

Notes from THOMAS MERTON: FIREWATCHER by Lawrence S. Cunningham

1. Rarely did Thomas Merton ever write more powerfully than in those pages which make up the epilogue of *The Sign of Jonas*.
2. One can look to those pages to see a kind of symbolic theology that combines, true to its monastic character, a polyvalent use of Biblical metaphor, a pitiless analysis of the self in relationship to the Christian mystery, and a kind of overarching vision of the Christian life, derived from the monastic experience, but the common destiny of all.

The epilogue, dated July 4, 1952, combines a narrative line describing Merton's duty as a fire watcher for the monastery while the other monks slept. To that narrative line he adds a powerful meditation on the meaning of the monastery in general and his own life as a monk in particular. The careful blend of narration and self-reflection turns the epilogue as a whole into a prose poem which is, at its finest places, a lyrical exercise which has its moments of ecstasy and a fall from ecstasy. It is the kind of writing that demands, simultaneously, attention and response.

We might begin by noting that, like the book as a whole, the *Fire Watch* epilogue is saturated with the imagery of the Book of Jonah. Merton indicates that in his description of the monastic church as a "great belly" which sets free the monks after the office of Compline and the community as a "holy monster" which contains the monks within it. In that sense, the epilogue stands as a symbolic coda to the work as a whole which, in its title, pays homage to the figure of Jonah: *The Sign of Jonas*.

For Merton to choose the image of Jonah is hardly surprising. The prophetic figure of Jonah is invoked by Jesus (see: Matthew 12:38-42; Luke 11 :29-31) as a "sign" of him. In Matthew's account Jesus draws an explicit parallel between Jonah in the belly of the sea monster and his own sojourn in the tomb before the day of the resurrection. Interestingly enough, Luke's account emphasizes the willingness of the people of Nineveh to hear Jonah as a contrast to those who will not hear the message of Jesus. Luke does not record the Jonah/resurrected Jesus parallel. Thus, even within the Biblical text we have two meanings assigned to the significance of Jonah: the Matthean emphasis on resurrection and the Lucan emphasis on the prophetic power of Jonah. While resurrection elements are in Merton's epilogue, I will argue, later in this paper, that it is the mystical Jonah who gets special, and rather novel, emphasis as Merton joins together the Christian tradition's meditation on that seminal figura in the church with his own drive for self-understanding as a Christian who is also a contemplative monk.

Given the many hued characterizations of Jonah it should not surprise us that the symbol of Jonah could be extended to stand for the life of the monk. In a kind of foreword to *The Sign of Jonas* Thomas Merton himself notes that the sign of Jonas dwells within him (and all Christians) who live within the hope of the resurrection. He then hastens to add that he feels that sign powerfully because "I find myself travelling towards my destiny in the belly of a paradox."

We need not speculate at length at the Jonah-like character of the monk in general and Thomas Merton in particular. Merton gives us a good picture of him in the epilogue. Like Jonah he travels alone in the viscera of the sea monster but his aloneness is in the midst of many others. He is a person called by God as the prophet is called. Unlike Jonah he does not know what his call will bring. There is no specific Nineveh to which he is being sent. He lives in the belly of the monastery (a microcosm of the world itself) waiting for the time when he will be spewed forth as Jonah was spewed forth. Finally we should be alert to what - for lack of a better word - we might call the absurd dimension of the life of Jonah who finds himself called to a life that, by the standards of both the sailors and the citizens of Nineveh, is an odd one. The great question is: how does one

spend one's time in that period where one is now {in the belly of the sea monster) and the time of one's expulsion/resurrection? To ask that question is to inquire into the issue of eschatology since the life of Jonah is a life pointing to an as yet unseen end or, as Merton calls it, a destiny.

At this point we might note two quite different movements in Merton's epilogue which I will call, for the sake of simplicity, the mode of descent and the mode of ascent. The former derives directly from the Jonah story while the latter owes much to the prophet Isaiah.

The Firewatch epilogue makes much of the descent motif. Merton, sneaker shod with clock in hand, descends into the regions of the monastery marking the stations of the watchman's rounds. Merton ends his descent pattern with a rather solemn entrance note ... with its insistent proclamation of "it is the time;" and the "time" is a time to ascend and, more specifically, to ascend "to meet you, God "

To summarize, the Firewatch involves a twofold movement: down into the bowels of the monastery and then an ascent into the church tower which constitutes the passage towards God. We might note in passing that this movement of descent/ascent is one of the oldest paradigms in literature and spiritual writing.

Interestingly enough, when Merton begins his ascent to the tower (where the notion of the firewatcher is most completely realized) he borrows his scriptural imagery, not explicitly from Jonah, but from the prophet Isaiah and, more explicitly, the phrase from Isaiah that serves as the epigram which heads the entire epilogue: "Watchman, what of the night?"

The watchman exists alone in his task but the reason for his solitude is not for his solitude but as a vanguard for the larger community that he represents. The firewatcher, in short, is both solitary and a cenobite. He acts alone but in the name of community. The point is an important one because it sheds light on the essence of the monastic vocation. To be a monk is to enjoy a charism, which is to say, a grace that is given to one for the good of the whole believing community.

The vision of Thomas Merton on his tower is not that of "signs and portents" or even of "brushfires." His vision is the vision of the apophatic mystic. Here is what Merton the watchman sees and hears as he sits crosslegged in an opening of the abbey tower, an imitation of death: "The door swings out upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer. Will it come like this, the moment of my death?". The image is a striking one. The sudden black silence, outside the monastery, wraps Merton in the immense solitude of the night of nature. The world hints of the deep mystery of God and the keen awareness of the solitary self. Is that what death is like? Like all true mystics, Merton posits the dialectic of God's presence and absence in a manner which plays on paradox and tension. Echoing the vocabulary of Martin Buber and the Johannine language of Jesus, Merton looks out over the silent landscape of the Kentucky night and writes : "You are found in communion: Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me: dispossession within dispossession: dispassion within dispassion, emptiness within emptiness, freedom within freedom. I am alone. Thou art alone. The Father and I are one"

It is a powerful visual image that we get at this point. The monk is, as it were, suspended between heaven and earth. The community is at rest beneath him. He is a monk (monachus means one who is alone) with roots in that community but now between them and the dark immensity of the sky which represents the silence and immensity of God. He expresses a sense of "going out" -a going out which is like death but also like the "going out" of the self who is ready to embrace, in that immense silence, the reality of God. This mystical exodus gives a new direction to the energy of the narrative: a descent which leads to an ascent which leads to a going out fairly describes the geography of this narrative. It finishes, as we shall see, with a going down/going back.

It is worthwhile to note the stylistic power of this moment in Merton's narrative. During his rounds of the monastery we are treated to a visual picture of the cluttered nature of a house that is home to a large community. It is kaleidoscopic in its imagery with sounds, sights, and smells. As Merton ascends to the tower, the images become sparser until we are confronted with the silent immensity of the night. Images are now purged to give way to quiet and immediacy. The literary narrative, in short, tracks the experience of simple prayer itself as one moves from the state of cluttered imagery to the simplicity of presence. The narrative line of the epilogue replicates, in a subtle and studied way, the passage of a person who is a beginner in prayer to one who reaches the simple bond of presence and adoration.

Like all contemplative experiences, this ecstatic moment must end. The very last line of the epilogue heralds, not the night, but the inevitable return of the day and the end of the nightwatch: "There are drops of dew that show like sapphires in the grass as soon as the great sun appears, and leaves stir behind the hushed flight of an escaping dove". The circle is complete: from imagery to simplicity and back to imagery again just as night gives way, in the round of things, to the day.

When one penetrates into the framework of Merton's imagery it is not difficult to see that he has erected a classically perennial structure of the spiritual quest of descent and ascent. That is not a one way street until the pilgrim life is over. What we must hold onto is that the morning did come. The moment of ecstatic prayer was over. It was time to rejoin the community and life had to continue its ordinary round. This is the way life should be. That is the way life is.

Remarks on the Epilogue

The symbolic typology, which is sustained throughout the "Fire Watch," involves an antithetical juxtaposition of day and night, each with its cumulative secondary associations. With the night Merton associates the eternal abyss, the fecund darkness of the soul, and the blissful silence and solitude that permit an emerging sense of contact with the transcendent. The day he associates with the intellect and reason, language and speech, the desire for clarity, and the articulation of meaning. The antithetical motifs of light and darkness are nourished, from a narrative point of view, by the concrete particulars of Merton's progress as watchman and by the injection of wit and paradox. Paradox appears, for example, in the observation that night and darkness bring a "semblance of order before all things disappear" (349), a reversal of the conventional perception of day and night. The daytime, filled with external movement and declared purposes, is granted only a shallow kind of order alongside the immensity of the night, which allows the mind, now able to set aside its tasks, to focus on ultimate realities.

Sign of Jonas – Excerpts from Epilogue Fire Watch July 4, 1952 (pg 349 – 362)

Pg 349:

Watchman, what of the night?

The night, O My Lord, is a time of freedom. You have seen the morning and the night, and the night was better. In night all things began, and in the night the end of all things has come before me. Baptized in the rivers of night, Gethsemani has recovered her innocence. Darkness brings a semblance of order before all things disappear. With the clock slung over my shoulder, in silence of the Fourth of July, it is my time to be the night watchman, in the house that will one day perish. Here is the way it is when I go on the fire watch: ...

Pg 350:

At right-fifteen I sit in darkness. I sit in human silence. Then I begin to hear the eloquent night, the night of wet trees, with moonlight sliding over the shoulder of the church in a haze of dampness and subsiding heat. The world of this night resounds from heaven to hell with animal eloquence, with the savage innocence of a million unknown creatures. While the earth eases and cools off like a huge wet living thing, the enormous vitality of their music pounds and rings and throbs and echoes until it gets into everything, and swamps the whole world in its neutral madness which never becomes an orgy because all things are innocent, all things are pure. Nor would I have mentioned the possibility of evil, except that I remember how the heat and the wild music of living things can drive people crazy, when they are not in monasteries, and make them do things which the world has forgotten how to lament. That is why some people act as if the night and the forest and the heat and the animals had in them something of contagion, whereas the heat is holy and the animals are children of God and the night was never made to hide sin, but only to open infinite distances to charity and send our souls to play beyond the stars...

Pg 352:

The fire watch is an examination of conscience in which our task as watchman suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness. God, by God Whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer! I have prayed to You in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime You have confronted me, scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning with light and with desire, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire. I have explained to You a hundred times my motives for entering the monastery and You have listened and said nothing, and I have turned away and wept in shame. It is true that all my motives have meant nothing? Is it true that all my desires were an illusion? While I am asking questions which You do not answer, You ask me a question which is so simple that I cannot answer. I do not even understand the question. This night, and every night, it is the same question. There is a special living resonance in these steep hollow stairs to the novitiate chapel, where You are all alone, the windows closed tight upon You, shutting You up with the heat of the lost afternoon.

Pg 353:

It is as if the past had never existed. The things I thought were so important – because of the effort I put into them – have turned out to be of small value. And the things I never thought about, the things I was never able either to measure or to expect, were the things that mattered... But in this darkness I would not be able to say, for certain what it was that mattered. That, perhaps, is part of Your unanswerable question!

Pg 354:

On all sides I am confronted by questions that I cannot answer, because the time for answering them has not yet come. Between the silence of God and the silence of my own soul, stand the silences of the souls entrusted to me. Immersed in these three silences, I realize that the questions I ask myself about them are perhaps no more than a surmise. And perhaps the most urgent and practical renunciation is the renunciation of all questions.

Pg 355:

Your Reality, O God, speaks to my life as to an intimate, in the midst of a crowd of fictions: I mean these walls, this floor, these arches, this (overhead) ridiculously large and unsubstantial tower. Lord, God, the world tonight seems to be made out of paper. The most substantial things are ready to crumble to tear apart and blow away. How much more so this monastery which everybody believes in and which has perhaps already ceased to exist! O God, my God, the night has values that day has never dreams of. All things stir by night, waking or sleeping, conscious of the nearness of their ruin. Only man makes himself illuminations he conceives to be solid and eternal. But while we are our questions and come to our decisions, God blows our decisions out, the roofs of our houses cave in upon us, the tall towers are undermined by ants, the walls crack and cave in, and the holiest building burn to ashes while the watchman is composing a theory of duration.

Pg 356:

Now is the time to get up and go to the tower. Now is the time to meet You, God, where the night is wonderful, where the roof is almost without substance under my feet, where all the mysterious junk in the belfry consider the proximate coming of three new bells, where the forest opens out under the moon and the living things sing terribly that only the present is eternal and that all things having a past and a future are doomed to pass away!

PP 357 – 358:

I would like to stop and stand here for an hour, just to feel the difference. The house is like a sick person who has recovered. This is the Gethsemani that I entered, and whose existence I had almost forgotten. It was this silence, this darkness, this emptiness that I walked into with Brother Matthew eleven years ago this spring. This is the house that seemed to be have been built to be remote from everything, to have forgotten all cities, to be absorbed in the eternal years. But this recovered innocence has nothing reassuring about it. The very silence is a reproach. The emptiness itself is my most terrible question. If I have broken this silence, and if I have been to blame for talking so much about this emptiness that it came to be filled with people, who am I to praise the silence any more? Who am I to publicize this emptiness? Who am I to remark on the presence of so many visitors, so many retreatants, so many postulants, so many tourists? Or have the men of our age acquired a Midas touch of their own, so that as soon as they succeed, everything they touch become crowded with people? In this age of crowds in which I have determined to be solitary, perhaps the greatest sin would be to lament the presence of people on the threshold of my solitude. Can I be so blind as to ignore that solitude is itself their greatest need? And yet if they rush in upon the desert in thousands, how shall they be alone? What went they out into the desert to see? What did I myself come here to find but You, O Christ, What have compassion on the multitudes? Nevertheless, Your compassion singles out and separates the one on whom Your mercy falls, and sets him apart from the multitudes even though You leave him in the midst of the multitudes... With my feet on the floor I waxed when I was a postulant, I ask these useless questions. With my hand on the key by the door to the tribune, where I first heard the monks chanting the psalms, I do not wait for an answer, because I have begun to realize You never answer when I expect.

Pg 359

Now the business is done. Now I shall ascent to the tope of this religious city, leaving its modern history behind. These stairs climb back beyond the civil war. I make no account of the long

laybrothers's dormitory where a blue light burns. I hasten to the corridor by the wardrobe. I look out the low windows and know that I am already higher than the trees. Down at the end is the doorway to the attic and the tower... And now the hollowness that rings under my feet measures some sixty feet to the floor of the church. I am over the transept crossing... I climb the trembling, twisted stair into the belfry. The darkness stirs with a flurry of wings high above me in the gloomy engineering that holds the steeple together.

Pg 360

And now my whole being breathes the wind which blows through the belfry, and my hand is on the door through which I see the heavens. The door swings out upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer. Will it come like this, the moment of my death? Will You open a door upon the great forest and set my feet upon a ladder under the moon, and take me out among the stars? The roof glistens under my feet, this long metal roof facing the forest and the hills, where I stand higher than the treetops and walk upon shining air. Mists of damp heat rise up out of the fields around the sleeping abbey. The whole valley is flooded with moonlight and I can count the southern hills beyond the watertank and almost number the trees of the forest to the north. Now the huge chorus of living beings rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things. And far above me the cool sky opens upon the frozen distance of the stars. Lord God of this great night: do You see the woods? Do You hear the rumor of their loneliness? Do You behold their secrecy? Do You remember their solitudes? Do You see my soul is beginning to dissolve like wax within me?

Pp 361 – 362:

There is no leaf that is not in Your care. There is no cry that was not heard by You before it was uttered. There is no water in the shales that was not hidden there by Your wisdom. There is no concealed spring that was not concealed by You. There is no glen for a lone house that was not planned by You for a lone house. There is no man for that acre of woods that was not made by You for that acre of woods. But there is a greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question. Eternity is in the present. Eternity is in the palm of the hand. Eternity is a seed of fire, whose sudden roots break barriers that keep my heart from being an abyss. The things of time are a connivance with eternity. The shadows serve You. The beasts sing to You before they pass away. The solid hills shall vanish like a worn-out garment. All things change, and die and disappear. Questions arrive, assume their actuality, and also disappear. In this hour I shall cease to ask them, and silence shall be my answer. The world that Your love created, that the heat has distorted, and that my mind is always misinterpreting, shall cease to interfere with our voices. Minds which are separated pretend to blend in one another's language. The marriage of souls in concepts is mostly an illusion. Thoughts which travel outward bring back reports of You from outward things: but a dialogue with You, uttered through the world, always ends by being a dialogue with my own reflections in the stream of time. With You there is no dialogue unless You choose a mountain and circle it with cloud and print Your words in fire upon the mind of Moses. What was delivered to Moses on tables of stone, as the fruit of lightning and thunder, is now more thoroughly born in our own souls as quietly as the breath of our own being. The hand lies open. The heart is dumb. The soul that held my substance together, like a hard gem is the hollow of my own power, will one day totally give in. Although I see the stars, I no longer pretend to know them. Although I have walked in those woods, how can I claim to love them? One by one I shall forget the names of individual things. You, Who sleep in my breast, are not met with word,

but in the emergence of life within life and of wisdom with wisdom. You are found in communion: Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me: dispossessions within dispossessions, dispassion within dispassion, emptiness within emptiness, freedom with freedom. I am alone. Thou art alone. The Father and I are One.

The Voice of God is heard in Paradise:

“What is vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all. What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all... I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin. What was poor has become infinite. What is infinite was never poor. I have always known poverty as infinite: riches I love not at all. Prisons within prisons within prisons. Do not lay up for yourselves ecstasies upon earth, where time and space corrupt, where the minutes break in and steal. No more lay hold on time, Jonas, My son, lest the rivers bear you away. What was fragile has become powerful. I loved what was most frail. I looked upon what was nothing. I touched what was without substance, and within what was not, I am.”

There are drops of dew that show like sapphires in the grass as soon as the great sun appears, and leaves stir behind the hushed flight of an escaping dove.