

what the next minute I'd be late for,
or have no time to finish.

Most important perhaps for me, writing in this wild and lonely place, are the nature and landscape poems, and the lines that express so eloquently the lucidity and spaciousness of silence as in *Castle Rigg Songs*:

Cleft fast in the stone's skin
is a lichen tuft. It is the air's
embroidery: silent, slow, patient, deft.

When I am back from the Highlands, this is a book I will keep by me. When life becomes busy and congested, when the inevitable demands threaten to overwhelm, when weariness robs life of its mystery, then David's poems will, I know, slow me down and reconnect me to a source of inner replenishment. They embody a quality of mindfulness and attention to the ordinary that stills the soul.

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The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton

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Shortly after Easter in 1940 Thomas Merton made a trip to Cuba. He was there to pray, to affirm his relatively newly found faith, and to discern more clearly his vocation. He spent much time sitting at the back of churches, and records one particular occasion in the Church of St. Francis in Havana where, in many ways so like St. Francis, he had a vivid sense of being almost blinded by the manifestation of God's presence at the Consecration on the altar. 'Heaven is right here in front of me: Heaven, Heaven!' he exclaimed within himself, and was left breathless with joy and peace and happiness that stayed for hours and that he never forgot. And yet, in his characteristically self-deprecatory style, he goes on to

admit that, 'most of the time my prayer was not so much prayer as a matter of anticipating, with hope and desire, my entrance into the Franciscan novitiate, and a certain amount of imagining what it was going to be like, so that often I was not praying at all, but only day dreaming.'¹

Merton never did join the Franciscan novitiate, instead being clothed in the habit of the Cistercian Order at Gethsemani Abbey; but as Horan skilfully explains, his Franciscan beginnings were never disowned. *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton* explores in some detail the continuing inspiration that Merton found in the life of Saint Francis, and in the writings of Franciscan theologians such as Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus.

The exact sequence of events, and the unfolding of Merton's sense of vocation during his years in New York, form an interesting tale in themselves. This part of the story is applicable to many searching for a way forward in their lives: How can we know what God is calling us to do? Does God have a plan which we either discover, or miss to our eternal regret? Merton was helped hugely by the friends and teachers around him at the time, not least Professor Dan Walsh, whom Merton came to know during his graduate studies at Columbia University. Walsh had written his own PhD dissertation on the Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus, and Merton was able to develop his own enthusiasm for medieval philosophy, enkindled through the discovery of a book by Etienne Gilson, as he studied scholastic theology with Gilson's student Walsh at Columbia. It was Walsh who introduced Merton both to Father Edmund Murphy OFM of the Franciscan friary in Manhattan, and later to the Trappists in Kentucky. At one stage it seemed that Merton's application to the Franciscans had been accepted, ready for entrance in the fall of 1940, but for reasons he never fully explained (perhaps the fear that his fathering of a child in England would be an impediment in Canon Law), Merton withdrew his application and contented himself with joining the Third (Secular) Order of the Franciscans. By this time Merton had accepted a teaching post at the Franciscan University of St. Bonaventure in western New York State, teaching English Literature. Here he developed another significant friendship, with the librarian of St. Bonaventure, Father Irenaeus Herscher OFM.

After this setting of the scene, Horan goes further into the deep influence that Franciscan studies had on the development of Merton's spirituality. All through the early years at Gethsemani Merton continued to be inspired by the teaching of Duns Scotus. Early drafts of *The Seven Storey Mountain* contained long passages on Duns Scotus, which were

only removed at the insistence of his editor Naomi Burton. Horan goes on to explore how a central theme of *New Seeds of Contemplation* (one of Merton's own favourites) – the True Self – is rooted in Duns Scotus' teaching on 'haecceitas' or 'this-ness'. This was a theme echoed in the term 'inscape', used by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, on whom Merton proposed to write a PhD dissertation while still at Columbia. This sense of the unique individuality of all things, and the wonder in apprehending it as found in the poetry of Hopkins, was part of the spiritual formation that led to Merton's ruminations on the discovery of one's own True Self. It also emerges in the famous insight on his visit to Louisville after a long time in the silence of enclosure in the monastery, when he is struck so forcibly by the wonder and intrinsic goodness of all the people he sees going by.

Scotus is again the muse of Merton when he reflects on the Incarnation, both of them following the supralapsarian Christocentric school of theology, which sees the Incarnation not as a response to the Fall but as an intrinsic part of the eternal plan of God – even if Adam and Eve had not sinned, the Word would still have been made flesh, as part of the predestination of all creation, including humanity, to glory.

In further chapters of *The Franciscan Heart*, Horan describes the 'paradise consciousness' of Merton, and its possible roots in the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure's teaching on the imprint/footprint (Latin: *vestigium*) of God in creation. This in turn goes back to the delight of St. Francis in the elements and creatures of the natural world, as seen in his *Canticle of the Creatures*.

The final part of *The Franciscan Heart*, *Engaging the World*, speaks of the prophetic element in the vocations of St. Francis and Merton as they speak to the dislocation of a fragmented world, and seek peace and reconciliation among people of all nations and all faiths.

Throughout this study Horan shows he is up to date with the latest developments in Franciscan scholarship, and gives a clear outline of Franciscan theology which would be useful even to one not so interested in Merton himself. Although Merton was wholeheartedly a disciple of St. Benedict in the tradition of Cîteaux, still he could be said to have been a Franciscan to his final breath.

1. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Sheldon Press, London: 1948 / 1975) p.285

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