

Thomas Merton and the Stranger

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Make the stranger welcome and say something useful.

Evagrius Ponticus, *On Asceticism and Stillness*

You are longer strangers and sojourners,
but you are fellow citizens with the saints
and members of the household of God.

Ephesians 2:19

HAD THOMAS MERTON LIVED TO EDIT HIS JOURNALS COMPILED DURING this fateful pilgrimage to Asia I am reasonably certain he would not have called the finished product *An Asian Journal*. I say that with some confidence because Merton had a near genius for crafting brilliantly evocative titles for his books. Those titles almost always made a strategic, if sometimes, subtle point. In the case of *The Seven Storey Mountain* it was the strategy of allusion to that most monastic cantica of Dante's *Commedia* with its purgatorial cleansing of the seven deadly sins (or, more properly, the eight *logismoi* described and analyzed by Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian) accompanied by an increasing shedding of the *pondus* of those sins until one was ready to enter the edenic happiness of the earthly paradise—the symbol of the monastic life as the *paradisus claustralis*. Merton's title, in short, made a dense allusion to Dante's purgatorial journey in particular and, by extension, to Christian ascent literature in general. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* we catch both the social location of the one who conjectures and the incipient guilt of the one who does the watching from the edges; the bystander is a species of the stranger, a topic this

paper will soon make as a specific focus. Perhaps the most brilliant of his titles adorned one of the books with which he found the least satisfaction: *A Vow of Conversation*. In that title is a stunning play of words. Each monk takes a vow of 'conversion of manners' which becomes, in Benedict's curious Latin, *conversatio morum*. Benedict also tells us that the monk needs to cultivate a spirit of silence or, more properly, taciturnity (*taciturnitas*)—an economy of speech. Merton, however, struggled to gain the right to speak and write from the vantage point of the cloister. Hence, his title both alludes to a vow of conversion and a determination to speak—a determination which was the hallmark of his attempt to understand himself as a contemplative from the late 1950s on.

We know from the journals that Merton took care in choosing his titles and, before publication, tinkered with one possibility and another. We know, for instance, that books like *Thoughts in Solitude* and *Seeds of Contemplation* had working titles that were quite different from their final ones. We also know that certain titles, especially of the poetry, are allusive almost to the point of obscurity, as the published research parsing out the significance of *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* attest. Similarly, we are simply arrested by such eye catching titles as *Raids on the Unspeakable* or *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Who can resist the sly title of the 'Cold War Letters' in which, to the insider, the war is not so much between the Soviet Bloc and the West but between Merton and the superior general in Rome.

Which brings me to a consideration of the 1967 essay *Day of a Stranger* published first in the *Hudson Review*—a rather high brow American literary quarterly still alive today. This essay, first written in 1965 when Merton took up residence in his cinder block hermitage, has many characteristics of his writing in the period after the collection *Disputed Questions* (another brilliant title): observations about the world of nature; short imaginary snatches of interior dialogue; brief sketches of the quotidian round of eremitical life; a litany of literary figures; some moments of humor. Juxtapositions of "pious" Trappist tractors growling in the bottoms with the ominous SAC planes flying overhead with their metallic bodies pregnant with bombs.

There is no discernible narrative thread stitching together the essay as a whole. The piece is more like a mosaic, a collection of

quick strokes of a sketch, that aims to provide, in the end, a whole. It was the kind of writing Merton had come to love because it provided a formal vehicle for the conveyance of ideas and convictions that increasingly preoccupied him from the late 1950s on.

The very singular style of *Day of a Stranger* comes into sharper relief if one compares it to the account of another day or, more precisely, a single night in the life of the monk: the 'Fire Watch' epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* written two decades earlier. *Day of a Stranger* is set in the light; the 'Fire Watch' is a meditation on the night. The earlier piece is centered on the monastery and monastic life. Its energy derives from the old mystical *topos* of going down and going up (a leitmotif of the Book of Jonah itself) with its spiritual tone suffused with biblical and liturgical allusions.¹ By contrast, *Day of a Stranger* is horizontal, decentered with respect to the abbey, ironic, hip, and, in places, sly. Its major frame is not the long interval between Compline and Lauds as the community sleeps but between the intervals of arriving and again arriving SAC bombers which never seem to sleep. Its canopy is not the starlit sky embraced from a church tower but the blue sky crosshatched by ominous flying metallic birds.

The monk who wrote 'Fire Watch' was relatively young in the monastic life with the essay being an attempt to recapitulate his monastic life by indirection and reflection. 'Fire Watch' in particular and *The Sign of Jonas* in general is a profoundly and explicitly monastic book. The author of *Day of a Stranger* has had nearly a quarter a century of monastic experience behind him who now had embarked on a new life – or, better: a new stage of life – in the quiet of a hermitage. This mature monk calls himself a "stranger."

My question – and the question to which these reflections address themselves – is this: Who is the Stranger of Merton's title? And further: Stranger to what?

The concept of the stranger is one that carries with it mystery, danger, and possible grace. In an issue of a journal of myth and tradition devoted to the theme of the stranger, the editors noted that one role of the stranger is "to call us to a meeting at the border – the place between ourselves and the 'face of the sky' – where we might discover a kind of knowing that relates not only to place but also to time."²

We might then begin to answer the question: "Who is a stranger?"

We might start with the simple observation that in the bible every stranger (*peregrinus*) is an icon of Christ. In the great eschatological sermon in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35).³ More pertinently, for our purposes, we note that the *Rule of Benedict* (Chapter 53) cites that verse from Matthew in its advice on the reception and care of guests who, when they present themselves at the monastery, are to be "welcomed as Christ." The stranger, and hospitality provided to the stranger, is fundamental to monasticism since the stranger is always, in some deep fundamental fashion, the person of Christ. To be hospitable to the stranger is to be hospitable to Christ.

Was it not hospitality, in fact, that the young Thomas Merton experienced when he first approached the monastery to join his life to theirs? The young orphaned wanderer who bounced around France, New York, Bermuda, and England, in fact found his true home when he came to the Gethsemani guest house in December of 1941, as he makes clear in his description of being welcomed into the guest-house when he came to stay.

A curious paradox happens when one joins the monastic community especially if one was first a stranger, rather like the young Tom Merton, looking for a home. Such a stranger receives a welcome as if he were not a stranger but an icon of Christ but then becomes a stranger in a new fashion by the very act of receiving hospitality in the monastery. In that wonderfully titled chapter in the *Rule* named "Tools for Good Works" Benedict says that the monk, in the very act when he (or she) becomes a monk, makes himself a stranger to the ways of the world, putting Christ before all things.⁴ In that brief observation Benedict holds out a vision of the monastic life as a counter-cultural choice in which the monk not only flees the world but also, in that flight, passes judgment on his or her former way of life to embrace a new life—a conversion with its inevitable aversion. There is, in short, a kind of prophetic edge found in the laconic observation in the *Rule*.

Flight from the world (*Fuga mundi*) is a fundamental characteristic of all monasticism. Nonetheless, it is a notion that has a dialectical edge to it. The monk becomes a stranger to the world in a voluntary move and through a style of life but, simultaneously, must learn to love the world with a spirit of compassion and concern. Perhaps the

most emblematic example of that dialectic located between flight and concern is the Russian *staretz* who is defined both by his seclusion from the world in a strictly eremitical mode of life in order, in God's good time, to receive the world once again. To use the Russian formulation: the *staretz* "opens his doors" for the world. To put it briefly: monastic flight has, as its counter point, monastic hospitality—the reception of all as if they were Christ coming as stranger.

It may cut close to a banality to observe that the 1950s were a time when Merton tried to sort out and negotiate first for himself, and then with his superiors, how he was to live in flight from the world and yet have compassion for the world. What he most certainly came to see was that a monk could not shape his own culture and his own place in the monastery without regard for the culture in which he lived. If the early monastic tradition had to borrow Donatus on grammar and Cicero on friendship to aid their monastic formation, so the monk of the late modern period could not live a contemplative life wilfully ignorant of either the great masters of suspicions like Freud and Marx (or, at least, the culture they represented) or the valid insights of other contemplative religious traditions. Readers of the journals and books like *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* or the essays in *Contemplation in a World of Action* know all too well how burning this issue was for Merton.

By the late 1950s Merton had come to the firm conclusion that he had a vocation, as a contemplative monk, to speak from that vantage point on the burning issues of the day. The very fact that he had made that decision and began, despite obstacles from both within the Cistercian Order and without, put him in a position not unlike that once described by the theologian Paul Tillich: a person on the margins neither beholden to the traditional role of the monk nor part of the engaged activists who were inspired by the writer whom Merton studied and wrote about with such care: Albert Camus.

We may look back with a certain familiarity at Merton the writer on pacifism, race relations, the struggle for justice in Latin America and the protestor of cold war atomic policies but we do so because of our temptation to put such activists into a single class. However, such reductionism is beside the point. What we must recapture is the strangeness – the singularity – of a contemplative monk so engaged.

One could hardly imagine the kind of writings that Merton did coming from the pen of a Columba Marmion or a Hubert van Zeller or a Eugene Boylan, or even a Raymond Flanagan. Writers in the monastic milieu were expected to write about the life of prayer, not about the critique of social ills. The very topics to which Merton addressed himself shifted him, at least partially, from the central issues of monasticism traditionally understood.

In order for Merton to do the kind of writing that he did, given the seriousness with which he took his commitment to monastic life, he had to find some way to articulate his role as a person on the margins – the person who was a “guilty bystander” or one who launched “raids on the unspeakable” or brought up “disputed questions” – who fully engaged the problems of the world while still affirming himself as one who in the words I quoted earlier from the *Rule of Benedict* took up a life that made him a “stranger to the ways of the world.”

One place – among many – where Merton took up that issue of being a stranger to the world explicitly was in his preface to a Japanese translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. That introductory statement is justly famous as Merton spoke to an audience that knew little of Christianity in general, and monastic life in particular, about what he meant his life to say. Readers familiar with that classic text in which Merton saw his very life as a statement that both said NO to evil, terror, suppression and persecution while saying YES to all that is good and beautiful will also remember that the monk could only do this were he placed in a certain position *vis à vis* the world. Merton concludes with these words:

...for this ‘yes’ to be an assent of freedom and not of subjection, I must live so that no one of them [i.e. all the men and women of the world] may seem to belong to me, and that I may not belong to any of them. It is because I want to be more to them than a friend that I become, to all of them, a stranger.

Those words deserve some reflection.⁵ They could be read as an act of distance by one who lives in the abstract or in a life bereft of human contact but, given the wider reflections that Merton wrote about the role of solitude, monastic withdrawal, locating oneself on the margins for the sake of the contemplative life, it seems more proper to say that the very act of being a monk hermit demands, simultaneously, both distance and intimacy, with the former deriving

directly from the life of the monk itself, and the other flowing from that love which comes from embracing the life of contemplation. In other words, his statement is a kind of *apologia* for the monastic life not unlike that made in his exchange of letters with Rosemary Reuther. One should not elide too quickly over the reason for this state of being as an “assent of freedom and not of subjection” since it is that free YES that permits Merton from his solitude to extend love and concern by his writing, his prayer and his solidarity to the world of men and women.

It seems to me that the very compressed remarks Merton makes in that preface was prepared for in his earlier reflections on the meaning of solitude. In an early work like *Thoughts in Solitude* (1956) the emphasis may well be on self possession to avoid the illusions of the world, and the need to listen in silence for the Truth to emerge from nothingness, but the more Merton meditated on solitude the more he saw the solitary as one who lived in solitude in solidarity with all the people of the world. That shift in his thinking is most transparent in an essay which Merton himself thought to be one of his better efforts: ‘Philosophy of Solitude.’⁶ In that essay Merton consciously links the desire for solitude to the need to escape the illusions of mass society, blinding ideologies, and illusory materialism in order for the solitary to stand, as it were, prophetically against sin in the world in order, as Merton says, to disagree “with those who imagine that the call to diversion [Merton refers to Pascal’s *divertissement*] and self-deception is the voice of truth and who can summon the full authority of their prejudices to prove it.”

Merton saw the essays in *Disputed Questions* as a new way of writing and a new category of issues to be confronted from the perspective of his evolving understanding of his own monastic vocation. Central to that evolving perspective was plotting out where one stood (metaphorically and existentially) as his exchanges with people as diverse as Joan Baez, the folk singer, and Rosemary Reuther, the theologian, make clear: he did not, and could not, forsake his vocation for the role of the activist. He continued to examine the role of the person on the margin, the outsider, the stranger, and the solitary in relation to the great social issues of the day.

That ongoing evolution is patent when one considers the informal address⁷ that Merton gave in Calcutta a month before his death.

Speaking to a decidedly interreligious group connected to the Temple of Understanding, Merton focused on his understanding of the role of the monk in the contemporary world. In those remarks he describes the monk as a "marginal person," a "status-less person," a "strange" person, who is as "irrelevant" as the poet or the hippie or the prisoner. This marginal person goes through the "Great Doubt" precisely because the monk is a person of faith who must face the other side of faith, which is doubt. He sums up such a way of being as characteristic of those "people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk."

Now comes a bit of a paradox and it is this: if such people are faithful to their calling they discover at the deepest level possible not only communication but communion which is, in Merton's phrasing of it, "beyond words" and "beyond speech" and finally "beyond concepts." The paradox, of course, is that the very situation of marginality and strangeness brings at a deep level not alienation but communion. Although the language and the conceptual framework is quite different, the dynamic is not all that different from what entrance into the monastic way brings: one embraces monastic hospitality, which makes one alien to the world only to bring one to a sense of compassion for the world, just as marginality and lack of status brings a deep unity and not mere communication but communion.

One could not reflect on the stranger in Merton's thinking without making reference to his intense study of Albert Camus whom he refers to in passing in *A Day of a Stranger* as an "Algerian cenobite". Merton's study of Camus, a study which occupied a fair amount of his energies from the fall of 1966 through the following year, resulted in a monograph length series of essays.⁸ There are two reasons why Merton would have been attracted to Camus. First, Camus was an "outsider" in many ways: an Algerian by birth; a dissident as far as the orthodox existentialists (if that is the word) represented by Jean-Paul Sartre and the circle of *Les Temps Modernes* were concerned; a critic of Marxist orthodoxy while remaining a man of the Left.

Second, Merton had a profound respect for Francophone intellectual culture in general, and in particular he loved the

emphasis that Camus put on integrity, honesty, and on the demand for lucidity in the face of exigent realities in the world and in culture. Merton appreciated that Camus, unlike Sartre, was not one who set his face in stone against the claims of religious faith. Camus examined them, and not unlike Merton although from a vastly different perspective, demanded that believers not comfort themselves with illusions in the name of orthodoxy. Most of all, Camus demanded that people face up to the evil of the world and fight against it even though in their lucidity they knew that evil in this life would always be part of the fabric of existence.

What Thomas Merton learned from his study of Camus was that the person of authentic lucidity (how Merton loved that quintessentially existentialist word "lucidity"!) was one who went beyond the illusions of ideology and self-regard in order to live a life of authenticity. To do that, as Camus argued in works like *The Rebel* and *The Plague*, one had to stand apart from the temptations of the crowd and, more tellingly, from those who wished to direct the energies of the crowd. As Merton wrote (discussing *The Plague*): an ethic of such comprehension

is almost a monastic asceticism; it demands constant attention (compare the old monastic 'vigilance' and 'custody of the heart'). It is a monastic spirituality of exile because he who refuses to co-operate with the 'pestilence' which is part and parcel of every social establishment cannot be really accepted by that establishment.⁹

Such a life always put one in a state of tension with the majority. The tension involves being concerned with, but always somewhat apart from, the social majority. This was a theme that Merton also articulated in his essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' even though in that study it was the Romanian playwright Eugene Ionesco whose play *The Rhinoceros* became the the subject of his meditation. Merton, recalling the insights of the sixth century hermit Philoxenos (who saw the Christ of the desert taking on the loneliness and destitution of every person) remarked that today when regarding the loneliness and human alienation the "insights of a Philoxenos are to be sought less in the tracts of the theologians than in the meditations of the existentialists and in the theatre of the absurd."¹⁰

To trace the image of the Stranger we have followed a broad arc that moves from the *Rule of Benedict* through the experience(s) of Merton's own development as a monk to his life in the hermitage

and his quiet meetings with the mind of people like Albert Camus and Eugene Ionesco. The one constant in this trajectory is a certain tension or distance between the person who is the stranger and the world from which he or she is estranged. We have tried to parse out that distance in these pages.

What is left to do is to take one last look at the stranger as the one who comes and whom we meet in such a way that they are not only strangers but welcome guests. This is a very ancient theme in the sacred scriptures. It is the theme behind Abraham's hospitality at the oaks of Mambré (Gen 18) and it is crystallized in the haunting affirmation of the high Egyptian official who greets the famine driven Jews with the poignantly loving confession "I am Joseph your brother..." (Gen 45: 4). It is that same recognition and erasure of distance which reveals the stranger on the road to Emmaus to be the Risen One who is recognized in that act of hospitality which is the breaking of the bread (Lk 24: 31).

The erasure of distance between host and stranger is, of course, what monastic hospitality is all about—the welcoming of the stranger by the monastic strangers in the name of Christ. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* recount many instances of the stranger becoming an honored guest. When people came to seek the hospitality of the desert dwellers they most commonly came with a request ("Abba, give me a good word") or a question ("Abba, What must I do?"). It is not a rhetorical flourish on my part to stipulate that more than thirty years after his death we query that stranger in the cinder block hermitage on the hill with very similar words: "Father Louis, give me a good word." And, he always does.

Notes and References

1. I have parsed many of these allusions in 'Thomas Merton: Firewatcher,' *The Merton Seasonal* xv (Spring, 1990) 6-11.
2. Ellen Dooling Harper and Virginia Baron. 'Focus' in *Parabola* XX/2 (1995) - an introduction to a special issue devoted to 'The Stranger.'
3. The concept of "stranger" has a complex history in the bible. The stranger can mean one who is not a member of a social group (in that sense it was applied to Abraham, Moses, and the Israelites in Egypt) or, after the settlement, it meant resident aliens in the promised land to whom social obligations were due; see: Ex 22:21; Deut 10:19.

4. *Saeculi actibus se facere alienum* is translated in the Timothy Fry edition (Liturgical Press, 1981) as "your way of acting should be different from the world's way" which strikes me as flaccid.
5. The entire preface is reproduced in *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 64-67; see especially 65-66.
6. In *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960) 177-207. I consider that essay in detail in *Lawrence S. Cunningham Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 77-79.
7. Reproduced in the first appendix of *Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1973)
8. Those essays (seven in all) are available in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) 181-304.
9. *Literary Essays* 206.
10. 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' was first published in *Holiday* magazine (1965) and then reprinted in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1996); I quote from the anthology *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist, 1992) 395. The very name "Philoxenos", of course, means "love of the stranger."