In the beginning, a Word...

by Gary Hall

On November 16, 1938, Merton was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. He later describes his baptism somewhat dramatically as a decision to accept the "appalling responsibility" of responding to the call of God. There seemed little choice: this crucial decision was the key to release Merton from the unbearable tensions of his turbulent inner world. An existential crisis, threatening at times to consume Merton, echoed the political climate of the Europe where he had spent much of his childhood and youth; a Europe he had left behind four years previously, a world on the threshold of another major war, a world without meaning. In 1938 he made a life-giving choice, and found a language to form meaning amidst the chaos.

Some eight years later, in 1946, Merton was preparing himself for the priesthood. Around the same time he was completing work on The Seven Storey Mountain, in which the author refers back to his baptism as signifying "the profound and complete conversion of my intellect." In retrospect Merton is keenly aware that any intellectual conversion was only one facet of the journey towards religious transformation on which he had embarked. He concludes that "the conversion of the intellect is not enough," for there must also be a corresponding conversion of the will. However, the reorganization of his personality signified in intellectual conversion was the vital threshold of Merton's liberation.

> It is an emotional crisis that creates the possibility and necessity of conversion. The crisis involved is the collapse of meaning-schemes. Language proves incapable of putting names on things; they lose their meaningfulness. And the collapse of meaningfulness, of the ability to name things, gives rise to anxiety.... It becomes impossible to organize one's behaviour, since that requires a world which makes sense. (1)

That which Merton describes as a conversion of the intellect did involve much more than rational choice. Rather, his decision is portrayed as a response to inner yearnings and anxieties, to profound yet undefined emotional currents. Relating his first experience of Mass during the summer of 1938, Merton tells of how "there was this sweet, strong, gentle, clean urge in me which said: 'Go to Mass! Go to Mass!' It was something quite new and strange, this voice that seemed to prompt me, this firm, growing interior conviction of what I needed to do." He recalls how, on responding to the voice, yielding to it, "it did not exult over me, and trample me down in its raging haste to land on its prey, but it carried me forward serenely and with purposeful direction." (2) Thus, in this retrospective testimony, Merton personifies an impulse which consequently binds and directs the scattered fragments of his inner world. Thoughts and feelings become focused and anchored, and energies seem at last to be available for transcending or breaking through the impasse which accompanied Merton's experience of crisis.

> Here, then, is the first task facing conversion. It must give a name to anxiety, place one's subjectivity before some object. Once an emotion is named it can be understood, manipulated and exorcised. (3)

Yet when in Mountain Merton refers to the inadequacy of his initial Christian conversion, he reveals that the turmoil of his emotional world remained largely untouched by baptism and confirmation. Even the subsequent, more radical decision to enter a Trappist monastery was not, in itself, a

resolution of deeply-rooted anxiety. Nevertheless, the gradual restructuring of reality which Merton named a "conversion of the intellect" did allow some unlocking of emotions whose inhibition had previously led to a profound sense of alienation and impotence. He began to see a way forward.

In naming his anxiety Merton also names his desire. For example, in a passage from The Labyrinth manuscript, Merton recalls one of his many visits to old abbeys and churches: "I found this old church, and was suddenly very awed and surprised to find that this was something I recognized and understood. Something I had been looking for." As the Labyrinth narrative continues, Merton puts a name to the object of his yearning, clarifying a distinction between aesthetic or nostalgic sensitivities, and the more fundamental religious desire awakened by the old church:

> I had imagined, with a completely high-handed disdain for all that I had read, that Ancient Rome was a kind of heaven to oppose to the hell of nineteenth-century materialism.... But finally, it was quite a shock to have to admit that what I was looking for was a paradise, and that the Roman Empire was no more of a paradise than Victorian England.

On the contrary, he continues, both ancient Rome and Victorian England were "struck by the plague," which he tried to identify as barbarism, vulgarity or middle-class smugness; "but those were hardly satisfactory names for a plague that starves people and produces wars and mass executions and concentration camps." The language did not suffice.

Merton was later fascinated by Albert Camus' novel, The Plague, which appeared some six years after the writing of this passage. Meanwhile in 1939 the "plague" may be beyond accurate definition, but Merton knows he must escape it. And he can only conceive of escape in a paradise "not of this world." For the secular world, to Merton, "consists of a multiplicity of accidents without essences - a world that has been emptied of mythic reality." [4] The monastery by contrast represents for him a place where he might find that paradise. The liberating, naming word takes flesh. Merton was seeking a paradise by transcending the apparently meaningless accidents of history. His newborn faith beckons him towards a New World, one whose reality is validated by experiences of emotional liberation (evidence of relationship with one's world), insight and a consolidation of meaning. Within the bounds of that "sacred world," Merton recovers confidence to surrender more fully to the voice, the impulse, which draws him forward and sets his feet on the path.

In Mountain Merton defined his monastic life as a rejection of the (objective, externalized) world. Earlier than this - a few months before his entering Gethsemani - Merton's thoughts are more subtle: My Argument with the Gestapo demonstrates that Merton is more conscious of projecting his feelings onto the external world. In the book, a friend asks the author his reasons for wanting to be in England during a time of war. "I have come to make sure the sleeplessness of the air raids is the same as the sleeplessness of the nightmares in the shuttered rooms of the past years," replies Merton. The conversation continues:

> the things I remember are destroyed, but that does not mean as much as it seems, because the destruction was already going on before, and destruction is all I remember. (5)

Here is at least an implicit suggestion that the world is perceived through the lens of emotional memory. The explicit, external destruction of war combines with the inner turmoil surrounding past memories. Those memories, those emotions, are his connection with the world. The world appears as harsh or plagued; but that harshness only evokes such an emotional response from one in whom such feelings are already latent. The unique fusion of political climate and personal history, once couched in effective language, establishes the subsequent pilgrimage.

Finally leaving England in December of 1934, Merton sailed to New York. He could sail away from England to a New World, but Merton could not so easily leave behind the painful, sometimes debilitating memories associated with the place. Neither could he leave behind that self he was growing to despise. A passage deleted by the author from the 1969 setting copy of Argument indicates that Merton's departure from England is shrouded in regret and is, he acknowledges, no resolution of the problems encountered there:

> No sooner have I put down the phone, than I realize that it is all up with me, that I am leaving England without having made up for my ingratitude to you, which I will never understand until I have been away from England for years, and learned from the smell of hell in America where to look for some answer to all these questions I ignore because they aren't supposed to exist. [6]

The phone conversation is with a character who would seem to represent Tom Bennett, a surrogate parent figure. Merton's regrets revolve not solely around his own behaviour, but more broadly around a sense of fractured and fragile familial relationship. Fictional accounts of his departure from England appear as an archetype of Merton's eventual contemptus mundi, his rejection of the World. This vocational decision involved an attempt to leave behind the emotional residue of his earlier life, and a self-identity he neither accepted nor hoped to redeem. "Giving up everything" offered a prospect of release from archaic pain. Yet just as Merton returned to memories of Europe - and England in particular - so he would in due course need to rediscover the world he hoped to leave outside the monastery walls.

I began with Merton's assertion that a "conversion of the intellect is not enough." If not in itself an adequate solution to his existential crisis, intellectual conversion was a vital precursor to a more complete personal reorientation. Yearning for the solid ground of meaning and value from which to step out on his own journey, Merton trod the fragile ice of alienation which threatened to crack and let him drown. Eventually he felt able to act upon inner convictions when those impulses could be interpreted within a meaning-scheme which ordered and defined the World. If his only published novel represents a search for and recreation of meaning, then Mountain narrates the conversion story within a more structured mythological framework. At this stage, however, any sense of new meaning exists for Merton only within a sacred context. His "unwilled" decisions draw him into a reconstructed world whose reality is validated by affective liberty and cognitive clarity. This sacred world stands in contradistinction to the secular and apparently meaningless World. The language, ritual and aesthetic of Catholic faith define moments of joy and hope, but the apparent liberation occurs not as a redemption of his past but as a divorce from that past - and from the world in which it was played out. In time, Merton would be content to let the ice melt and surrender to the wordless unknown.

NOTES

1 Rubem Alves, Protestantism and Repression (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 31.
2 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (reprint ed., London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 206
3 Alves, ibid.
4 Ann Hunsaker Hawkins, Archetypes of Conversion: The autobiographies of Augustine, Bunyan and Merton (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1985), p. 122.
5 Merton, My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal (reprint ed., New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 26
6 Merton, Journal of My Escape from the Nazis, TS, p.157 of unnumbered pages. At the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Louisville, KY.