

WOODS,
SHORE,
DESERT

A Notebook, May 1968

Thomas Merton

with photographs by the author

Foreword by Brother Patrick Hart
Introduction and Notes by Joel Weishaus

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INTRODUCTION

During May of 1968 Thomas Merton took a trip to California and New Mexico, his first extended, unattended time away from the Abbey of Gethsemani in twenty-six years. Later the same year he was to make a longer sojourn, one that would take him to Asia, where, in Bangkok, Thailand, on December 10, 1968, he would touch a faulty electric fan in his room and pass from this world.

So many biographies and critiques of Thomas Merton's life and work have been written that I feel it redundant to go into any details exclusive of the period covered by the book at hand. But a very brief summary of his life before May 1968 may be helpful.

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France, on January 31, 1915. His father was an artist from New Zealand; his mother, also an artist, an American. She died when Tom was six, after which the boy traveled with his father or was shuttled between relatives. When he was sixteen his father died, leaving supervision of Tom to his godfather. Merton finished public school in England, then, after a summer in Italy, entered Clare College, Cambridge. But his godfather "decided that the temptations of Cambridge undergraduate life were too compelling."¹ In December 1934 Merton arrived in New York to live with relatives on Long Island while attending Columbia University. He received his B.A. in 1938, and an M.A. in English literature the following year.

On December 10, 1941, the young fun-loving man who seemed destined for a successful academic career took a train to Kentucky, where he disappeared behind the walls of the medieval Trappist monastery, the Abbey of Our Lady

of Gethsemani. Behind those walls, during the next twenty-seven years, Thomas Merton, living under a strict rule of silence, wrote more than fifty books: essays, journals, biographies, poetry. His views as a civil rights and anti-war advocate became known throughout the world. And, along with his concerns with secular issues, Merton was perhaps the most important Christian mystic of our time.

In the early 1960s, while keeping up his prodigious writing and reading and his normal duties as priest and monk, Merton took on the demanding job of Master of Novices. All this combined to threaten seriously his rather fragile health, as well as his spiritual progress. In 1960 he was granted permission to spend some time in seclusion in a small cinder-block house on the monastery's grounds. By August 1965, finally relieved of his teaching responsibilities, he was able to spend most of his time living the eremitic life. But the popularity of his books was bringing more and more pilgrims to the gates of Gethsemani to see the famous monk. On May 6, 1968, "seeking a more solitary place for his hermitage, with the approval of his Abbot,"² Merton began a fifteen-day trip to the California coast and New Mexico desert.

In 1978 I came upon an article in *New Mexico Magazine* entitled "Thomas Merton's New Mexico."³ Along with the text were a few photographs Merton had taken while visiting there. Upon my inquiring, the Thomas Merton Studies Center in Louisville, Kentucky, informed me that a series of photographs Merton had taken in California and New Mexico, along with a notebook, were possibly available for publication. A few months later, after more communication, I received a copy of the notebook.

Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968 begins with three quotes from the *Astavakra Gita*, following the direction of Merton's development.⁴ Several Roman Catholic priests had written books suggesting a more ecumenical view of the world, but Merton was one of the few who were actually integrating the teachings of other religions into their spiritual disciplines, "reading the calligraphy of snow and rock." His teachers included Christian Desert Fathers, along with Taoist philosophers, Buddhist Zen Masters and Lamas, Hindu sadhus and Jewish Hasids. Here he returns "to sources," preparing to speak "of something new to which you might not yet have access."

On May 6 he flew from Louisville, via Chicago and San Francisco airports, to Eureka, California. Based at Our Lady of the Redwoods Monastery, White-thorn, California, he ventured along the coast "with a small box of sun-kissed

seedless raisins." Although still tentative, Merton is moving toward "an experiment in openness." Standing on the Pacific shore, looking hopefully to Asia, hearing the "faint cry of a lamb" on the mountain side muffled by sea wind," breathing in the pungent world, breathing out the poetry of his vision . . . Bear Harbor, Needle Rock, Mattold Valley, wild irises "three or four feet high," calla lilies "growing wild among the ferns of a stream bank," roses, "and a lot of flowering shrubs that I cannot name." And always the redwoods "indescribably beautiful."

In 1963 John Howard Griffin asked Dom James Fox, Abbot of the Abbey of Gethsemani, if he could photograph Thomas Merton for a documentary archive. It was during the shooting session that Merton became interested in camera. According to Griffin, "The camera became in his hands, almost immediately, an instrument of contemplation."⁵ "His concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood or whatever crossed his path . . . seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it in his emulsions."⁶ Not like Tennyson, who plucked the "flower in the crannied wall . . . roots and all." More like Ryokan, who wrote:

*The grasses of the garden,—
They fall,
And lie as they fall.*⁷

Photography is a way of framing wholeness so that suchness reveals itself;⁸ it "never makes the mistake of trying to turn from the material to the immaterial in hopes of conveying 'spirituality.'"⁹ And Merton was a man of the earth. His eyes danced with shapes, textures, gestures of rock and woody plants; "illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene."¹⁰ He was not a "photographer." For him, the camera was merely another tool "for dealing with things everybody knows about but isn't attending to."¹¹

After a restless night in San Francisco, Merton flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico, the way to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, 130 miles north of the city. He had published a collection of parables and sayings of the fourth-century Christian Desert Fathers;¹² but it is in his book *Thoughts in Solitude* that Merton most eloquently addresses contemporary problems in "the holy desert":

The desert Fathers believed that the wilderness had been created as supremely valuable in the eyes of God precisely because it had no value to men. The wasteland was the land that could never be wasted by men because it offered them nothing. There was nothing to attract them. There was nothing to exploit.

He goes on to lament:

When man and his money and machines move out into the desert, and dwell there, not fighting the devil as Christ did, but believing in his promise of power and wealth, and adoring his angelic wisdom, then the desert itself moves everywhere. Everywhere is desert. Everywhere is solitude in which man must do penance and fight the adversary and purify his own heart in the grace of God.¹³

Those words were written in the early morning gloom of Gethsemani. Now, motoring through the sunlight of New Mexico, there is the stark beauty of the Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) Mountains, and "mesas, full rivers, cottonwoods, sagebrush, high red cliffs, piñon pines," and "miles of emptiness."

At the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, by day he walked up the canyon observing "a fat mountain ringed with pillared red cliffs, ponderous as the great Babylonian movie palaces of the 1920s, but far bigger." At night he awakened with stomach cramps and ran "barefooted down the cold pebble path to the hut with the toilet in it not knowing whether the toilet would flush."

What he was reading he wove into the fabric of what he was living. Thus "the curvature of space around *Mount Analogue*" is penetrated by "the calls of the crows in New Mexico" as he "pick(s) up the amice to begin to vest for celebration." The connection. The path forever lengthening, the Vision approaching, "The Clear Light" and reality itself.¹⁴

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