journals VII, 284. Kanchenjunga is the third highest mountain on earth in the border region of Tibet.

ligiosity, this also means that in order to understand the whole, we must look at it from the unknown side, in this case from the eastern side.

The Divine Child and the Self

The “Inner Child” or the “Divine Child” are for Carl Gustav Jung sub-archetypes of the “Self”. At the beginning of his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton reflects on a dream of the famous Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth. Several times Merton has dealt with Barth’s world of ideas which in many ways was alien to his own views. Whether Barth was familiar with the world of Thomas Merton must be doubted. He never quoted or mentioned him. This dream seems to have been so important to Merton that he at a time wanted to call his entire book “Barth’s Dream”. Both, Barth and Merton, died in 1968 on the very same day, December 10: two of the greatest, yet very different teachers of Christian religion in the 20th century. This dream and its interpretation seem to say at least as much about Merton as about Barth:

Karl Barth had a dream about Mozart. Barth had always been piqued by the Catholicism of Mozart, and by Mozart’s rejection of Protestantism. For Mozart said that “Protestantism was all in the head” and that “Protestants did not know the meaning of the Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi.” Barth, in his dream, was appointed to examine Mozart in theology. He wanted to make the examination as favorable as possible, and in his questions he alluded pointedly to Mozart’s Masses. But Mozart did not answer a word.²²

The dream touches Thomas Merton. It seems to concern salvation, Barth’s salvation, and his own. Barth loved and revered Mozart. He

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22 *Conjectures*, 3.

could only begin his daily theological work after listening to Mozart music. Mozart, for Merton, embodies love, no abstract theological *Agape*, but *Eros*. Barth himself, who was actually averse to C. G. Jung's theory of archetypes, saw in Mozart a child, a "divine" child at work. The prodigy Mozart was never allowed to be a real child. But his playful and lustful "soul child" was very alive. Merton ends his dream interpretation:

Fear not, Karl Barth! Trust in the divine mercy. Though you have grown up to become a theologian, Christ remains a child in you. Your books (and mine) matter less than we might think! There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation.

Without a lively contact with our inner child there is no wholeness and no self-realization possible. God became human as a baby child, and Jesus invites his disciples to become like children. This does not contradict Paul's statement of leaving childish naivité behind to become an adult ("When I was a child, I talked like a child. I thought like a child. I had the understanding of a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." 1 Corinthians 13:11), but it is another unification of opposites and the overcoming of the dualism between old and young (as in his first letter to "Proverb", Merton said he was not troubled by the age difference between her and himself). "The child is father of the man", as Wordsworth says in his famous poem, "The Rainbow". Union with the Divine Child is the goal and completion of becoming who we really are, our true selves.

Already in the early 1960s, Merton had a "Great Dream", pointing at the end and fulfillment of his own life. The dream is about the feast of the divine child in the human soul. In 1989, Melvyn Matthews dedicated a whole monograph to this one important dream.²³ It is a surreal account

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23 Melvyn Matthews, *The Hidden Journey: Reflections On a Dream of Thomas Merton*, 1989.

of being invited to a party, which turns out to be far across water, such that Merton needs to travel by boat. The feast is far away, and the way is arduous. Merton needs to cross the water that separates the visible sphere from the yet invisible world. The cruise cannot be bought with money, be it many dollars or francs, the currency that symbolizes Merton's childhood in France. There is no yacht from here to there; at best only a fishing boat. But even that cannot be moved at first. Merton suddenly realizes that he has to swim himself. There is no highway to heaven!

And I am swimming ahead in the beautiful magic water of the bay. From the clear depths of the water comes a wonderful life to which I am not entitled, a life and a power which I both love and fear. I know that by diving down into the water I can find wonders and joys, but that it is not for me to dive down; rather I must go to the other side; and I am indeed swimming to the other side. The other side is there. The end of the swim. The house is on the shore [...]. And I have arrived. I am out of the water. [...] I know the child will come, and He comes. The child comes and smiles. It is the smile of a Great One, hidden. He gives to me, in simplicity, two pieces of buttered white bread, the ritual and hieratic meal given to all who come to stay.²⁴

The dream points to Merton's completion. It is a "Great Dream", which at the same time has individual and collective significance. Everything that has made Merton's life livable and loveable, does not count anymore. The water is magical, wonderful and tempting. But this depth is not meant for the dreamer. He has a predetermined destination: the opposite shore. The wondrous and almost magical energy of the water carries him there. Before he reaches the place of the celebration and before the child comes he must play with a dog. The dog represents the instinctual, the savage, lust and passion, that needs to be tamed and integrated in a

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24 *Conjectures*, 22f.

playful way. Only then can and will the child come. And He comes. Note the capital H! He is the divine child and at the same time an “old soul” with the hidden smile of a Great One. Another dualism to be bridged! Without saying a word the child serves his guest the Eucharistic yet ordinary gift of buttered white bread. The positive symbol of butter stands for vitality and success, maybe for everything that is summarized in the biblical Hebrew word “Shalom!”. This ritual is the ticket to the feast for those who “came to stay”. A return trip is not planned. This feast is the end and completion of Merton’s life, and the invitation to this feast applies to him and to all people: “I have arrived!”

Awakening from Barth's Dream

Endings and Beginnings

Fifty years ago, on 10 December 1968, Thomas Merton was killed by electricity, on the margins of a war zone in South East Asia. The sudden end of a story, in one way at least. In another way, Merton continues to be present to readers in ways that he has always been present, conjured from literature and audio recordings and visual art and endless recollections.

Twenty years earlier, in 1948 Merton entered the limelight by publishing into a Cold War world an early version of the beginnings of the story – the beginning of his life, and the beginning of his monastic life. That story has often been re-told from the beginning:

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born.¹

And so it began, according to Merton. But how might things seem if we enter the story near the end rather than the beginning?

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1 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 3.

In 1966, Merton was in his hermitage, writing and publishing some of his most vivid and memorable work. The recent passing of his 50th birthday seems to have prompted Merton's reflecting not only on his past, but also on his legacy for future readers. Occasionally he had premonitions that he would not live into old age. He clearly had no intention of slowing down; in fact, the author and his publishers seemed to be working with some urgency. In August 1965 Merton had resigned as Novice Master and taken up full-time residence at the hermitage. In September, "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air" was published in the *New Blackfriars* journal. In October "Truth and Crisis: Pages from a Monastic Notebook" was published in *Gandhi Marg*. In November, "Few Questions and Fewer Answers: Extracts from a Monastic Notebook" was published in *Harper's Magazine*. There were other publications in between, but what connects these particular pieces is that each was a foretaste of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which would be published by Doubleday in November 1966. In August of that year, extracts from *Conjectures* appeared in *Life* magazine, a few days before *Raids on the Unspeakable* was published by New Directions.

Several people, including Merton's secretary, Br. Patrick Hart, tell us that *Conjectures* is as good a place as any to begin to get to know Merton. The end rather than at the beginning. A creative re-working of journal material going back to 1956, the draft title for a long while was *Barth's Dream*. A year before it was published, in November 1965, Merton noted in his journal that they had dropped the "Barth's Dream" title in favour of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. The first of its five sections, however, is still called "Barth's Dream"

The dream to which Merton was referring had been briefly mentioned by Karl Barth in a Christmas message of 1955, a response to an invita-

tion to write for a newspaper a “letter of thanks to Mozart”.² Barth recalled that, in the dream, he was supposed to examine Mozart (he knew not why), but his questions about dogmatics were met with silence. He was mystified about Mozart’s Catholicism; wanting to help him along, but receiving no answer. Barth loved Mozart, began each day listening to recordings of him before setting about his work on the *Church Dogmatics*.³ In the dream, Mozart had nothing to say – except what he has already said through music.

Merton was captivated by this story from Barth. So captivated, in fact, that he opened *Conjectures* with reflections on Barth’s recollection of the dream, blended with other comments by Barth about the child-like nature of Mozart, or the child who speaks to us through his music.⁴ Merton’s reflection ends with the observation that the inner child can save, where no amount of writing can save either Barth or Merton. “I was deeply moved by Barth’s account of this dream”, writes Merton.

*The dream concerns his salvation, and Barth perhaps is striving to admit that he will be saved more by the Mozart in himself than by his theology.*⁵

Barth recalls that it “has been said that it is a child (a “divine” child to be sure), the “eternal youth”, who speaks to us in his music”.⁶ Merton suggests that Barth was seeking to awaken “the hidden sophianic Mozart in himself, the central wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even by eros” and not just the “mo-

2 Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. by Clarence K. Pott (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 19.

3 Barth, *Mozart*, 16.

4 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

5 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), 10.

6 Barth, *Mozart*, p. 29 is part of ‘Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’ from the *Zwingli-Kalender* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1956).

re stern, more cerebral agape” which “is not in our own heart but only in God and revealed only to our head”.⁷ Eros is passion – and play.

My first impressions, when reading of a divine child speaking to Barth through Mozart’s music, were of playfulness breaking through, or breaking into, the serious business of composing or of writing. Perhaps we imagine Mozart being silly, free – irresponsible? Barth muses that such impressions arise because of the “sad brevity” of Mozart’s life, and “perhaps also the undeniable naiveté with which he conducted all practical affairs (according to his sharply critical sister, it became particularly evident on the occasion of his marriage and certainly in financial matters).”⁸

Then there were “the pranks and nonsense in which he indulged in his conversations and especially in his letters even during his final days”.⁹ Barth tells us that reliable accounts indicate that these behaviours happened most often when Mozart was hardest at work.¹⁰

In the opening pages of *Conjectures*, Merton makes no mention of playfulness or silliness at all. Rather, we are reminded that Mozart “was never allowed to be a child in the literal meaning of that word”¹¹ (What is the literal meaning of that word?) He was a child prodigy, a genius performing even as an infant. Yet, Merton picks up from Barth, Mozart was always a child “in the higher meaning of that word”.¹²

He does not say what that higher meaning is, but even to talk in this way about different levels of the meaning of “child” may lead back to the

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7 *Conjectures*, 10.

8 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

9 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

10 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

11 Cited by Merton in *Conjectures*, 10-11.

12 *Conjectures*, 11.

world of abstraction and organising, and distance the intellectual from the thing encountered through Mozart. One way to lose touch with the child is to theorise her or him. Barth moves in a more fruitful direction, however, as he ponders the idea that a divine child speaks to us through Mozart's music. He reflects on how Mozart

while truly mastering his craft and always striving toward greater refinement, nevertheless manages never to burden his listeners – especially not with his creative labors! Rather, he always allows them to participate afresh in his free, let us now say “childlike”, play. [...] he is able “just as an innocent child to move us to smiles and tears at one and the same moment without our daring to ask how and why.”¹³

This is Barth writing about how the child continues to address us through Mozart. We can miss the child's voice by theorising her or him too quickly. We can also miss the child's voice by yielding to the idea that “rediscovering” the child's condition” has something to do with “the present adult me” having “some agreeable experiences of the kind I vaguely remember from my early years”¹⁴, as Rowan Williams puts it in the foreword to Fiona Gardner's book on Thomas Merton and the child mind:

Many people use a wide variety of techniques to attain this goal. But it is not the same, because it is a self-conscious quest for another satisfying experience. The true mind of the child is found in an emptying out of the self that collects nice experiences. The child mind is simply the mind that inhabits where and who and what it is, that lives in the world without the shadows of craving and fear and self-objectifying.¹⁵

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13 Barth, *Mozart*, 29-30.

14 Rowan Williams, Foreword in Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), ix-x (p. ix).

15 Williams, Foreword, ix