Thomas Merton and Vincent Van Gogh: The map of two Pilgrim Journeys to the True Self in Art and Parable.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Uncle Ken Hill (1949-1973) Poet.

Black and White

The night is black, the day is light
As far apart as black and white
The world is good, the world is bad
The world is full of good and bad
Some are rich, some are starving,
Some are gay and some are sad
A craft speeds out through space and lands upon the moon,
While in jungle clearing a young man dies too soon
While in Africa discrimination tries to quell a whole nation,
In Israel an angry peace is set which warlords watch,
And watching yet don't hear the distant plea of all humanity.

Ken Hill, 1972.

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the search for the *true self* as taken by the renowned contemplative writer, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), and the nineteenth century artist Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890). These two are observed side by side as pilgrim figures, journeying and struggling through high and low times of joy and suffering, evidencing the experience of the *dark night of the soul* as a key facet to any kind of rebirth experience into light, and the awakening of the true self. Both find in art a means of immersion into contemplation and prayer, and a sharing in the creativity of God. Both also reveal in their art and writings the unity of God and nature, and a strong self examination, as portrayed in the portraits they have made, Van Gogh in his paintings, and Merton in the portraits he allowed to be made of himself by the photographers Eugene Meatyard and John Howard Griffin.

The first chapter sets out Merton's discourse on the true self, with its rejection of a false (selfish) self. Van Gogh's self-portraits are then studied as an avenue to the artist's self-awareness and how they parallel his alternative inner pilgrimage to the true self. The second chapter seeks to ascertain how one journeys towards that self by what Merton defines as 'pure intentions'. The third chapter examines how both Merton and Van Gogh find the capacity for true seeing, and the understanding and even the partaking in parables, for a parable is not only examinable, but also to be seen as a two-way mirror, something which examines *us*. The last chapter has as its focus the metaphor of light, which is employed by both artists; in the paintings of Van Gogh, as a visual well-spring of hope; and also in the art and writing of Merton, and indeed many artists and writers. Overall I can propose that each of these two figures, along their journey, attained what they sought to become, and that the journey was essential to their becoming true, for it required a pilgrimage.

Abbreviations

Shoes: Edwards, C. 2004 *The Shoes of Van Gogh* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.)

HW: Merton T. 1970 *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.)

NSOC: Merton, T. 1964 *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Kent: Burns and Oates Publishing Co.)

NMI: Merton T. 1955 *No Man is an Island* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Inc.)

Raids: Merton T. 1964 *Raids on the Unspeakable*, (New York: New Directions Publishing Co.)

SSM: Merton T. *Seven Storey Mountain* 1948 (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.)

AJ: Merton, T. 1968 (Edited from his original notebooks by Burton, N., Brother Hart, P., and Loughlin J.) *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing Co.)

VGD: Van Heughten, S. 2005 *Van Gogh Draughtsman*, (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum)

MTW: Yancey, P. 2002 *More Than Words: Contemporary Writers on the Works That Shaped Them* (Grand Rapids: MI. Baker Books)

TNM: Merton, T. 1961 *The New Man*, (London: Burns & Oates)

TNOB: The New Open Bible

CSA: Kandinsky, W. 1977 *Concerning The Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications Inc.)

Illustrations

Introduction

The discussion of this thesis surrounds two central figures, the writer Thomas Merton and the artist Vincent Van Gogh. I will use this thesis to show how Thomas Merton defines the *true self*, and then how both he, and Vincent van Gogh, *reveal* it through art. I also seek to show how, through art, they both demonstrate what Merton terms the *hidden wholeness* in all things.

On first glance they seem like very disparate persons; Merton is a successful writer, a committed monk, a jovial and yet calm person; Van Gogh, despite his undisputed brilliance as a painter, is, contrarily, somewhat caricaturised by the hot temper he was famed for, and the accusations of 'madness' that shroud his early death.

Yet on closer analysis it can be admitted that they are joined by some mutual and striking similarities: they are artists and they are contemplatives, although Merton, as a Trappist monk, is the contemplative more-so officially. At the same time they are figures on this type of pilgrimage to secure the *true self* [1] and a pair who are prepared to sacrifice a great deal for their life's purpose, which involves their art. They both endure their individual pilgrimage with great patience, and ultimately triumph, for despite both of their unfortunate and untimely deaths, they have planted seeds of the true self within their written and artistic legacy to all, and so a unique pattern of pilgrim living survives.

The finding of one's *true self* is predominantly a story of pilgrimage, which encompasses journeys, rituals, discoveries and transformation of self. I hope to show that the outcome of this journey is determined somewhat by the map that one follows, as our predecessors on pilgrimage show something of the terrain through which we must pass. For instance we have Merton's map: Merton was a monk, contemplative and writer, yet simultaneously a poet and photographer; he was an artist, both visually and lyrically. This

[1] Merton T. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 1964 (Kent: Burns and Oates) p. 158-160

duality outworked in the complex life of Merton can serve as illustration, as a map, or guide, to others who feel some need to connect their spirituality and their works of art. It is also by finding the strength for survival in a desert or wilderness place,[2] wherein one is invited to discover and prove his authenticity, in finding his true self.

Merton's journey towards the *true self* is the theme and focus of several of his writings, especially as it is the fruit of his life of contemplation. In *No Man Is an Island* (1955) Merton claims that God's will points to one important thing: "the realisation, the discovery, and the fulfilment of myself, my true self, in Christ."[3] To define this true self, Merton holds it against the mirror of its counterpart, the false self, and thereby teaches us what the true self looks like. The false self is an *illusory person*, one who exists only for his egocentric desires.[4] This self wraps himself vainly in experiences, and pleasures, and so mummifies the inside, which is but a hollow. By contrast then, the true self allows the inner self to come to the foreground, without a mask.[5]

The true self becomes a seed-carrier of the truth, and I would suggest, in appropriation to Merton's thoughts in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1964) that, when making an art form, the *true self* is sowing seeds of truth and life for others to find. These seeds were first planted by God in his creativity to be spread abroad in *our* creativity, as Merton describes: "the seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God's will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity."[6]

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, we witness how the seeds bear fruit in Merton's true self, as he confesses that: "Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name."[7] Love and selflessness are fused together in the forming of a true self. The inner journey upon which we are invited to partake entails the

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[2] NSOC ch.33: Thomas Merton calls this the *journey through the wilderness* through which God leads us peacefully, even in darkness.
[3] Merton T. 1955 *No Man is an Island* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Inc.) p. 64.
[4] NSOC p. 33: My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love-outside of reality and outside of life.
[5] ibid. p. 32: we are called to share the work of creating the truth of our identity. We can evade this responsibility by playing with masks.
[6] ibid.
[7] ibid: p. 49.

finding of an innate being deep within each individual who instinctively knows who he is meant to be. This is a latent and potential self waiting to be discovered, and created together with God; it offers us not only a true, but new identity, one which Merton appropriates to himself:

> **For me to become a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self...we are called to share with God in creating our true identity.** [8]

The biblical roots of Merton's interest and study of the self can be located in the teachings of Jesus, as in Matthew 16: 25, where the writer proposes that to lose the self is to gain real life. [9] Then in Paul's Epistles, there is the charge to have self-control, and to be rid of selfish ambition[10]. Again, in Philippians 2: 2-4, Paul directs that the welfare of others be placed on equal par with that of ourselves.[11] Following these directives, Merton realises it is a process of finding and discovering the new and true self, after the old one has been lost or discarded. It is a shared discovery with God, who is now granted permission to share in the creation of the true self. The former self was bound in selfishness and a defensive barrier against any interference to its individuality and self-determination. The true self, by contrast, is open and flexible both to the leading of God and to the needs of others. In the second chapter I have defined this leading away from selfishness as a journey towards purity of heart, and for the artist it becomes the path of true seeing and vision.

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[8] ibid. p. 85.

[9] Matthew 16:23-25 (NKJV) v24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

[10] Galatians 5:22-24 (NKJV) v22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24 And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

[11] Philippians 2:2-4 (NKJV) v2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

The Journey as Metaphor

The motif of the journey can be found to underpin the life and writings of Thomas Merton, and it comes readily as a metaphor for his search for the true self. Outwardly, a record of his physical travels is detailed in journals, autobiography and through photographic record. This journeying took place mainly in his early life before entering the monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky, and later in his final pilgrimage to the East. These latter travels began in Calcutta, which he termed the *unmasked city*: a place where not only the individual self but an entire city demonstrates, not only the depth of their poverty, but a real sign of hope.[12] From there he travelled to New Delhi, and then to Dharamsala in the Himalayas, meeting with the Dalai Lama.[13] What he was able to gather on this journey was the significance of compassion; to consider others, to keep open to them to some extent, and not revert to absolute solitude.[14]

What is Pilgrimage?

In their book *Pilgrimage* (1996), Freyne and Elizondo note that: "each occasion for the liminal passage of the pilgrim enhances opportunities of human bonding and also bonding with sacred forces."[15] This can be detected in the monastic life of Thomas Merton, wherein he entered a spiritual journey with fellow monks, in the setting of his much loved forest in Kentucky. The many small and routine physical journeys, for instance a walk in the forest of Gethsemani, or a round of the Monastery during a fire watch, have their particular spiritual parallels. He converts routine micro-pilgrimages into liminal passageways by the sheer wonder of their placement in the midst of very ordinariness, and also seeing the extraordinary within or through that ordinary occasion. The definition of 'pilgrimage' may also be held to comprise of the following:

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[12] Merton, T., 1968 (Edited by Burton, N., Brother Hart, P., & Loughlin J.) *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing Co.) p.28: Calcutta, smiling fecal, detached, tired, inexaustible, young-old, full of young people who seem old, is the unmasked city. It is the subculture of poverty and overpopulation. Calcutta has the lucidity of despair, of absolute confusion....yet undefeatable....somehow a sign to others of some inscrutable hope.

[13] ibid. p.100: Their discussion was all about religion and philosophy and especially ways of meditation. They discussed Merton's personal interest in Tibetan mysticism.

[14] AJ: p. 102.

[15] Elizondo V. and Freyne S. (Editors) *Pilgrimage*, 1996 (London: SCM Press, New York: Orbis Books) p. 16.

> **Pilgrimage requires normatively a vow, promise and symbolic or geographical separation, change, exposure to new landscapes, food and eating habits, ideas, strangers, dangers and uncertainties** [16]

In this respect, Merton's experience of moving to a monastery fulfils the requirements of a pilgrimage experience. For him this is an especially protracted experience, the choice of one who feels at home in a perpetual pilgrimage lifestyle. Merton was able to participate in all of these elements of pilgrimage on first arriving at Gethsemani, and, to emphasise, he creatively managed to turn daily routine experiences into ever evolving spiritual journeys.

Merton gives weight to the elements of both inner and outer experience when he makes a comparison in his tract *From Pilgrimage to Crusade*. The former is, "the symbolic acting out of an inner journey" and the other "the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage."[17] The metaphor of the journey then was used widely to understand his search for God, for truth, and for his true self.

The Painful Pilgrimage

The pilgrimage to the true self for Van Gogh and Merton can also be seen in terms of a passion narrative, for as the story of their lives unfolds we witness their times of struggle and deep inner anguish. There are sacrifices to be made which are painful in many ways, yet made painful on behalf of the search for authenticity and for the sake of others. The first is the great change required in the metamorphosis, or rebirth experience of the self in becoming true. Requiring a rebirth from out of the false cocoon of self, man must be delivered, but first he must see himself, as he is, in his Promethean state, the state of *agonia*. This refers to man's sense of nothingness and despair. Merton made this point in *The New Man* (1962): "In solitude man feels essentially his terror at having to be himself,

[16] ibid. p. 16.
[17] Merton, T. *Mystics and Zen Masters* c1967 (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux) p. 92.

at having to be a person." [18]

Further on in the pilgrim life is often the experience of painful loneliness, and this too was the experience of both of Merton and Van Gogh at various times. The salvation gained from this is the genuine discovery of love for others through self-sacrificing service. Vincent van Gogh made reference to the pilgrim life that he saw himself on in his first sermon, which he recounted to his brother Theo in a letter dated 29th October 1876. The text he used was Psalm 119: 19: *I am a stranger on the earth, hide not thy commandments from me.* The following is an extract from Van Gogh's sermon, in which the concept of the pilgrim is one in which he relates to personally. This demonstrates Van Gogh's lucid perception of the parable in art; it speaks to him of spiritual concerns, it shows him his place on the pilgrim journey, and he in turn, now in a sermon, and later in his own art, is fully able to awaken in others their own perception of themselves on the pilgrim journey.

> **It is an old belief and it is a good belief, that our life is a pilgrim's progress - that we are strangers on the earth, but that though this be so, yet we are not alone for our Father is with us. We are pilgrims, our life is a long walk or journey from earth to Heaven…..Christian Faith makes life to evergreen life. We are pilgrims on the earth and strangers - we come from afar and we are going far. The journey of our life goes from the loving breast of our Mother on earth to the arms of our Father in heaven. Everything on earth changes - we have no abiding city here - it is the experience of everybody… Our life is a pilgrim's progress.** [19]

The pilgrim identity embodies a physical and spiritual quest; one of these is, as we have acknowledged, the search for a true self, and both Thomas Merton and Van Gogh explore the self in contemplative practice, including the use of artistic means; making portraits of self, and selecting or forming icons from nature. The self fully integrated with the environment is the magic of a Merton portrait; his physical body transparent and made

[18] Merton T. *The New Man*, 1962 (London: Burns & Oates) p. 15.
[19] http://www.vggallery.com/misc/sermon.html (22nd January 07).

one with the trees around him. This speaks more intimately of the self in unity with all that surrounds, than can many words. Another merging point lies where both discover within and around themselves a *hidden wholeness* in all that surrounds. This wholeness defined by Merton, and revealed in the paintings by Van Gogh, is not always immediately brought to our attention, for it requires of us our time and contemplation.

As Georgia O'Keefe said, when considering a flower, "it takes time to look, when looking at a flower, and seldom do we really take the time." [20] Merton, in his monastic life, has both the time and inclination to do this looking; to see the hidden dim light in all creatures, and in his roles as an artist and poet, he expresses this inner vision in metaphor and parable. Van Gogh too, becomes a visionary, and his art is a supreme example of a heart's vision brought to light; the willing sharing of the inner wholeness that he sees within all things, so that now others can see too what once was hidden.

I liken this hidden quality to the meaning of parables, found in the biblical tradition, especially in the four gospels. A parable often speaks of some obscure, but precious thing, such as the pearl of great price, or of something lost, and needing to be found. The artist too can play this role; he or she discovers what has long been lost or hidden to the natural eye and re-presents its beauty to us again, forcing us to really take notice of what is 'lost' by our general indifference.

The parable of *The Lost Son* (Luke 15: 1-22) combines the journey theme with lost-ness. The son is supremely valued by the father, whose very willingness to let go proves his unconditional love; but this is not appreciated until the journey becomes wearisome, and ultimately enlightening for this son, who comes to realise the extent of his lost-ness. The son knows now that riches will soon be spent and that a son's position can move rapidly from that of an heir to a slave. Yet the love of a father is redeemingly strong, and the father can show himself true and selfless, in an act of complete forgiveness towards the son. This is a cycle of a true self being formed, the son wanders away to indulge his false

[20] O'Keefe G: in Cameron, J. 1993 *The Artists Way* (London: Pan Books) p. 22.

and selfish self, and on return he sees his father offering the forgiving hand of an older, wise and true self. The son is now unmasked, he sees the image of the true self before him and is able to accept the offer now to become true, like his father.

Rembrandt, in *'The Return of the Prodigal Son'* (ca. 1622) (Fig. 1.) notably, chooses to render the touching reunion of father and son, upon the son's fearful return from the journey to that 'far country'. It shows the son wrapped in the father's loving and forgiving embrace. The parable message hits home; the father's enduring love is stronger than his disapproval, yet paradoxically the brother is consumed by jealousy and stands at a distance. For as it is stated in 1 Corinthians 1: 12b[21], just as the gospel comes across as 'foolish', so does the father's pride in his prodigal and wastrel son for whom he prepares a great feast.[22]

The work of a parable is likewise demonstrated; it is that medium by which ordinary life is set into new and somewhat strange contexts, in this case, a seemingly *foolish* one. The parable is set in the confines of some earthly context, (to reveal something about those very human relationships which are outworked in the earthly scenario) and is *not* to be read primarily through eschatological lenses. As Sally Teselle points out:

> **Metaphorical language, parabolic language, does not take us out of everyday reality but drives us more deeply into it, deforming our usual apprehensions in such a way that we see reality in a new way.** [23]

The parable is an ordinary story, in a familiar setting, but often with an incredulous twist, that makes the ordinary somehow resound with the extraordinary. As if to allow glimpses through a dim or smoked glass into a realm beyond, a spiritual realm, while at the same time remaining fully contextualized and housed in the everyday, in the now.

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[21] 1 Corinthians 1: 12b: For God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

[22] http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/1660/: *The return of the prodigal son* c. 1662 (210 Kb); Oil on canvas, 262 x 206 cm; The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (30 September 2006).

In the parable of *The Lost Sheep*, the sheep has strayed far into the wilderness, and so the shepherd seeks, finds and carries this sheep home across his shoulders. The unusual twist in the story is the shepherd's greater concern over the *one* who was lost, than over the larger group. The ninety-nine others were also there in the wilderness, yet stayed together; how often on a pilgrimage then, it seems to be the case that one wanders into a wilderness place, whether as part of a group or alone.

The pilgrim is an identity Merton would also choose for himself, as he took the pilgrim pattern from others. The van Gogh journey was rather different to that of Merton, and it could be questioned whether van Gogh realised his true self, as in the end, he committed suicide. However, in choosing to follow his dream and pursue the life of an artist, I believe he was following the seed-life of his true self, which was yet to be fully germinated. I would also argue that true-ness is identifiable in his art per se, and must not be judged purely on the sudden end of his life.

The symbolism of the journey is one leading from darkness to light: that which can be seen visually in art and photography, and read or felt intrinsically in certain poetry and music. In the spiritual parallel, Merton teaches that contemplation can provide the clarity needed for the inner transportation of the soul to its perfect destination, towards the love of others, and to the divine love, although paradoxically grasped as through a cloud.

My final assertion is that the awakening of one's true self, together with the gifted and prophetic use of art forms, can be seen as a manner of prayer. It was so for Merton, in his life of dedication to prayer and solitude. Art is prayer, when both art and prayer fuse together and are made true by the true-ness and pure intentions of the artist.

There are contemporary examples of artists making a pastiche of their art and their spiritual vision. Merton had a penchant for the American jazz culture, which exploded from the 1920's era on, certainly in his college days, and it is probable that he would

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[23] Teselle, S. 1975 *Speaking in Parables, a Study in Metaphor and Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd) p. 70.

have been able to detect the element of prayer and contemplation through music. His fellow Columbia student, Jim Knight, recalls in a memoir entitled *The Thomas Merton We Knew* that:

> **Merton also led me to jazz, away from Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller, to Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Jelly Roll Morton, Billie Holiday, the Mound City Blue Blowers, the Austin High School Gang, Peewee Russell, Eddie Condon; he was a jazz lover all his life, and looked for live jazz wherever he could find it, in his travels as a monk, for medical or other reasons, to Louisville or New York.** [24]

John Coltrane, the American saxophonist, presents a beautiful example of art as prayer in his album *A Love Supreme* (1964). Prayer can be heard and felt in this music, which is in essence homage to God, a humble offering to him. Coltrane acknowledges that through the grace of God he was given the means and privilege to make others happy through music. The final piece, 4th of a quartet, is entitled 'Psalm.'

> **Coltrane "reads" the words, following the cadences of the text from the opening phrase, "A Love Supreme," to the final "Amen." The oft-repeated phrase "Thankyou God" develops an incantatory ring. Like a whispered prayer, the effect of "Psalm" is hushed and extremely private; the suite's reflective point of closure stands as one of Coltrane's most serene, soul-baring performances.**[25]

For Coltrane it was a step forward in both his music and in his own spiritual journey, his progression was towards a higher spiritual realization and development. This is Coltrane's own prayer set to music:

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[24] http://www.thecalmerton.com/tommie.html (16th January 07).
[25] From the Album *'A Love Supreme'* by John Coltrane, recorded late 1964.

I will do all I can to be worthy of Thee O Lord.
It all has to do with it.
Thank you God.
Peace.
There is none other.
God is. It is so beautiful.
Thankyou God.
In you all things are possible.
We know. God made us so.
Keep your eye on God.
God is. He always was. He always will be.
No matter what...it is God.
He is gracious and merciful.
It is most important that I know thee.
Words, sounds, speech, men, memory, thoughts,
fears and emotions - time -all related...
all made from one...all made in one....
Blessed be his name.

Coltrane is in agreement with both Merton and Van Gogh; all things are related somehow, all things connect, and the capability to really approach this truth depends on the biblical directive to keep the eye on God. And yet the paradox is that God is *seen* most clearly in the physical embodiment of an earthly story, parable or work of art. It is requisite to keep one's vision pure so that one realm can be seen in the other, just as one 'sees' by way of a parable, and is able to foresee his journey ahead.

It is in the unbinding and the stepping away from one's roots that one finds the road upon which he should travel. Merton's pursuit of the true self requires that one must be *unmasked* to discard the prior false self, and commence the inner journey of contemplation in order for the true self to be found. Primarily it is an acting out of blindness, stepping into unfamiliar places, having yet to discover the potentiality that may be revealed. The physical path is mirrored by an inner, spiritual progression, of which the first steps are an act of faith and hope, with perseverance and pure intention being key as the journey proceeds. Van Gogh was in this sense a keen traveller; his own personal vision kept him on many dark paths, where others would have receded. His true self was made manifest in his art and letters; honest, frank portrayals of a wounded soul, which

attract so many others today by their vulnerability and honesty.

The *journey* has historical, mythological, biblical and church-historical precedents, and some of these models were within Merton's reach. The early monastic voyage tradition, for one, gripped Merton's attention and imagination. These are stories which combine true episodes from life, yet are freely embellished in legend and literary fiction. In this sense the stories are quite parabolic in intention, they are replete with spiritual truth mirrored in through a dim smoked glass, a frame of unreality, which in fact enhances and makes reality *more* real, more *visible*. The protagonists of such voyage tales abandoned all to join some fantastical voyage, such as that taken by St. Brendan, an Irish monk. His map is that of a pilgrim and his followers, bound like Merton to the rule of monasticism, yet finding a freedom within that to set out on a true physical journey or pilgrimage, that which Merton later embarks upon himself, as he travels east. This physical pilgrimage of Brendan's merges quite irretrievably with the inner journey, resulting in a poetic work *The Voyage of St Brendan*, whose elements are at once both aspects of the real and of the fantastic.

Paul Pearson in his article "Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton's Journey" identifies Merton's self-consciousness as a pilgrim figure.[26] I am in basic agreement with the findings of Pearson, and seek to relate them further to Merton's image of the true self as intrinsic to his pilgrim identity. For Merton, to become his true self, he needed to wear the cloak of the pilgrim. He had to make that connection, a journey of minds and footsteps connected through time and space, gleaning the collective wisdom of past, present, and future embodied in the pilgrim figure.

In a journal entry, dated July 18th, 1964, Thomas Merton mentions that he has received a copy of this poem (*The Voyage of St Brendan*) and that he has begun "studying it as a tract on monastic life." Therein he identifies with: "the myth of pilgrimage, the quest for the impossible island, the earthly paradise, the ultimate ideal". Then Merton assesses its

[26] http://pages.britishlibrary.net/thomasmerton/celtic.html: article by Pearson, P: Celtic "Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton's Journey" (12th February 07).

function in the manner of a parable: "as a myth it is, however, filled with a deep truth of its own."[27]

For the Irish monks the geographical and inner journeys were more closely linked than was often the case with other monks on the continent. They saw three forms of pilgrimage:

> **Firstly, a geographical pilgrimage in body only where the spirit remains unchanged. Secondly, an inner pilgrimage, where, though the spirit and soul journey towards God, the body remains physically stable. Thirdly, the perfect pilgrimage where a man leaves his country in both body and soul and journeys in search of the absolute, the very source of being. So the ideal for the monks was both the geographical pilgrimage and the inner journey.[28]**

The lives of Thomas Merton and Van Gogh follow the pattern of pilgrimage, which combines the geographical and inner journeys so intrinsically linked for artists and contemplatives. Merton's attraction to the idea of pilgrimage in *The Voyage of St. Brendan* led him to discover a deeper understanding of pilgrimage as a whole.

Alongside such metaphors as *solitary explorer, guilty bystander, stranger, wanderer, marginal person*, Merton also truly considered himself as a pilgrim figure. The theme continues in his Asian Journal, which illustrates this – "I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author. I come as a pilgrim...to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience."[29]

Paul Pearson discovers in Merton's article *From Pilgrimage to Crusade* the realisation that: "the external and geographical pilgrimage was...something more than the acting out of psychic obsessions and instabilities. It was in profound relationship with an inner

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[27] Merton, T, *A Vow of Conversation*. (1988) Edited by: Stone, Naomi Burton. (Basingstoke) p.64.
[28] http://pages.britishlibrary.net/thomasmerton/celtic.html: article by Pearson, P: Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton's Journey (12th February 07).
[29] Merton T. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* Edited by: Burton, N., Hart, P., and Laughlin, J. (London. 1974) pp: 312/3.

experience of continuity between the natural and the supernatural, between the sacred and the profane, between this world and the next: a continuity both in time and space."

Again we are met with a set of opposites, or contrasts; an interesting device employed habitually by Merton in his writing, used here to show how seemingly distinct areas of our lives interrelate, and cross over and under one another, like in the interlacing of a knot. The physical does not separate from the path of the spiritual, and vice versa.

Brendan's Voyage was an example of Voyage literature (Immrama) with a distinctively monastic tone. The popularity of the theme had equally spread through other nations, being captured in secular literature as evidenced by the *Odyssey* and the *Aenid*. Brendan's tale, in contrast, is "predominantly monastic in outlook, and inculcates the doctrines and practices of the ascetic life as understood in an Irish environment". [30]

This type of literature was used both to 'delight and edify' its reader and audience; telling the adventures of a travelling bunch with their strong devotion to God and leader, and their new and exotic discoveries, and at the same time nourishing hungry souls in the rekindling of biblical stories and miracles. In *The Voyage of St Brendan* there is a miracle of loaves and fishes, the casting out of demons, and a Judas figure in the midst, making it a veritable contextualisation of the gospel message in a new setting. This is what I would like to suggest happens each time a new parable is told, whether its physical form takes shape in words, music or in paint.

The pilgrim figure, especially the monk as pilgrim, finds another realm wherein lies that *hidden wholeness* of Merton's description, that in which temporality and the eternal are seen to overlap. The monk stands quite deliberately at the threshold between the two, in his perpetual seeking of the *promised land* while yet living in this world. As a model we can look to the nine canons or sutras that Raimundo Panikkar uses to define his monsastic archetype in *Blessed Simplicity*:

> **Canon five, "overcoming spatio-temporal parameters", and canon six, "transhistorical consciousness above historical concerns" [31] are**

[30] O'Meara, J. J. *Voyage of St Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land*, The Dolmen Press, 1976, p. xi
[31] Pannikar, R. 1982 *Blessed Simplicity*. (New York.) p. 39.

concerned with the monk's relationship to time and place. Panikkar sees temporality as a dimension of the eternal, like "concentric circles emanating out of the same centre" so that human time is "contained within and unfolds within the dimension of the eternal; the eternal, conversely, does not take away from the reality of human time, but floods through it, illuminating it while at the same time introducing a transcendent dimension" [32] and the monk is one who "deliberately places himself in the overlap zone" [33] of the concentricity of temporal and eternal.[34]

I liken Pannikar's metaphor of the concentric circles to the motif of the interlacing knot. There is no definable beginning, middle or end; the journey is constantly shifting between the geographical and spiritual, the temporal and eternal, the real and illusionary. Artists, and art itself move freely across these parameters, erasing boundaries and creating new frontiers.

Biographical Section I and II:

This section, in two parts, contains some biographical details of both Thomas Merton and Vincent Van Gogh, in order to show how their lives transpired and to give an outline of the journey made by each one, and the similarities and differences between them. Each was an artist in his own right, and each a writer: a recorder of facts and feelings, discoveries and insights on their journeys. Finally we will ascertain how art itself is to be made true, and whether it can be of service to those on a pilgrimage, the endeavour to find their own true self and search for wholeness in life.

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[32] Bourgeault, C. 1983 "The Monastic Archetype in the Navigatio of St. Brendan," Monastic Studies. 14. p. 112.
[33] ibid. p. 116.
[34] http://pages.britishlibrary.net/thomasmerton/celtic.html: Pearson, P. Article: 'Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton's Journey'. (16th February 07).

I. Short Biography of Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton was a theologian, poet and photographer, the son of artist parents, not brought up in a particularly religious household, but nevertheless drawn to the spirituality he could see manifest in the world around him as he travelled with his father from place to place in his early life. Convicted by the claims of Christianity, he determined as a young adult to enter a religious life within the monastic Trappist community, at Gethsemani, Kentucky. His spirituality evolved as he followed the journey paved by others into contemplation, and opened up new directions for him in his own life; incorporating the whole world of his writings, inspired greatly by his experiences there. Unlike Van Gogh, Merton was a popular figure during his own epoch, even though he insisted that the majority of that attention was unwanted. Merton saw many of his own works published, and left a lasting impression on his readers, and on those who knew him personally, with his fresh insights into human nature, accompanied by his own striving for personal authenticity.

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, a picturesque corner of France where his parents, being artists, loved to paint. They had travelled before, leaving behind roots in New Zealand and America, moving to London and Paris before settling a while in the Pyrenees prior to any threat of the war in 1914. Perhaps Merton's home schooling, and consequent isolation, combine to explain his early fascination with geography books and maps, which was a passion never to leave him. He seemed to display little aversion to the upheavals ahead, the physical uprooting and resettling that was to set the pattern of his pre-monastic life. Both his parents and he could be reborn into the hope sought with the entry into each new land of promise. As he admits "I was only too eager for the kind of footloose and unstable life I was soon to get into." [35]

Merton's father, Owen, played a significant part in creating a journey pattern that, both

[35] ibid p. 33.

consciously and subconsciously, was recreated and played out in Thomas. This father was the only static figure in Merton's early life, and he was affected by both the absences and presences of his travelling-artist father, with all the freedoms and restrictions, the dreams and disappointments that ran alongside. Having imbibed these sets of opposites, or paradoxes, we can later see how Merton's very life is lived in a paradoxical fashion. He is at once gregarious, outgoing and popular, yet with an ability to spend weeks in virtual solitude at the monastery. He is devoted to Catholic teaching, yet embraces and absorbs what he admires from Zen Buddhism. He is a farmer, priest, artist and hermit all at once.

Not long after the early death of his mother, Owen Merton and Thomas came to live in Bermuda. The romance of the journey, with its long train ride and boat trip, was the bringing to life of geography. [36] . It was the first journey in the physical sense that Merton would engage in. He was leaving behind the first of the seven mountains by which he would frame his life story, the mountain of Canigou, sheltering Prades. Merton spent some time both in and out of school, living sometimes with his father, sometimes with others. Things were always apt to change, and Merton reflects that it was difficult to make much sense of his unusual childhood. His life was rearranged month by month, yet in his childish mindset these were reasonable and worthy changes, openly accepted especially since it brought days on end where "I could run where I pleased, and do whatever I liked, and life was very pleasant."[37]

Merton remembers the shining sun, deepening the blue of the sea, and lightening the white sand and houses. This light at least was one element of continuity with Prades, where bright sunny days inspired his parents to sit outdoors and paint, while he would play. As he had no formal religious up-bringing as a child these elements provided at least some spiritual sustenance; the sun, the whole creation, standing symbolically for the reality of God, the truth of whose being he would discover in time.

His poetry glows with reference to nature from which he took inspiration; the motifs he

[36] Merton T. *Seven Storey Mountain* 1948 (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.) p. 17.
[37] ibid. p. 36.

used such as *bright spring, generous flowers, flowering dark sun,* and *burning bees* all contribute to the abundant heritage he absorbed into his soul from nature. [38]

Running alongside these good and fond times though, are sadder memories of childhood. While acknowledging the good intentions of his father, he was deeply affected by the absence of his mother. In his own words, he felt quite clearly "without a family". He resented the new (although temporary) rival to his father's love, the writer Evelyn Scott, and he often had to endure separation from his father, who by necessity travelled to and from New York to sell his paintings. [39]

Two years passed in Douglaston, and the young Merton was finally starting to feel more at home, enjoying his friendships and leisure pursuits. At this stage he was developing an interest in the camera, which would later feature in his life works. Now it was with sadness that he learned of his father's desire to travel once more to France.

A second landmark on the Merton map would be the Mount Calvaire, at the foot of which Owen Merton built a home. Thomas would sit in the main room by a large fireplace, dreaming of travel while poring over images of French Cathedrals from guidebooks. Sometimes he and his father would travel around the area of the Midi, Thomas searching for the 'perfect city'. There was something in the south of France that stirred in Thomas his first impressions of the church as the central locus in town or village life. In 1925 Owen and Thomas were settled in the old town of St. Antonin, and Merton recalls:

> **Here in this amazing ancient town, the very pattern of the place, of the houses and streets and of nature itself, the circling hills, the cliffs and trees, all focussed my attention upon the one, important central fact of the church and what it contained. The whole landscape, unified by the church and its heavenward spire, seemed to say: this is the meaning of all created things: we have been made for no other purpose than that men may use us in raising themselves to God, and in proclaiming the glory of God.** [40]

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[38] *Dirge For The Proud World*, (in ibid. p. 108).
[39] The Oakhamian 47 (Summer Term 1932) in *'The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton'* p.22.
[40] SSM, p. 37.

In 1929, Owen was persuaded to send Thomas to 'Oakham', a private school in London. This was the start of another journey, to the England of Aunt Maud, to Sussex villages, the New forest, and the third mountain, Brooke Hill. Thomas became fond of this aunt, who was the first to ask him about his future ambitions. His reply, that he would like to be a writer, did not receive any criticism, but rather she spoke kindly to him about the possibility of becoming a journalist. [41] Merton preferred his education at Oakham to the French Lycee. He found a capacity for Greek, Latin, French, and Literature, and was encouraged to study for entrance exams into Cambridge University. There was another upset to deal with however; Owen Merton was now taken into hospital with a brain tumour, and Thomas had to face the possibility of losing another parent.

Merton, in 1934, was on the move again, this time as a young man, leaving England for New York. He writes of the strong feeling he possessed of a saintly presence there operational at the time of that journey, guiding him safely across the waters to a place he could never have imagined, a place of rescue and shelter:

> **...and when I thought there was no God and no love and no mercy, you were leading me all the while into the midst of His love and His mercy, and taking me, without my knowing anything about it, to the house that would hide me in the secret of his face** [42]

He then implores, by way of prayer, that Christ would be revealed to others just as he was revealed to him in this life *our exile*, and asks: "show him to us here, while we are still wanderers". [43]

Earth is seen as a place of exile, a place of wandering, often lonely as Merton was as a young man. It is perhaps an exile after Adam and Eve, an expulsion from all the beauties of God's garden, the place where depression or sadness could never reach humanity. Then it became a place where humanity had to survive by struggle and wandering, fallen from grace. However, despite being wanderers still, Merton's example to us is of a prayer that Christ can yet be revealed in the *present* place, in the here and very earthly now. His is

[41] ibid. p. 63.
[42] SMTM p. 41.

not a prayer for escape from the suffering, poverty or wandering that this life may entail.

Having just finished Oakham, and immediately following his eighteenth birthday, Merton took a vacation in Italy. It was in Rome that Merton felt real stirring within his soul again, a God-awareness that he had not felt in a very long time. The reason for this was nothing more or less than the simple and obscure church art, of the oldest and least flamboyant, churches in Rome. Art touched him with its pure visual demonstration of an ethereal love that Merton wished he knew, that he longed to reach out to. He did in fact connect to the spirituality he could perceive visually on his last days in Rome; he entered the little church of Santa Sabina, and he knelt down to pray, pouring out his inner longings, and acknowledging God present in that place.[44]

Following that summer, Merton spent his first, and only, year at Cambridge. He did not complete his studies at Cambridge University, but was urged to return to America[45], where he enrolled at Columbia University. Merton was persuaded to go quite easily, albeit with little choice. He had fathered a child, and his incensed guardian took to dealing with the matter on Merton's behalf; a settlement was reached and Merton fled the scene. Columbia was a favourable exile for Merton, it rekindled his love of learning, of writing, and he eagerly joined a fraternity[46], a communist party[47], and made himself known to the editors of various college magazines, soon becoming both cartoonist and writer for the *Jester*, contributor to *Spectator* and to the *Columbia Review*.[48] His social life became hectic and compulsive, he took many girls on many dates, and his love of jazz and parties blossomed.

Again in Columbia, it was through reading, and through some of his more serious minded friends, such as Robert Lax and Robert Giroux, that Merton finally resolved to embrace and explore the Christian faith, and make a personal dedication to God and to a new life; he was tired and disinterested at last with a hectic schedule of socialising, dating, drinking, and spreading his writing projects too widely. In cutting down the breadth of his

[43] ibid. p. 42.
[44] ibid p. 110-113.
[45] SSM, p. 126.
[46] ibid p. 151.
[47] ibid p. 142.

commitments he made one new resolve, to find a church, to find his true self, and his purpose in life.

The next gigantic leap was to baptism in the Catholic Church, followed by the intense conviction that he should become a monk. The monastery acts as the central locus in his journey. He arrived in monasticism partly out of the sense of dissatisfaction with the world, which was for him the "terrible insufficiency of life in a civilization that is entirely dedicated to the pursuit of shadows" [49] Coming to the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky was indeed an attempt to journey out of shadows and towards the light, a real meaningful life.

Merton felt in his own life that by becoming a monk one becomes *a stranger, an exile.* [50]

Merton makes a favourite theme of the universal exodus experience, as noted by Sister Marie de Lourdes. This becomes "a touchstone for desert solitude with God". [51] It is with Moses that we associate most closely this character in exile. Moses felt the burden of his leadership isolating him from the exodus crowd who would frequently blame him for their troubles; complaining that it was better in Egypt to suffer slavery, than to be hungry, tired and cold, miserable in the desert. [52] The original Exodus referred to occurred around 1446 BC. This is recorded in Exodus Ch. 13: 40-42: "And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years –on that very same day-it came to pass that all the armies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt." [53]

The oppression of the people was heard in their cry for rescue; it was the 'dark night of the soul' for an entire nation. The exodus shows us that "in the darkest night of bondage, we cry for a deliverer. Captive we cannot escape the isolation, the pain, the

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[48] ibid. p. 154-155.
[49] *A Thomas Merton Reader*, Ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, p. 183: Original Source: *Waters of Siloe* 1979 (U.S: Harvest Books).
[50] Merton, T. *Life and Prayer: Journey in Christ*. Electronic Paperbacks (New York.) (in http//pages.britishlibrary.net/thomasmerton/celtic.htm) 10th January 06.
[51] *Spirituality Today*, Summer 1989, Vol. 41, No.2, pp. 133-142. Sister Marie de Lourdes: Thomas Merton: Man of Many Journeys.
[52] Exodus 15: 24: 'And the people murmured against Moses saying, "What shall we drink?" TNOB, p. 86, and Exodus 16: 3: 'Oh, that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'. TNOB, p. 87.
[53] Exodus 13: 40-42. *The New Open Bible*, NKJV. p. 82.

overwhelming feeling that we are struggling against the whole world alone."[54]

Merton may have compared his own situation to this experience; a realisation that he was in bondage, in the prison of the false self. Making a journey through and beyond confusion, a spiritual Red Sea, towards a personal commitment to God and later to a monastic community attained freedom.

On some level, Merton was like Moses too, questioning God with his many human questions. [55] Moses' question of the Lord shows his fear of man (rather than true concern as to who God was): "when.... they say to me 'what is his name?' what shall I say to them?" but God would not be pulled into this arena of doubt, and his reply became a profound statement of revelation "I AM WHO I AM."

Sister Marie de Lourdes rounds Merton up as a *man of many journeys*. She highlights the *faint lines of a journey theme* in his works of the 1940's.[56] Merton's journey was one which he was careful to record and reflect upon throughout his life, in the form both of an autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and in later journals and other books and essays. Often the focus is upon meditative and spiritual journeys in fact, which bear a close link to their physical counterpart, be that a round through the monastery, a stroll through the adjoining forest grounds, or a visit to meet friends. A journey to the east (the final journey made by Merton before his accidental and untimely death) was a literal wish-fulfilment for Merton and the climax of his life ambition to merge the best of Christian thought with Eastern Wisdom.

> **We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light.... But oh! How far have I to go to find you in whom I have already arrived.** [57]

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[54] http//gospelcom.net/rbc/ds/sb112/sb112.html: *The Journey Through Exodus* (18th January, 2006).
[55] Merton T. *A Reader*: Merton's questions arise in the day-time, as he says in the *Fire Watch* episode, but God comes with his own deep questions in the heart of darkness.
[56] *Spirituality Today*, Summer 1989, Vol. 41, No.2, pp. 133-142. Sister Marie de Lourdes: Thomas Merton: Man of Many Journeys.
[57] SSM p. 198.

Merton knew he had 'arrived' at God's station on earth, which for him was to be in the centre of God's will, physically located in the monastery of Gethsemani. However, paradoxically, he was still in another sense *travelling and in darkness* because there was (and is) yet a more perfect place to arrive in God. For, according to Paul's lesson to the Corinthians, now we see and know only *in part*, as if this temporal world is a shadow-land, not a land of full knowing. It is this sense of having knowledge of God's will, and yet also knowing that one is limited to *seeing in part* that intrigues. My thesis will use this sense to propose that art also operates along these lines; it offers us a partial vision of a greater whole. It can act as a map on a journey, but never fully contains the entirety of any journey, nor is it meant to.

Brian Hawker writes of Merton as a model explorer, and journey guide, providing a map that can complement the maps of others who pass into similar terrain:

> **Basically his message was his own life's journey. Merton cannot teach me or anyone how to pray; he can only pray. His value lies in the fact that what he has written is a map of his journey and his thoughts and meditations on that journey. Any explorer knows that the map is not the journey and Merton never expected it to be so. The value of the map lies in enabling me to understand something of the terrain through which I must pass.** [58]

The poet or artist cannot be there to solve all the problems of others; ultimately, what they offer is a guide but never a directive. Photographs, and other art forms, produce a record, that it might be followed, or appreciated by another, on a similar but unique quest. The artist cannot teach anyone exactly how they should paint, nor the photographer tell his pupil where and when to shoot, but his influence is there in demonstrating an individual expression.

The map that Merton detailed through his diverse works is well complemented by a photographic record of his own making. Merton's particular map is certainly of value to someone seeking to travel to the same 'country'. Merton's country crosses into spiritual

[58] Hawker, B.H. "Twice Twenty Seven Plus Ten" Cistercian Studies XIV, 3 (1979): 192.

places, some of which are only to be found at night, in the darkness of the soul, and so there are blind spots on the map. It is necessary for those who enter the dark places with God to do so alone, without directives, since this is a *cloud of unknowing*.[59]

Merton increasingly described himself as an *explorer* who felt summoned to traverse the desert places of the human heart. As he continued to grow deeply in the life of prayer and to write about contemplation, Merton found various ways to express what he wanted to say using metaphors like *awakening, becoming aware,* and *being born again.*[60]

II. Short Biography of Vincent Van Gogh

Vincent Van Gogh can also be defined as an explorer of his times. His life journey began on 30 March 1853 at Groot Zundert, near to Holland's Belgian Border. He was the eldest in a family of three boys and three girls, born to the Reformed Dutch Pastor, Theodorus Van Gogh and his wife Anna Cornelia. As a boy Vincent was known to be taciturn and bad tempered, yet he had a passion for nature, for birds, insects, plants and flowers, and spent his time making drawings of these subjects in childhood.[61]

His first employment as an Art Gallery Clerk began in 1869, a position arranged by his uncle Vincent, at the Goupil Art Gallery in the Hague, under the supervision of H. G Tersteeg, and was moved to the London branch of the firm in 1873.

While in London, Vincent was moved by the plight of the poor and homeless, and was attracted to drawings representing their plight, as published in magazines such *as The Graphic, The Illustrated London News* and *L'Illustration.*[62] The other great influence, mentioned in many letters, was the Barbizon artist Jean Francois Millet, who depicted farm-workers with a quiet and noble dignity; touching a large part of that which Van

[59] See: Spearing, A. C. *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, (Penguin Books: London, New York, 2001).
[60] http//www.stmarkspresbyterian.org/stmarks/sermons/6jan02.htm (12th January 06).
[61] Bernard, B. (Ed.) *Vincent by himself*, (Time Warner Books: London, 2004) p. 8.

Gogh himself aspired to as an artist.

His time in London came to an end with the crushing experience Vincent experienced by way of an unrequited love he held for Eugenie, his land-lady's daughter; this caused his work at the Gallery to suffer, and led him to realise a deeper dissatisfaction with his whole life and work. He served for a period of about one-year in Paris before finally being dismissed. [63]

After a brief teaching appointment, Vincent developed an interest in Church ministry, and in July 1876, he accepted a position as assistant to a Methodist minister at Isleworth, England. He returned to Holland in early 1877, and worked in a Dordrecht bookshop, using his spare time to study the bible and write sermons. In August 1878, he decided to study a course of Theology in Brussels. He failed the course but was permitted to serve as a lay preacher to the coal-mining district of the Borinage near Mons.

Vincent's personal convictions compelled him to give freely of all his own personal belongings, even his own best clothes and shoes, and would deny himself food to feed the others in need around him. Unfortunately his state of raggedness and uncleanness caused his supporters to withdraw their funds, and Vincent found himself forced to relinquish his work once more. His work did benefit the miners and their families, however, his love and selflessness making a deep impression.[64] At this time in his life it can be observed that a missionary journey to the Borinage brought out aspects of Vincent's *true self*, in the selfless and unconditional love he poured out of himself to help others as he could. It was the lack of true self and spiritual vision in others that prevented Vincent from fulfilling this desire to be of practical help to these people, so instead (and lastingly) he reflected their suffering and poverty in his art.

His art developed well during these travels, and reflects the experiences he gained. His drawings of the people, the houses, the landscape, show the beginnings of competent

[62] Van Heughten, S. *Van Gogh Draughtsman* 2005 (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum)p. 36.
[63] *Vincent by himself*, p. 9.
[64] ibid. p. 10.

draughtsmanship, a strong foundation for his later art.[65]

Vincent's subsequent travels found him moving to Etten until December 1881, where he began to make 'copies' of the work of Millet, portraits of local people, gardeners, peasants, and landscapes. From here he moved to The Hague until September 1883, where he met, and shared a home with a prostitute, by the name of Sien Hoornik. He felt he could 'save' her from her life of sorrow and debauchery. In Sien's company Vincent experienced his first and only time of domestic happiness, especially in the attachment he felt for the young son (not his own) born to Sien while living with him. However, he had to deal with family opposition, including a threat to have him committed to an asylum, so in the end he had to arrange for her to leave. Sien herself reverted to her reputed former ways, of manipulation and instability, and Vincent understood that he was no longer able to support her.

Soon after, Vincent returned to the family home, and for a time progressed peacefully, making studies of weavers and their homes. A series of studies in oils formed the basis for his first major work *'The Potato Eaters'* (1885) (Fig. 2). He made a visit to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where he was affected by the paintings of Frans Hals and Rembrandt, while at Antwerp he was similarly inspired by Rubens. Van Gogh joined the Antwerp Academy for a period, before joining Theo in Paris in 1886.[66]

Vincent made extraordinary progress while in Paris, in the company of such artists as Seurat, Pissarro, Emile Bernard, Lautrec and Gauguin. He began a series of self-portraits, and experimented with new styles in painting. After nearly a year in Paris he moved towards Arles, feeling drawn to the South, a place filled with inspiring light and colour. Vincent arrived in Arles as the snow was falling, but after a couple of months, the orchards were beginning to blossom, and Vincent was energised and inspired by the new life in nature, and the colours of the South. In May he rented the famous 'yellow house', making it a comfortable home, and decorating its rooms with his bright paintings. He

[65] ibid
[66] ibid. p. 14

made several drawings with reed pen and ink, choosing fishing boats and houses as his main subjects. He also painted café scenes at night, and portraits of his friends, such as the Postman Roulin, and the proprieters of the Café Ginoux. It was at this time too, in preparation for a visit from Gauguin, that he painted his series of Sunflowers.[67]

Gauguin's expected visit caused a flurry of excitement, and stirred hope in Vincent for a future artist's colony. For two months they lived quite amicably together, working side by side, however some heated arguments led to Vincent becoming gradually more irrational and unstable. This led to the incident in which Vincent faced Gauguin menacingly with a razor, and proceeded to cut off part of his own ear with that same razor later that day. It was clear at this stage that Vincent was mentally unwell, and required hospitalization.[68]

Vincent was moved to an asylum at St Remy, and there painted the '*Starry Night*' (1889) (Fig. 3.) a work which bears testimony to Vincent's spirituality; a painting made alive by energetic movement, and living things representing invisible forces.

Faith was evident throughout Vincent's lifetime, even if outwardly he seemed to reject established religion after his failed attempt as a Preacher. Vincent wore his spirituality close to his heart and through the way he lived his life. Once an artist, he no longer found it necessary to be a public religious figure. He was content rather to stay out of the limelight, in the privacy of his own life. Vincent's work and personality are strongly linked together, and this is what makes his art so timeless and unique.

His upbringing was one of the foremost influences on his life and work, and may hold answers to his attitudes and philosophies of practice. The role of the family was important in sowing the seeds for the future. Vincent's father was an opinionated, outspoken man with a fervent vocation and immense faith, even if unfortunately this was the cause of many a clash between him and his equally strong-willed son. After his

[67] ibid. p. 16
[68] ibid. p. 16.

father's sudden death in 1885, aspects of his ideologies and personality lived on in Vincent and his work, in their simplicity and honesty.

What is significant, and of value for our thoughts today, is the impact of his art on today's audience, the viewers, readers and listeners for truth and meaning in a confusing world. Henri Nouwen, for one, a popular modern author of devotional literature, found great solace, a friend in absence, in the figure of Van Gogh, whom he called his *wounded healer*:

> **He painted what I had not before dared to look at; he questioned what I had not before dared to speak about; and he entered into spaces of the heart that I had not before dared to come close to. By doing so he brought me in touch with many of my fears and gave me the courage to go further and deeper in my search for a God who loves.**[69]

Van Gogh showed himself to be a man who loved, who loved deeply, often unrequitedly and so suffered for his love. Nouwen, and others could perhaps see resonances with the love of God for humanity and creation, as described in biblical texts. Vincent may have believed that when looking at nature we are looking at God's work and when doing so we are in direct relationship with him.

Van Gogh never made a literal pilgrimage to the east, but he did in spirit, becoming an avid collector of Japanese prints, he studied both the art and religious thought of this land with great enthusiasm. Many of his paintings pay homage to this influence and much of his thinking correlates with the Buddhist sympathy for nature, and desire for peace. Van Gogh writes of the Japanese artist who is interested not in examining such issues as politics or cosmology, but in depicting a single blade of grass:

> **but this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant and then the seasons, the wide aspects of the countryside, then animals, then the human figure. So he passes his life, and life is too short to do the whole.....Isn't it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers? And you cannot study Japanese Art, it seems to me, without becoming much gayer and happier, and we must return to nature in spite of our education and our work in a world of convention. (Letter 542)**[70]

It is the simplicity of the Japanese that Van Gogh relates to, how they blend their lives in harmony with nature, becoming as one with the flowers, the birds, and the grass. This is truth displayed in unity, which Van Gogh describes as *almost a true religion.* By this I believe he means a way of life, in which people are pleased to be true to themselves and live in harmony with each other in a simple way, manifesting the essence of the true self that Merton so plainly describes.

Van Gogh and Merton both seek wholeness and light; Merton calls it a 'dim light' and Van Gogh paints in such a way that the true light, or wholeness in all things can be seen. The next four chapters of this thesis seek to exemplify how this takes place, how Merton and Van Gogh study and employ the light, the darkness, in very visual ways, and how this applies to their spiritual pilgrimage towards true self and true art.

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[69] Edwards, C. 2004 *The Shoes of Van Gogh* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.) p. ix: Forward by Henri Nouwen.
[70] Shoes, p. 131

Chapter 1
False Self/True Self: A Van Gogh Self-Portrait

Thomas Merton's dialectic on the *true self* was born out of his life-time concern to answer the most fundamental existential questions: *who am I?* and, *what is my purpose and calling in life?* To begin, Merton's formative years proved to be a critical time in the development of this line of thought, since his unusual childhood experience frequently involved being geographically on the move, with either one or both of his artist parents. Despite the disruption caused, it birthed in him a great love of travel and discovery. Merton's autobiography, journals and books are replete with echoes of all his physical transitions, which form the outer context for his innermost travels. It seems to me that the journeys (which combine physical acts of movement and a vast intake of the visual outside world) ask the questions of life, and the answers come in the still moments, when Merton stops to reflect and process all of this outer experience.

In a similar way, Vincent van Gogh asked much the same questions, and set himself on various missions to succeed and be accepted as a true person. He desired to be valued as a real artist, and struggled to be understood as an artist with a unique style and voice. He would not accept anyone else's version of who he should be, whether the suggestion came from a controlling parent figure, an art critic, or well-meaning friends. Unfortunately, the recognition of Vincent as a true artist came rather too late as, for the most part, it came posthumously. Nevertheless his blueprint of determination, and some possible 'answers' to the questions of many other pilgrim-travellers, are located in his paintings, which make them invitations to wholeness; the wholeness that Merton embraced fully, and which Van Gogh sought throughout his life, though it was a painful process.

The Pilgrimage towards the True Self

We discover from Thomas Merton first of all the conditions in which one finds him or herself on a type of pilgrimage towards an obtainable true self. Merton's pilgrim identity unfolds by undergoing transitions and unpeeling layers of the *false self* on the journey deep within. His inner journey has its physical parallel in the context of the monastic pilgrim community both east and west. This journey cannot be set out in black and white as a clear map to be followed. There is no easily discernible beginning and end point, but rather it is more like a path gathering other paths around it like concentric circles, interweaving in endless possibility.

The journey to the true self is deeply personal, and in Merton's case it is a journey into darkness and the abyss, into contemplation and loneliness[1], into literature and poetry, art and photography. Beyond this, there is the exploration of other religions, whose physical counterpart is played out in his later pilgrimage to Asia.[2] The journey is multifaceted, and each facet provides a means for the self to reinvent and emerge renewed. Although we would perhaps expect, or wish, the pilgrimage to follow some regular sequence, there are instead many ways to begin, and many new beginnings to be made. As Merton explains, to *find* oneself, on such a journey, is paradoxically also to lose oneself.[3] Before one can begin this journey, he must realize the state of his lost-ness, and this is a period of significance *before* the journey of which Merton speaks.

[1] This loneliness is however an accepted loneliness, as Merton has chosen to live within the confines of the Trappist Monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, where monastic vows of silence are undertaken.
[2] See Merton, T. 1968 *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (Edited by Burton, N., Brother Hart, P., & Loughlin J.) (New York: New Directions Publishing Co.).
[3] Merton T. 1961 *The New Man*, (London: Burns & Oates) p. 13.

The Prodigal Experience

The pathway that precedes the true pilgrimage is that of prodigals, that is the lost, wandering and confused. The fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel harbours a trilogy; a subset of parables of lost things, the order of those being a *lost sheep*, a *lost coin* and a *lost son*. There is a subtle difference between the three, and this becomes apparent when they are read sequentially. The first recounts how sheep have a wandering nature and often stray into new pastures. The second explains how a coin may fall accidentally from a woman's bridal headdress, and this, too, is an unintentional loss. The son however, in the third account, is the only one who *willingly* plans to escape the familiarity and safety of the everyday, and ends up losing *himself*.

The first parable tells of a young man who grows restless following the daily routine of home life. He knows there is a legacy set up for him, and that in coming of age he will be eligible to receive it. Rather than waiting though, and against the custom of his time, he asks for his portion of the legacy in advance. In making his decision, and with his father permitting, he eagerly takes the money from his inheritance, and starts on a journey which leads him deeper and deeper into a land unlike his true home, where he has no restrictions upon him and follows his own desires. In Luke's account of the parable the son "journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living".[4]

A *prodigal* journey then is not like a pilgrimage, although it may usefully be seen as a type of forerunner. It certainly ought to be recognised as a quest for new experiences, seeking a new life, bearing the seeds of one's need for self-transcendence. Yet the prodigal participant is still masked; he is starting out with foolish and selfish motives, blinded by the temptation to indulge in short-term pleasures. The aim of this son is to go and enjoy his father's inheritance while young, and he is unable to see and predict the reality and pitfalls of the journey ahead. By the time of his return, though, he is

[4] TNOB p. 1218: Luke Ch. 15 v. 12-13.

awakened, in Merton's terms, to his *true self*.

He returns, envious even of his father's hired men, and hungry for whatever small mercy his father may show him. Awakened to the cold light of reality, he is stripped of the first of many masks, his egocentricity and pride. Having fallen into the valley of disillusionment, he is ready to uncover his true self, to start the ascent of the heart upon the mountain of *true* pilgrimage, where the pursuit is of truth, and not arbitrary pleasure.

There is a paradox in the heart of this set of parables. It may seem as if we are searching for God, finding a way back to him from out of the wilderness and the briars we are entangled in, as was the lost sheep; but in actuality, the parables teach that it is he who is searching out the one which was lost, like the woman in search of her coin. This is true in the case of the lost son too; the father *could* have engaged in a proactive search if he wanted to, or deemed it necessary. Instead, the father chose to bide his time and allow the son to fully *see* that he was in the lost place. He knew it would bring about the turnaround from lost to found, inclusive of the son's recognition and repentance.

This *true seeing* ability is part of what it essentially means to find one's true self, and therefore it holds true in converse that the former self is blind, or masked, and darkness will be experienced on the road towards the true self. Since sight and vision are so important to art and art practice, we should therefore be able to detect when art is true, and occasioned by a *true artist*, since it will be art stripped of the scales of illusion and falsity. This is what may be accessed in the case of Thomas Merton and Van Gogh, whose art both enters and emerges from places of darkness and suffering, into contemplation, and progresses with pure intentions and personal integrity; therefore it becomes credible to say that theirs is a *true* art. There is the clarity and purity of vision detectable in Merton's body of calligraphic drawings, and there is the change from dark to light in the palette of Van Gogh when he travels south, to Arles in the final stage of his artist career, where, for instance, he invites the palest pinks and softest peach tones into his studies of apple and peach blossom and we sense he has harnessed at last his

vision of a land blessed and invigorated by the sun, but not just a nod to the Japanese prints he so admired, they are the flourishing colours of an artist *really seeing* and representing truth, light and honesty, even if he himself suffered from an interior darkness of depression.

The parable of the prodigal son has invoked both art and writing, as for instance the writings of Henri Nouwen stem from a deep appreciation for the inclusivity of both the visual and the spiritual. Nouwen lived from 1932 to 1996, and was a renowned priest, author and professor who wrote over 40 books on the interior life.[5] His book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1994)[6] bears the same title as the famous painting by Rembrandt, now housed in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.[7]. Nouwen's enthusiasm for this painting is remarkable; he literally adopts it to himself as a visual life motto, and sees aspects of himself reflected variously in all three figures.

First, he looks back to himself as the rebellious and wandering younger son, and then as the dutiful yet envious elder son. Then gradually, and certainly from the time he enters the L'Arche community in Trosly, France, to work amongst handicapped people, he begins to sense a call in his life to become a father figure, openly and unquestioningly receiving wanderers home. [8]

The painting has as its focus the summation of the young man's journey wherein the touching reunion and embrace of father and son are watched somewhat detachedly by

[5] http://www.henrinouwen.org/henri/about (21st June 2005): Born in Nijkerk, Holland, on January 24, 1932, Nouwen felt called to the priesthood at a very young age. He was ordained in 1957 as a diocesan priest and studied psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In 1964 he moved to the United States to study at the Menninger Clinic. He went on to teach at the University of Notre Dame, and the Divinity Schools of Yale and Harvard. For several months during the 1970s, Nouwen lived and worked with the Trappist monks in the Abbey of the Genesee, and in the early 1980s he lived with the poor in Peru. In 1985 he was called to join L'Arche in Trosly, France, the first of over 100 communities founded by Jean Vanier where people with developmental disabilities live with assistants. A year later Nouwen came to make his home at L'Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada. He died suddenly on September 21st, 1996, in Holland and is buried in King City, Ontario.

[6] Nouwen, H. 1994 *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Darton: Longman & Todd).

[7] ibid p.7-8.

[8] ibid p. 5: Nouwen carried out this role of the Father in his work at the L'Arche Community, in the village of Trosly, France, among the mentally handicapped, where he felt called to work upon resigning his teaching post at Harvard University.

the elder son[9], along with two other unidentified figures acting as witness. Nouwen's testimony to the painting is that it brought him to a place where he could identify his own personal need to be welcomed and made to feel safe:

> **My intense response to the father's embrace of his son told me that I was desperately searching for that inner peace where I too could be held as safely as the young man in the painting.[10]**

The Land of Unlikeness

The journey upon which Merton invites his readers to follow has also its starting point in the valley-place, the land of *unlikeness*, where, metaphorically speaking, the soul is distant from God, and unlike him. [11] The self, having made itself lost from *the likeness*[12], has to find its way back to the native land, to the *true likeness*. This is why the journey starts in the wilderness, in the lost place, for, as with the prodigal son, one does not know that he is lost until he finds himself there.

Merton's terminology can be traced back through the long line of tradition embedded in western mysticism, whose exponents include for example: St. Augustine (354-430), St. Bernard of Clairvaux, (1090-1153), St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), The German Theologian Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) and the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). [13] One connection is to a 14th Century writing by Gerhard Zerbolt (1367-98) entitled *Spiritual Ascensions*. Zerbolt belonged to an association known as the *Brethren of the Common Life*, a reform

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[9] The elder son has expressed his disdain at the father's jubilant welcome for the wastrel younger son.
[10] ibid p. 17.
[11] Merton T. 1961 *The New Man*, (London: Burns & Oates) p. 88-89.
See also: http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/10 (23rd June 2006): Merton was likely familiar with the first published collection of poetry bearing the title *Land of Unlikeness*, by Robert Lowell in 1944. In this collection Lowell was charting his conversion from the Episcopalian to the Roman Catholic Church, in a backlash against Puritanism.
[12] TNM p. 88: This likeness is more than a representation; it is the word of God himself united to our soul.
[13] Bishop, D. 1995 *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press)

movement begun in 14th C Holland.[14] This group were dedicated to the *Devotio Moderna*, closely adhering to the pattern of life set out in the classic text *Imitatio Christi* (ca 1418) by Thomas à Kempis. [15]

Spiritual Ascensions takes the image of a traveller falling from a high mountain to a low valley, and starting once again his ascent; the application is to a spiritual journey since the ascent begins from the heart:

> **Briefly recall then whence, how, and why you ought to make this ascent. Once you were established on the high mountain of your natural and primordial dignity, but you willingly fell headlong into a certain low valley. You must therefore leave this valley and ascend once again the mountain from which you fell. But before you begin to climb, erect a ladder in your heart, arrange a certain means of advancing, by which you may better climb out.** [16]

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[14] http://www.etss.edu/hts/MAPM/info3.html: (25th June 2005): Devotio Moderna ("modern devotion") refers to a movement for the renewal of the spiritual life that began in Holland during the late C14th and was influential in Germany, France, and parts of Italy. Both Catholic and Protestant reform initiatives reflect the influence of theological emphases found in the Devotio Moderna. These include an appeal to the original simplicity of Christian faith in a "golden age" now evidently lost; a call to clergy for a truly holy life; a valuing of the interior life with a corresponding lack of stress on the Church's institutionalized aids to salvation; criticism of formalized acts of piety together with any naive reliance on the external aspects of religion; an insistence that the knowledge of God lay open to scholar and illiterate peasant alike; a soteriological urgency in the face of both human sinfulness and the ubiquitous reality of death; intense and emotional meditation to the suffering of Christ; an interpretation of the Eucharist that stresses the sacrament as mediator of an intimate relationship with Christ. You should be able to spot roots of these features in both Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, and also their influence on Erasmus. The classic text of the movement is St. Thomas a Kempis' The Imitation of Christ, but the principal founder of the movement was Geert de Groote (1340-84). Groote - who was never ordained priest - became a missionary preacher in the diocese of Utrecht but had his license withdrawn because of the vehemence of his criticisms of ecclesiastical abuses. The Devotio Moderna was successful amongst laity and found institutional expression in the Brethren of the Common Life: associations of laity and non-monastic priests who were called to practice a disciplined life within their existing callings. The monastic form of the movement was found principally amongst the Windesheim Canons, a community founded in 1387 under the direction of Florentius Radewijns.

[15] A Kempis, T. 1997 (originally written: 1379 or 80-1471) *The Imitation of Christ: The first English translation of the 'Imitatio Christi'*/edited by Biggs, B. (Oxford; NY: Published for the Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press) see also: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/kempis/imitation.html: (18th July 2005): (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1949, c1940): For five hundred years, this gentle book, filled with the spirit of the love of God, has brought understanding and comfort to millions of readers in over fifty languages, and provided them with a source of heart-felt personal prayer. These meditations on the life and teachings of Jesus, written in times even more troubled and dangerous than our own, have become second only to the Bible as a guide and inspiration.

[16] http://www.etss.edu/hts/MAPM/info3.html (20th February 2006).

The land of *unlikeness* can be compared to the *far country* described in the parable of the lost son. Ultimately, the son yearned to return to the *likeness*, homeland where the true self is reunited in its drawing close to the father. This likeness to God is the crux of the true pilgrimage journey, and any other journey is confirmed to be a prodigal one.

For Merton, the awakening of the real self is the fruit of contemplation, where new life is aroused as if from sleeping, and embraced in spiritual wonder. The *ladder* which Merton employs is the ladder of inner pilgrimage, rising from the ashes of a former life. Before the journey, or soul's ascension, can begin there must be a separation of the two selves within us, both of which are striving for the upper hand. As with the biblical twins, Esau and Jacob, it is a birth-struggle for predominance, with one seeming to clutch tightly at the other's ankle when we want him to let go. Merton describes one as the *false self* and the other is the *true self.*

The false self lives out a life of illusion, fulfilling selfish desires and the need for status and group approval, and is seldom prepared to stand alone. The true self meanwhile is the self relinquished from its former masks of deceit, and made whole by its relationship to God. To have this relationship one must start on a quest, one must set out actually to *find him*, and in doing so, find and regain his true self. Furthermore, by a curious twist of Merton logic, the only one who can teach me to find God is God himself. [17]

Entering the Chrysalis: Transformation and Preparation

The harsh experience of the prodigal grants him true insight, and he emerges from under the mask of selfish ambition to become a humble and repentant new man. Merton speaks of the first rebirth of the soul that is akin to the experience of entering a chrysalis, and emerging as a new creature. One has first of all to recognise the *necessity* of this experience, which calls for the iconoclasm of all the false images and idols we

[17] Merton T. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 1961, 1972 (Kentucky: Abbey of Gethsemane, New York: New Directions) 34-36.

contain within us; in brief, the breaking free of the *false self.* [18] This initial realisation and disposal of alienation and falsehood is an inner equivalent to the physical first separation from the womb, making it a painful but essential disturbance from a place of comfort and platitude.

The chrysalis event represents a certain *intentionality* in seeking the true self, the model for which we have first of all in the monastic poverty of Thomas Merton, who *gives up everything* in order to gain it back again.[19] This is a time to enter the darkness, the desert, the cloud of *unknowing*, which are all metaphors for the pure solitude that one must enter into, that which is so essential in the Merton journey.

The self is moulded into true *likeness*, becoming humble and honest about both its strengths and weaknesses, and, though alone, is awakened to its interdependence with all of humanity, and its vital relation to God. A pattern is established with Merton's insight that man is not *an island*, but belongs to the great continent that is humanity. For likewise it follows that in order to love, one must be loved, to receive one must fully give, to be saved one must sacrifice himself utterly. However, paradoxically, there must necessarily be a prior time of independence from humanity in the initial discovery of the true self. This principle is clearly set out in Merton's book *No Man is an Island* (1955):

> **We cannot find ourselves within ourselves, but only in others, yet at the same time before we can go out to others we must find ourselves. We must forget ourselves in order to become truly conscious of who we are.** [20]

This finding of ourselves first can only be done in solitude, as the self comes to see where it is placed on the prodigal journey, and comes to its senses; truly conscious of where it should be going, to the place of home in God and then in others.

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[18] NSOC p. 110: Enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip you soul of images and let Christ form himself in you by his cross.

[19] Merton T. 1955 *No Man is an Island* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Inc.) p. 16: 'We become ourselves by dying to ourselves. We gain only what we give up, and if we give up everything we gain everything'.

Nouwen testifies to the power of art, in the Rembrandt, to help one to find the call of homecoming. For him, the power of the visual supersedes the power of the text of the same story. In the *visual image* of the prodigal, Nouwen also sees himself fully, recognises his condition and formulates a change in direction for his future path. This is an instance of the function of a parable to *interpret us*, as it tells us who we are. Art can achieve this role-reversal by giving us as it were a double sided mirror, to see with true vision, the wholeness and completeness of the message, and also the recipient of the message, and the physical carrier of the message.

'Finding ourselves' in Solitude

The crux of Merton's directive is the finding of *ourselves first*, that crucial preparation for a life ready to be found and find in others its sweetest consolations and approvals. We seek to find ourselves, that is, our true selves, to which we are in many respects blinded by our intuitive egocentricity. This legacy of childhood is smashed when the will is submitted to the light of the mirror of our true self, found in the hallway of solitude and repentance. Solitude may seem to capture us as in prison, but it is there that the chains of the false self will be firmly removed and laid to rest. Merton understands that:

> **Those who have found solitude are empty...They have advanced beyond all horizons. There are no directions left in which they can travel. This is a country whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by standing still. Yet it is in this loneliness that the deepest activities begin. It is here that you discover act without motion, labour that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and beyond all desire, a fulfilment whose limits extend to infinity.**[21]

[20] ibid.

Types of 'Self'

In order to fully appreciate Merton's desire for and journey towards the true self, it is beneficial to examine some other definitions of the self, and how others have informed him in the formulation and construction of an ideal true self, with the correlative destruction of the false self. In the physical sense, Merton entered the monastic life having grown sickened and disillusioned by his own false self. It was an amalgam of the monotony of life lived for materialistic ends, the unfulfilled desire for fame as a writer of novels, and the realisation that a life of endless social engagements and a string of relationships could no longer satisfy his deep inner needs.

The ways of describing and defining the self are vast, and Merton adopted the ones he could best identify with. Such labels as individual, secret, insatiable, illusive, selfish are variously attributed, and these will be looked at in turn. Merton goes beyond the prescription of fixed labels, although he does examine these. With him there is room for an on-going appraisal of how the self can be transformed or made new. The idea of the self as *solitary*, as opposed to *individual*, is important in Merton's thinking. The individual looks to the group for self -assurance and guidance, while the solitary leaves the pack, to embark on the somewhat painful, yet essential journey into the deepest self, which is the means to find himself truly.

Merton builds upon the thinking of the 6th century Syrian, Philoxenos, who sees the individual as enclosed and limited by the laws of collective existence, *individual* but never alone, which means that he fails to discover his true identity.[22] This person sees himself as an individual but depends on an *illusion of omnipotence*, which means that he is always seeking to maintain irresistible images of himself as he would like to be.[23] This is a false self who denies that he has any real needs, for he wants to be seen as self-sufficient. As he certainly does have needs, *he creates an awareness of himself as one*

[21] NSC p. 61.
[22] Merton T. 1964 *Raids on the Unspeakable*. (New York: New Directions Publishing,) p. 14-15.

who can immediately satisfy those needs as they arise.[24] This is clearly the case of one putting on a mask of illusion. The location of this false self Merton calls the *social womb*, a warm place in the collective myth, but not a place where one can think for himself, and be free. Merton reasons that:

> **…..because we live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive. Our capacities for joy, peace, and truth are never liberated. They can never be used. We are prisoners of a process, a dialectic of false promises and real deceptions ending in futility** [25]

By way of remedy for this individual self, Merton details the format of his emancipation, by taking one of two paths at a crossroads; one can follow the active or the contemplative life. The ancient distinction between the *via activa* and the *via contempliva* have their biblical precedents in the two female characters, Martha and Mary.[26] The blueprint of Martha adopted into the *via activa* liberates the self by service to others, and so forfeits what Merton calls the *enslavement to necessity.*[27] The second way, following the pattern of Mary listening at Jesus' feet, is seen as the model for *an advance into solitude and the desert,* and it is the way Merton himself chose. It is, in his own experience:

> **….a confrontation with poverty and the void, a renunciation of the empirical self, in the presence of death, and nothingness, in order to overcome the ignorance and error that spring from the fear of "being nothing".**[28]

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[23] ibid p. 16.

[24] ibid: Merton continues: 'It is like an unborn child in the womb, whose limbs and senses are developed and ready to use independently, but he cannot until he is born.'

[25] ibid p. 17.

[26] TNOB: NKJV p. 1211: Luke 10: 38-42: 38 Now it happened as they went that he entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus feet and heard his word. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached him and said, "Lord do you not care that my sister has left me alone to serve? Therefore tell her to help me." 41 and Jesus answered and said unto her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. 42 But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

[27] Raids p. 17.

[28] ibid p. 17-18: Merton continues: "The man who dares to be alone can come to see that the "emptiness" and "uselessness" which the collective mind fears and condemns are necessary conditions for the

These words are expressive of pain, loneliness and suffering; therefore the second path, the *via contempliva*, is not the easy option, it is a pilgrimage into a type of death to the self; that is the illusive and selfish, ambitious self, to find truth in the midst of real fear. Anguish is not always overcome but it can be embraced with peace. Furthermore Merton discovers a mission, an all-embracing love for others, which is that: "the solitary, far from enclosing himself in himself, becomes every man. He dwells in the solitude, the poverty, the indigence of every man." [29]

This seems to me the crux and purpose of Merton's *true self*, and the reason why he can bear and rationalize his painful journey. As his true self, he partakes in the koinonia (fellowship) of walking alongside the other. Merton shares in the desert experience, as did Christ, knowing hunger, dereliction, and the temptations common to every man. The true self is a solitary experience but paradoxically that which leads us into the communal experience, the fellowship of all true selves, even in sharing the utmost poverty.

The Self as a Paradox

Merton, again in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1964) refers back to the works of Eugene Ionesco, an Existentialist thinker, and an exponent of the Theatre of the Absurd. In the *Rhinocerous* for instance, again we find this focus on the *individual* who is displayed as a paradoxical entity; for however much he aims to be individual, he is just as much a *universal man*. This man is in a perpetual rush; having no time to find *himself* "he blunders with the tunnel vision of the rhinoceros, headlong into the prison of necessity". [30] He will observe his reflection, but he will never take the time to contemplate what he

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encounter with truth. It is in the desert of loneliness and emptiness that the fear of death and the need for self-affirmation are seen to be illusory. When this is faced, then anguish is not necessarily overcome, but it can be accepted and understood. Thus in the heart of anguish are found the gifts of peace and understanding.'

[29] ibid p. 18.

[30] ibid p. 19: The problem of Berenger is the problem of the human person stranded and alone in what threatens to become a society of monsters. When Berenger finds himself suddenly the last human in a

is a reflection of, (which is in fact an image of totalitarianism). Ionesco advocates man's freedom from this void, and urges that he should reclaim the gift of *time*, where he has left himself no time. Too much of life is taken up with carrying the 'burden of necessity', and Ionesco remedies this by the suggestion that man ought to allow that things might be enjoyed for themselves, without necessarily having to be *useful*. Merton is then able to apply this to art as well, in saying that "if one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art".[31]

The Insatiable and the Secret Self

Henri Nouwen, in *The Inner Voice of Love* (1996)[32] speaks of the *insatiable self*, as one who requires to be noticed and desires to present him or her self in the best light. A conflict arises between how we view ourselves and how others see us, since our own perspective is often highly self-critical and perfectionist. As with Jesus we are faced with the temptation to *do something spectacular* faced with pressure from family and others to present ourselves as the best we can be.[33] Again it is the voice of the *collectivity*, or group, that we are programmed to answer to, with its subsequent demand for our conformity. As Merton perceives, we are *becoming more hopelessly mortgaged to collective power* which first of all increases your needs, and then demands that you pay for them in full.[34]

Merton demonstrates in his life journey how greater benefit comes to the individual when he first of all finds his true identity in solitariness, before he is soul-equipped to

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rhinoceros herd he looks into the mirror and sees that he no longer resembles anyone. He then becomes a monster, as the last man in a rhinoceros herd.

[31] Raids p. 21.

[32] Nouwen, H. 1996 *The Inner Voice of Love, A Journey through Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Image Books)

[33] Ibid (in MTW, p. 60)

[34] Raids p.16.

return in his true self to partake in the *collective dance* of which Kierkegaard speaks.[35] It is Kierkegaard too that speaks of the *secret self*. Kierkegaard's views were in some respects like Merton. He held the opinion that man is more than just a *rational animal*, and that we must take account of man's *passion*, for passion does not yield merely to logic, and in order to capture the true essence of a person, one needs *the cunning and craftiness of a spy*.[36] In paying detailed attention to people and things we are following clues, seeking out and pinpointing the *secret self*, and thereby perceiving light through what appears to be dimness. It follows from this that one who has gained the enlightenment of the true self already can become a seeker for the seed-life of the true self in others; a spy for the secret self can help bring the other to recognition of *their* hidden light. An example of this could be that of the portrait artist, spying out the hidden corners and depths of his subject and bringing them to light through his unique vision, into the new image that, by permutation of artist materials, his hands and eyes alone can translate. Van Gogh is a spy for the secret self in his own self-portraits, and in portraits of others, which are discussed later in this chapter.

A Journey into Minds

Merton's formulation of the true self has links with his postgraduate thesis on the work of the English poet and artist William Blake (1757-1827). Merton credits Blake with the development of his own consciousness of *the necessity of a vital faith*, and said that it was directly through the works of Blake that he was enabled "to become conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world which was charged with the presence of God".[37]

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[35] MTW: 38: (Original Source: Kierkegaard, S. 1954 *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) p. 51.)

[36] ibid: 33: (Original Source: Kierkegaard, S. 1962 *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* (New York: Harper & Row) p. 89.)

[37] SSM p 190-191: See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blake (07 February 2007): Largely unrecognized during his lifetime, his work is today considered seminal and significant in the history of both poetry and the visual arts. He has often been credited as being the most spiritual writer of his time.

He was certainly also informed by steady readership of poetry and literature, along with his following of the worlds of art and music, and this is a journey into a world of minds. It is revealing as to just how culturally broad-based were Merton's insights and reflections. He was a great enthusiast of the Irish novelist James Joyce (1882-1941) and he experimented with his own writing by trying to force the plot of his own novels into the mould of the 'anti-plot' that Joyce was renowned for. Like many other would-be novelists who styled themselves on another, this was a certain failure; it was for one a sure example of wearing a mask of illusion instead of trying to find his own voice.

Merton also read the work of the poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) whose poem *Song of Myself* (1855) addresses both widely and succinctly the whole area of the self. There is found here a self-celebratory, self-absorbed self which at first sight appears at odds with Merton's ideal *true self*. Yet, on balance, it comes across as an all-encompassing self which gazes at, and imbibes the whole of humanity together with itself; nature, animals, war and peace, man and woman, life, death, love and hate. In this instance, Whitman, like Merton *becomes every man*. The concept of *hidden wholeness* can now be traced in part to the poetry of Whitman and others, and this is a place where Merton may have made many 'connections'. Whitman begins his long poem with the lines: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."[38]

There is a sense here that along with his own conception of self, and the celebration of it, is the portrayal of all selves as equal, sharing in living and breathing on the earth. Whitman's speaking of the grass (in the 6th stanza) recalls, and invites comparison with Merton's photograph of a single blade of grass. Whitman personifies it as a child, as one without partiality for the place of its growth "growing among black folks as among white".[39] The grass knows no divisions; it teaches a lesson of unity, even a lesson of life in the midst of death, where it seems to Whitman "the beautiful uncut hair of graves".[40]

[38] Whitman, W. *The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman* 1995 (Herts: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.) p. 26
[39] ibid. p. 27.
[40] ibid.

This ability of Whitman to discern such hidden symbols living and speaking in nature helps to confirm that many messages are lying in wait for those with the ability to truly see, with the transformed vision of a true self. Van Gogh was able likewise to discern the mysteries of nature, and bring them to light. Inaudibly speaking, yet, through the medium of art, Van Gogh seems to grasp at our senses, shaking us into a new depth of perception as we gaze at the revelation of nature's passionate voice translated into the language of colour and form.

The 'I', (or we might say true self), for Whitman, is, as he says, "not contain'd between my hat and boots" but rather it is preferably seen to be "the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself" (7th Stanza)[41]. Like Thomas Merton and Van Gogh then, Whitman expresses an ultimate longing to be a friend and helper to others; yet on balance, before this communion is possible, he requires, as they do, time alone. This is the inner adjustment between isolation and companionship that gives wholeness to the true self. In the 10th Stanza, Whitman describes how it feels to be in solitude: "alone for in the wilds and mountains I hunt, wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee."[42]

This need for solitariness was the hallmark of artists and writers such as Merton and Van Gogh. Indeed Van Gogh was a man who suffered many frustrations *because* he did not enjoy being alone, and yet his art undeniably thrived in this imposed isolation. It is almost as if the frustrations, the energy, the pain and hunger that were felt within surfaced on canvas as a bright and explosive commentary on life.

Van Gogh did succeed in being able to mortify in himself the false categories of religious institutionalism, and had no care for the judgmental opinions of others. Yet he

[41] ibid. p. 32.
[42] ibid. p. 34.

was caught in a limbo situation between a type of shadow self and his real self, particularly in the turmoil arising in how to live his life outside the confines of a strict upbringing. For Vincent, even to begin to be true to himself, he had to endure a certain amount of personal suffering as his own views were often taken to be controversial to those of his family, and caused upsets. Low self-esteem, as a result of constant family criticism and belittlement, contributed to the false shadow self that would often imprison him in despair. For Van Gogh the contemplative experience formulated itself into the cathartic and often purgatorial experience of painting. He worked through his difficulties and emotions in a dramatic surge of artistic energy. One example is how his self-portraits sometimes contain the hint of a self-punishing or self-harming of his own image, as if he felt guilty and despising of himself.

Merton, on the other hand, deliberately chose a life of monastic solitude; it was for him the recognition of the will of God, a homecoming call to the land of true likeness where he could be moulded into God's pattern for him. Merton's acceptance of solitude brought him a lasting peace; though it was certainly also a painful sacrifice for Merton to relinquish much of human contact in order to follow a pilgrimage within his soul into darkness, in order to retrieve light. Solitariness then is the shape of that chrysalis wherein the true self is formed, in the darkness yet nurturing warmth of the womb. Here the self is stripped of the masks of pride and selfishness, and re-clothed with humility and new vision.

A life of dedicated solitude would have been much more difficult for Van Gogh to accept, than for Merton, and yet, without an official monastic label, he did experience a rather solitary life. He was a troubled and wounded soul, but experienced some satisfaction in following his choice to pursue art as a life calling, art which manifests the pilgrimage to his true self. The communication of his deep self with every created thing, with humanity and with God, resulted in an art that can be said to be both his prayer and his life. As Merton said in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1964):

> **In all the situations of life the "will of God" comes to us not merely as an external dictate of impersonal law but above all as an interior invitation of personal love.** [43]

It is certain that Van Gogh loved what he painted, and loved to paint. His paintings too can be seen as invitations of personal love; they bear the seeds of a deeply communicative self, who poured his questions, comments and answers, as if to real people, into his works, housing soul and spirit in a body of paint and canvas.

The Mask of the False Self

The true self is often despised, and seen as weakness; not many have so bravely faced the face of humiliation as Van Gogh, have stared plainly into the abyss as Merton, have succumbed to the dark night as St John of the Cross. In the face of darkness it is possible to retrieve light, light which is hidden everywhere beneath the masks that people wear. M. Basil Pennington, a Trappist monk and author (who is himself clearly indebted to the works of Merton), describes the false self as:

> **This self which we construct and which in turn imprisons us and makes us serve it in varying degrees of misery. (He asks the question): How can we die to the false self if it is the only self we know? If we die to the false self and we do not know the true self, where are we?** [44]

Pennington's question demands that we look carefully at the situation we find ourselves in as there is evidently a danger in the state of 'almost' but not quite finding the true self, and thereby never finding our true identity. If this is what happened to Van Gogh, the middle ground became a downward path of depression, resulting ultimately in suicide. He may have been searching hard to find his identity and purpose but time and

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[43] NSC p.21.
[44] Pennington, M.B. 2004 *True Self/False Self, Unmasking the Spirit within* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.) p. 36.

time again came up against barriers, and his desires went unfulfilled, especially the desire to love and share in normal family life.

Living out the true self is a costly enterprise; it cost Van Gogh the reproach of his family, friends, the loss of love, and misunderstanding. He stood in the gap and repaired the breach for others, he made a social gospel of his art and life, but he found no one to love him in deeply personal way. Although his brother Theo maintained a genuinely supportive relationship, he too bent under financial and familial strain, and could not in the end fully suffer with Van Gogh the depth of poverty that he had to suffer, in despising all else but his calling to art. In a letter dated 30 June 1890, Theo aired his worries to Vincent:

> **At present we do not know what we ought to do; there are problems. Ought we to take another apartment - you know, on the first floor of the same house? Ought we to go to Auvers, to Holland, or not? Ought I to live without a thought for the morrow, and when I work all day long not earn enough to protect that good Jo from worries over money matters, as those rats Boussod and Valadon are treating me as though I just entered their business, and are keeping me on a short allowance? Oughtn't I to be calculating, if I spend nothing on extras and am short of money - oughtn't I to tell them how matters stand?** [45]

Vincent was alarmed at the frank admission from Theo, and took it to signify that he himself was becoming another heavy burden to his family.

For Merton too, there was a cost; he laid aside a promising career as a college lecturer; he gave up his personal, and as he saw it, selfish ambition to be a successful writer, in

[45] http://webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/21/T39.html (20th January 07): Original Source: Theo van Gogh. Letter to Vincent van Gogh. Written 30 June 1890 in Auvers-sur-Oise. Translated by Mrs. Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, edited by Robert Harrison, published in *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh, 1991 (Bulfinch)*, letter number T39.

order to fully live this life as a call to prayer. Later he would face a huge challenge as, surprisingly, he fell in love with a woman, a nurse who attended to him during a stay in hospital. He struggled internally with his natural affections, but decided in the end to remain truly committed to his vows of celibacy, and to his new identity as a Father, Father Louie, by which name he was known in Gethsemani. Fortunately, he discovered that God was willing to use him as a writer even besides the confines of monastic life, as his writing was recognised as a special gift, and encouraged by his Abbot, James Fox, Merton went on to produce many renowned books.

Van Gogh did largely reveal his inner self before others, especially in art. In a sense he made himself naked and exposed, just as in a figure drawing, and not only of himself but of others too. For instance in the drawing of the young prostitute Sien Hoornik (with whom Vincent temporarily shared his home) he exposes both her scrawny body and her *sorrow* all at once, depicted in her hunched and despairing posture ('Sorrow' (1882) (Fig. 4.) being the title of his portrait of her, authenticated by his own handwriting). In essence Van Gogh was an open and true person, and reacted against a society which sought to cover up its secrets and shame. In doing so Van Gogh faced painful rejection from a deeply morally upstanding family, but he remained faithful nevertheless to charitable ideals, and the pursuit of love and acceptance for who he truly was, and not a shadow or false Vincent.

No physical nakedness is evident in his self-portraits, but it could be said that he is still exposed by other artistic stratagem, by the sense of emotion and truth in these works. By means of facial expression, posture, and even manner of dress, there comes forward the inner nakedness or representation of deep-seated meanings and intentions. As Van Gogh once admitted, in reality he felt a *deep anguish* and he wished to express this rather than hide or suppress it. His inner journey can be traced in his art and letters; his pilgrimage to the true self involved this necessary exposure of himself to the scrutiny of the light of truth. In his overcoming of the false self, or personage, he accepted that the price would be the rejection and misunderstanding of many others. Another paradox is

that while for Van Gogh the exposing of his true person had a disconcerting effect on others, primarily his family circle, yet when Merton, through his writings, put the idea of the true self, and his own self, under the spotlight, it attracted others. Redeemingly though, Van Gogh *now* has a truly unique drawing power through his art, signified by the popularity (and also the sheer value) of his works held at the Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, and many other Museums world-wide which house collections of his work.

Revealing the Self: Portraits and Self-Portraits of Merton and Van Gogh

One of the most interesting areas of commonality between Thomas Merton and Van Gogh is their love for and adherence to creative processes, whether in art, photography or writing, and their tendency to self-portrayal and self-analysis through artistic device. As a means to make connections, to find a link between Merton's definition of true self, and the arts, it is useful to look at some of these *'portraits' of self.* There are photographs of Merton, and then self-portraits painted by Vincent Van Gogh, which take a frank and honest look at the self. Both of these are images of *unmasked* selves and therefore the more compelling.

Furthermore, to highlight an aspect of Merton's contemplative self, we have a rich heritage in the collection of photographs of the very subjects he chose to focus his attention on in the grounds of the monastery, such as the trees, stones, isolated plants and grass. John Howard Griffin remarks that: "in these works, he photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation, seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it".[46]

In and around his simple hermitage he made images of everyday things; the Coleman

stove, a ladder against the wall, or splattered tins of used paint. (Fig.5-6.) Everything communicated something to him, and he found the blessing of the hermit life to be living *in the fullness of time* in God's kairos, where the whole idea of time is approached in a new way. "We are free to love. And we must get free from all imaginary claims" such as "the feeling, the sickness, that we have to keep on the move all the time".[47]

Merton had some close friends outside of the monastery environment, including the photographers Eugene Meatyard, and John Howard Griffin. The friendship with Griffin developed out of his interest in making a visual record of important figures, (who he felt would later be historically important) and he applied to the Father Abbot of Gethsemane for the purpose of making a photographic record of Merton. Normally Trappists forbade publication of any 'recognizable' image of their monks, permitting only back views or blurred images, but they accepted Griffin's request, along with a promise not to publish without permission. [48]

Merton, Griffin and Meatyard discovered between them some common interests including a love for jazz, art, poetry and literature. Upon Merton's call to monasticism he initially felt compelled to lay all of these kinds of things aside, even the love of writing, in order to come to know his God, or at the very least to serve him. This was a very great sacrifice for Merton to make considering his unmistakable talent for writing in particular. It also would reveal the paradox of Merton, as an outgoing and gregarious person, widely enjoying friendships and various interests, yet at the same time, prepared to enter a life of reclusion and virtual silence as a Trappist monk, only setting aside occasional days to meet with friends during the year.

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[46] Merton T. 1970 *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.) p. 50: Griffin also ascertains that these photographs do not need to be studied, they need to be contemplated if they are to carry their full impact.
[47] ibid p. 49.
[48] ibid, p. 36: Griffin's archives include portraits of Jacques Maritain and Nobel laureate Dominique Pire.

Gene Meatyard's photographs reveal a diversity of character in Merton, bringing a unique visual response to each side of this gregarious personality. Meatyard said that he was striving to make a *kind of surreal poetry of the visual.* [49] The two were aiming to create poetry; one with words, and one with the camera, and both had an interest in Zen Buddhism, with its existential view of the world infiltrating their craft. It was no wonder that Meatyard enthused in letters to Merton for a joint exhibition of their work, combining Merton's poetry and calligraphy with his photographs.

Meatyard was an influence on Merton to fire up once again his interest and participation in the arts. Merton had been neglecting this aspect of his self, certainly because of his duties and lack of free time, but it became as urgent for him to create, as it was for Meatyard. Thereby Merton could participate in the divine work of creation, the very creative act becoming a prayer, in its participation within utmost creativity. Merton produced some beautiful photographs himself, recording images of the very things he contemplated, and what better means of bestowing praise and honour to God, than in *this* form of prayer, the one which lay at the centre of God's will, by acting in the true self as an artist.[50]

Both Merton and Meatyard referred to masks as alternative forms of identity. Through Merton's writing of the *false self*, he spoke of this self as masked and under illusion. Then he wore a *mask for the whole person* in the form of his costume, the monk's habit.[51] A series of photographic work, the *Lucybelle Crater* series, by Meatyard, shows his subjects wearing fantastic masks. Some are identical masks in different pictures; one a transparent mask to age the wearer, the other a Hallowe'en witch's face. This includes *'Lucybelle Crater'* (1970-1972) (Fig. 7.) and *'Lucybelle Crater & her good, good Mertonian friend Lucybelle Crater'* (1970-1972) (Fig. 8.) And may one not assume with some certainty that this 'Mertonian friend' is indeed Thomas Merton? Another very interesting image from the same genre is *'Romance of Ambrose Pierce'* (1964) (Fig. 9.) where Meatyard uses both the masks and body posture of his subjects to express apathy

[49] ibid p. 28-29.
[50] ibid p. 3.
[51] ibid: Davenport spoke of Merton wearing a mask for the whole person, the habit lent him an alternative identity as 'Father Louie'.

and disillusionment alongside the appearance of horror. Perhaps this is why Merton, in *'The New Man'* (1962) alludes (as first referred to in the introduction to this thesis) to the 'terror of being a person' using words which link to ideas he has seen expressed by Meatyard in the visual. No wonder then, with proximity to this intriguing artist, that the imagery of the mask is found often to infiltrate the writings of Merton on the subject of the self. Meatyard's interest in the mask, as a photographer, is both visual and insightful. As the editor of the book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Davenport explains that:

> **Gene is interested in what happens to the rest of the body when the face is masked. A mask, like an expression, changes the way we see feet and hands, stance and personality. These photographs are both satiric and comic; their insight, however is deep. We are all masked by convention and pretence. Merton would have said that we are masked by illusion.** [52]

Rather than mechanically recording fact, Meatyard sought to capture the essence of his subjects.[53] The first thing we notice about these portraits of Merton is the diversity: from monk and tobacco farmer, to the musician (playing drums) and poet. A diversity of roles, characteristics and personality traits are detected and then captured in Merton. Some are evidently the result of a collaboration between the artist and his subject, (or we could infer, between two artists) while the majority follow the elusive ploy of the photographer, taking images of Merton unawares. Meatyard was aware of Merton's humility and honesty, his laughter and sobriety, and wanted as much as Merton did, to find and portray his true self, albeit this time through the lens.

To have a photographic record of Merton (not withstanding photographs *by* Merton) is hugely interesting. Davenport, for one, points us to its value, even the potentiality of writing which will be generated from it. And is it not also the case that more can be generated from this material than writing alone? There is encouragement here for all

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[52] ibid p. 29.
[53] ibid p. 32.

who seek to unite their art with their inner journeys, as means to unite all our divided worlds. Merton shows how to draw divided worlds together in many ways, in writing, poetry and prose, in calligraphy and photographs, and many times in discussion and written correspondence with those of other faiths, and of none.

It was seldom practical for Merton and his friends outside of the Trappist community to meet often. Merton and Meatyard maintained an alternative line of correspondence, writing letters. In a letter dated 8/2/67 To Merton, it is evident that Gene is seeking for a connection with art and with words.

> **Dear Tom,**
>
> **...Would you be willing to try something in an experimental vein? If not just say so and it will be perfectly all right with me & I will understand. What I propose is to see how closely I, or any artist can connect with the utterances of another. If you were to send me words, prose or poetry & number of words doesn't matter & I don't necessarily understand the personal or private meaning of them- then try to make a photograph of them! We might also if that works try my abstracted photo first and then your words.** [54]

Meatyard wanted Merton to feel he had joint mastery of the project, and this was an openness characteristic of them both. In response to Meatyard's proposition, there is Merton's response, dated Aug 15: "Dear Gene...I like very much your suggestion of trying something experimental; poems and pictures. Let's think about that."

By this reply it is clear that both parties were willing for the creative experience to work in either direction, or indeed to go in any new and experimental direction, in the hope of finding these new 'connections' between artists.

[54] ibid p. 65.

Van Gogh: Self Portraits

As a counterpart to the Merton portraits, it is valuable to look another time to the self-portraits by Vincent Van Gogh. Vincent's paintings are like pages of a diary, in fact an entire autobiography, since he painted on a daily basis. His self-portraits in particular read as the days when introspection and self-appraisal are necessary.

First of all there is the quite flattering early portrait, *Self Portrait with Dark Felt Hat* (1886) (fig. 10.) which shows Vincent with swarthy skin and a trim beard that is painted dispassionately in subdued tones of red; Vincent dressed in a handsome black suit, poised elegantly. He was certainly feeling self-confident at the time, with a look of calm assurance and hope. It seems to reflect that he knows what his life is about, he is a young artist, ready and waiting at the brink of the success eminently due to him.

This self-image is in some ways reminiscent of the handsome reflection of Albrecht Durer in his *Self-portrait with a Fur Coat* (1500) (Fig. 11.) This young artist is fashionably dressed and has his hair styled in long ringlets, touching his shoulders. Schneider sees it as an idealised version of the artist, (as perhaps is Vincent's first portrait) and its composition is understood by Winziger to be indebted to the underlying structural principles of medieval systems of proportion and triangulation, which, notably, is in keeping with paintings of Christ in the same era.[55]

However, Durer had already painted himself in flattering style, and was simply up-keeping his image, perhaps even elevating himself to a likeness of Christ; while Vincent, product of a different era and mindset, would bear witness to his own deterioration over the years in frank pictorial honesty.

[55] Schneider, N. 2002 *The Art of the Portrait, Masterpieces of European Portrait Painting, 1420-1670*, (Koln: Taschen) p. 104.

In later portraits Vincent looks older, haggard, tired, pallid; he even seems to exaggerate this ugliness with a sour grimace. This can be seen in '*Self-Portrait*' (1889) (Fig. 12.) which he had dedicated to his artist friend Paul Gauguin. Poverty and the pain of loneliness are etched upon his pinched face. He certainly feels bad about himself, and has no desire to ameliorate what he sees in the mirror; there seems to be no hope, and an uncertain future lies ahead. In his early portrait, the strength of personal faith in God may have given an added beauty to his visage that is lacking later on, for it seems that some of the light has gone out in his eyes. Certainly, the poverty experienced both by himself and others may have been one catalyst for this sense of loss and helplessness, driving him to a crisis of identity, and to fears for an uncertain future.

Not only did Vincent paint his own portrait, he also inspired others to make his portrait, despite the fact that even his closest companions, like Gauguin, believed his distinguishing characteristic to be his so-called "madness". Gauguin's brief, but traumatic, period of co-habitation with Vincent provides a compelling first hand account of which there are not many. One gets the sense that Gauguin is rather less sympathetic and honest than Theo, for instance, who provides a non-judgemental account, based on a much longer period of time, than we find in Gauguin's self-promoting account of affairs. From Theo's perspective Vincent's painting springs not from a frenzy of madness, nor is this his predominant mode of being.

In the letters between Theo and Vincent we find evidence of the true self; Vincent's stability and determination in continuing the mission of painting despite times of duress, poverty, anxiety and loneliness. This could only have been executed by a man with singular vision, and a mind capable of intense human sympathy for others suffering a poverty even more intense and inescapable than his own.

The self-portraits executed by Vincent depict a man suffering in silence as an act of fellowship, making himself an example, a martyr to the cause of exposing and sharing in poverty. Perhaps it was also to make a statement of identification with the 'suffering

servant' in Isaiah 53: 3-4[56]; a subtle portrait of Christ reflected in the mirror of himself. His many portraits of peasants share in this artist's cause.

Gauguin, being less subtle, and in contrast to Vincent, was not averse to the use of traditional Christian imagery which permeates several of his own major works. Welsh-Omcharov, in her book *Van Gogh in Perspective* (1974) outlines the intentions of Gauguin in his self-portraits of himself as Christ. Interestingly, it is asserted that Gauguin sees in Vincent a Christ-like figure, even though Van Gogh would never have raised such a possibility himself.

> **Particularly during the period during his departure from Arles, Gauguin painted a series of self-portraits in which his own visage was fused with that of the suffering or martyred Christ. As such, these portraits reflect a projected visionary identification between himself and the Christ figure that he also attributes to Vincent, albeit indirectly, in the stories of the injured miner and the mutilated ear.** [57]

In Van Gogh's series of self-portraits, he appears as a solitary figure; there are no references to friends or family in the background, but instead the anonymity of plain or mottled colours or of Japanese scenes. Thomas Merton chose the solitary path of the monastic life, finding peace and communion with his own true self in this life. I see Vincent as a kind of monastic figure too in his all but solitary existence, which forces him to see through to his own true self.

Through painting he could commune with his inner feelings, make innumerable decisions concerning, for instance, the composition of a painting, the choice of colour to

[56] TNOB: NKJV, p. 825: Isaiah 53:3-12: 3 He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from him; He was despised and we did not esteem him. 11 By his knowledge my righteous servant shall justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities. 12 He poured out his soul unto death.

[57] Welsh-Omcharov, B. (Ed.) 1974 *Van Gogh in Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.) p. 6.

use, where and what to paint. He was his own best guide in these matters, the meaningful sense of occupation alleviating the otherwise lonely, even futile existence he would otherwise bear. In this way art operates like a mirror in which he can view himself, his inner and true self, and reach out to that self in warmth and affection. At times agreeing with himself when a painting comes to life and shouts that it is a wonderful creation, a beautiful reflection of the character that generated it into existence; likewise arguing with himself in front of the critical eye constantly reviewing his work.

It seems that, through art, Vincent found friendship, or communion, with his own soul, in a self-acceptance that drove him forward in the capacity and enthusiasm to continue painting, and believing in himself as an artist, despite a lack of financial success and the disinterest of people. The paintings are loaded with the integrity of their creator, in turn bearing witness to the integrity of nature and all created things.

Vincent is proved in self-transcendence, that inner yearning to reach outwith oneself and touch the lives of others. It is something that he still achieves today as a hand reaching out through his art to give comfort. In Nouwen's terms, he is indeed *a wounded healer.* [58] This is someone who is able to make his own wounds a source of healing, to be willing to offer the comfort of fully experiencing and understanding the human condition. Van Gogh makes plain the human condition, and his own condition of suffering, in his art and letters. By this he offers hospitality, as the painting becomes a place where others can come and find their wounds visible to their own eyes, through the open wounds of another, and there is no longer any need to hide for the invitation is there to share one's own experience. This artist/healer can "make visible in daily events the fact that behind the dirty curtain of our painful symptoms there is something great to be seen: the face of him in whose image we are shaped". [59]

[58] Nouwen, H. 1979 *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday).
[59] ibid p. 44.

Van Gogh's death was a tragedy brought on by illness, for right up until that day Vincent retained the seeds of his true self, for his works and his life do not represent the false self identified with selfishness and a disinterest in others. In the end, the autobiography of Van Gogh is told both in his many paintings and in his letters. This body of work still has the power to touch and transform the lives of others, often those feeling the struggle to discover their own identity. In his self-portraits Van Gogh reveals his own intensity, his own hiddenness, for he allows us to see, by way of colour and texture, what cannot be seen in physical actuality. Each image is complicated, and this is suggested by the rich tapestry of colour and texture, like basketwork, a lattice work of criss-crossing interweaving lines and rainbow-like accumulation of colours.

As artists paint what they see, they are often aware of a powerful presence of the unseen, and this is harboured into the intensity of their work. Van Gogh employed the brightest colours, to express a vibrancy that cannot actually be seen, but is there *internally*, and he brought it to light by offering up a magical glimpse, (as in the vision of Ezekiel, who saw the Lord in blazing glory like fire, in Ezekiel Ch 8 v. 3)[60] admitting to the painting, as to a stage, that holy presence revealed first to him. Van Gogh's portraits, both of himself and others, bring the truth of character to light. True feeling and emotion emanate from the portraits as he uses colour and light effectively to enhance the mood of the sitter, whether that be of despair, frustration, anxiety, fatigue, or conversely of lightness, innocence, confidence or glee. This is likewise true of his nature studies, of flowers, hills and trees. He injects movement, swaying, dancing, prayer, humility, obeyance, many times into the figure of these humble subjects. He

[60] TNOB: NKJV, p. 924 Ezekiel Ch. 8 v 1-4: And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth *month,* on the fifth *day* of the month, as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. 2 Then I looked, and there was a likeness, like the appearance of fire—from the appearance of His waist and downward, fire; and from His waist and upward, like the appearance of brightness, like the color of amber. 3 He stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the north gate of the inner *court,* where the seat of the image of jealousy *was,* which provokes to jealousy. 4 And behold, the glory of the God of Israel *was* there, like the vision that I saw in the plain.

finds in them and reflects through them the hidden qualities endowed in them by God, and he takes his vision out into the open for all to see, what otherwise they cannot see, for it is a gift to the artist to both see and reproduce the spirit of things. The art then becomes a spectacle of the prayer of all creation; prayer made in secret that is now announced boldly. This prayer is the prayer of wholeness; in the end, art is the confession of the artist to God.

Coming back to the focus of this first chapter, the road to the true self; one can locate his position on the road, is it yet in the wilderness place? Or having built the ladder already for the hearts ascent, is he or she climbing already, though stiff from the cramped stillness in the womb, beyond into the surrogacy of contemplation? This road leads to wholeness. In the case of the two figures under discussion (Thomas Merton and Vincent Van Gogh) this road engages the practice of art, where the self becomes the object of contemplation in the making of a self-portrait. And in the self-portrait, as in the portrait of some other being, a likeness is observed and replicated, as a kind of preview of the land of likeness to which we are destined. Contemplation becomes a mountainous region, that which, in Merton's language, comprises the *summit* of life.[61]

Each portrait, each icon made, each photographic and visual record, is a likeness of something other, numinous, beyond the self. Each journey, micro or macro, provides instances or opportunities for observation, for true looking, for visions of interconnectedness. Untangling the knots of hazy vision, we are to weave and knit the true self from out of the web of illusion, in ditching the false, the loose-threaded masks of the former self. True seeing takes us beyond and through the image we see before us, to see the heart of the true artist who created the work. So we can measure our own selves on the scale of the true self, set before our eyes, and inviting us to see with *true seeing ability.*

[61] TNM, p. 9: *Contemplation is the coalescence of life, knowledge, freedom, and love in a supremely simple intuition of the unity of all love, freedom, truth, and life in their source, which is God.*

Chapter Two:
Purity of Heart as a Prelude to Reaching the True Self

In order to be true, the self must intend to be pure and true; it is to have *pure intentions*. This is the directive of Merton in the book *No Man is an Island* (1955) which directs the self towards the will of God for its true happiness and reward, the plain reason being that *his will is right and good*. This does not lessen the desire or fulfilment of our own good, as Merton explains:

> **...we simply seek it where it can really be found: in a good that is beyond and above ourselves. Pure intention identifies our own happiness with the common good of all those who are loved by God. It seeks its joy in God's own will to do good to all men in order that he may be glorified in them.** [1]

This purity is made a possible attainment when it becomes the desire of unmasked eyes; and the desire for pure intentions is an unselfish one as it demands that mutual respect and hospitality be given among fellow travellers. Hospitality and kindness were ideals of monasticism and Merton adopted its principles from the legacy of many monastic movements in history, including the Benedictine and Trappist movements, and from Anglo-European branches of monastic tradition, which flourished in Ireland and Britain.

In an article entitled *The Spirituality of the Celtic Church* (1985) by Richard Woods, there is found a keen likeness to many of Merton's own principles and beliefs. For one, there is an emphasis in this monastic tradition on the wholeness, or interconnectedness of all things, with thin boundaries between the sacred and the secular. Simultaneously there is the love of nature and the elemental, (a passion shared by Merton, as noted for instance in his affinity for the forest of Gethsemani) and there is the encompassing desire for, and use of, art and poetry, as is found in the illustrated gospels such as the

[1] Merton, T. *No Man is an Island* 1955 (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Inc.) p. 54.

Book of Kells. [2] Woods gives in his article an example of two short poems that treat typically of the importance of hospitality:

> **O King of Stars!**
> **whether my house be dark or be bright**
> **it will not be closed against anybody;**
> **may Christ not close his house against me.**

Again, with regard to an unwelcoming guesthouse, there is this warning against the opposite sentiment:

> **Great the sorrow!**
> **Christ's guest-house fallen into decay;**
> **if it bears the name of Christ the renowned,**
> **it means that Christ is without a home.** [3]

Henri Nouwen in *The Wounded Healer* (1979) writes also of the responsibility of hospitality, for, he asserts, it is *the ability to pay attention to the guest.* Time and patience are required to divert us from the normal preoccupation with the needs of ourselves, as he says:

> **hospitality is the virtue which allows us to break through the narrowness of our own fears and to open our houses to the stranger, with the intuition that salvation comes to us in the form of a tired traveller.**[4]

Hospitality is advocated by Nouwen as a response to the universal condition of loneliness, and his concept of the *wounded healer* is of one who has accepted his wounds as a gift, that he might learn how to bring healing and compassion to others

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[2] Meehan, B. 1994 *The Book of Kells: an Illustrated Introduction to the Manuscript in Trinity College Dublin* (London: Thames & Hudson)

[3] From an article by Richard Woods 'The Spirituality of the Celtic Church' in *Spirituality Today*: Fall 1985, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 243-255 in http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/853735woods.html (23rd June, 06): Father Diarmuid O. Laoghaire describes a series of Celtic proverbs which begin with the word *eochair*, "key." There we learn that if the key to justice is distribution, the key to miracles is generosity.

[4] Nouwen, H. *The Wounded Healer* 1979 (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.) p. 89.

suffering in a similar way. Hospitality becomes a healing force when one is able to pay attention to the lonely, to the traveller, to the pilgrim, but this must occur while at the same time having a pure intention towards the guest. For Nouwen warns us that a wrong intention can prevent us from truly listening or connecting to others:

> **So we find it extremely hard to pay attention because of our intentions. As soon as our intentions take over, the question no longer is, "Who is he?" but, "What can I get from him?"- and then we no longer listen to what he is saying but to what we can do with what he is saying. Then the fulfillment of our own unrecognized need for sympathy, friendship, popularity, success, understanding, money or a career becomes our concern, and instead of paying attention to the other person we impose ourselves upon him with intrusive curiosity.**[5]

Nouwen's version of making our intentions pure is in standing back and quieting our own voices, to allow room to be made for the other to come forward. This is a contraction of the self inwards, which he describes as an *intense act of concentration*; it is a parallel to Merton who speaks of entering into one's centre, and coming out of that centre into God, and finding his true self from within that centre.[6] It is akin to an act of disappearing into a desert place, to lose one's identity, to become anonymous, as the poet Edmond Jabes advocates: "You make yourself void. You become silence...more silent than the silence around you". [7]

Only when silence has been learned and imprinted on a human soul, the silence imbibed from being in such a desert place, can one truly withdraw inwards, to that centre, or central space, which becomes a sacred space. This is what art becomes when it is made by desert hands, the hands of a true self, whose intentions have been purified in the desert, in the dark night, in silence and the void. This purgation of the self, this desert experience is a type of suffering, such as both Merton and Van Gogh knew.

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[5] ibid p. 90.
[6] NSC p. 36.
[7] Jabes E. 1990 *From the Desert to the Book: Dialogues with Marcel Cohen,* translated by Pierre Joris (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press) in Jasper, D. 2004 *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art and Culture* (Malden, Mass., Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd) p. 2.

True art I would suggest springs from the void of nothingness, when the soul has experienced the kenosis of the false self, and has become pure in intention and is free to offer its art as a gift of hospitality to the other. This art is not intended for self or for ambition, nor does it seek to follow any tradition. They are the artists of whom Kandinsky speaks:

> **I value only those artists who really are artists, that is, who consciously or unconsciously, in an entirely original form, embody the expression of their inner life; who work only for this end and cannot work otherwise** [8]

Where hospitality is concerned, the suggestion might be made that it is a gift for the wounded, from the wounded, from those who could be called *wounded healers*. Hospitality runs through the Judeo-Christian tradition, and into the western tradition of mysticism. It appears to have been given special emphasis in early monastic forms of Christianity, later to be revived in our thoughts by writers such as Merton and Nouwen. Merton's *pure intentions* are manifest in his love and passion for nature, art, poetry, hospitality and justice; and his strong advocacy of the hidden wholeness in all, connecting earth to the unseen, but real, spiritual world.

Van Gogh likewise had a certain gift for hospitality, as is manifest when one considers his willingness to forfeit such basics as food and clothing when he observed others, such as his neighbours in the coal-mining district of The Borinage, in conditions of extreme poverty. Another out-performing of this gift can be observed on the occasion of him opening his home, at The Hague, to a prostitute by the name of Sien Hoornik, and her young child, even though it cost him his reputation and the rebuke of his family. In fact, Vincent always suffered most when his offers of hospitality were met with a rebuff by his acquaintances. Such was the case in his deep-felt longing to establish an artist community, which would have consisted of a fellowship of artists living and working

[8] Kandinsky, W. 1977 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications Inc.) p. 7.

together, but he could find none truly willing, beyond a certain point of initial interest, to share in this dream.

The Gift of Hospitality for the wounds of hatred

Hospitality is, undoubtedly, a gift for the wounded, although this gift is not received without pain. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1964) Merton is careful to highlight the pain of disunion with others, for even as we seek unity love's pure intention will bring us suffering by our contact with one another, because *this love is the resetting of a body of broken bones.*[9] The alternative to love is defined by its opposite; hatred, and Merton sees hatred as *the elimination of everybody else but ourselves*, for the hating soul sits wrapped up in its own false ego, blindfolded to the concerns of others. It sees the wounds of humanity, but ignores them, for it is bitter against their unlikeness to him. As Merton explains: "hatred tries to cure disunion by annihilating those who are not united with us...but love, by its acceptance of the pain of reunion, begins to heal all wounds" [10]

Carlo Carretto writes along very similar lines in *Letters from the Desert* (1964). His chapter on purification of the heart echoes the thought of Merton that pain purifies love, in making it *true, real, pure*. Carretto identifies pain as the instrument best wielded in ridding love from that which prevents it from being. "It frees love from pleasure, which falsifies it like a mask. It makes it a gift freely given". [11] With the removal of false love's pleasure, this pure love then becomes unable to bear any sense of false love: "it feels nausea when faced with sentiment. It loathes calculated love". [12]

Carretto begins his desert tale with an account of a personal lost opportunity to love. He and a fellow traveller, named as 'old Kada', were sitting in the cold of the Sahara evening, and Kada was shivering from the cold. Carretto viewed his friend's situation,

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[9] NSC p. 56.
[10] ibid p. 58.
[11] Carretto, C. 1972 *Letters from the Desert* (New York: Orbis Books) p. 32.
[12] ibid p. 32.

and held in his own possession, not one, but two blankets. However, thinking to himself how he too would be shivering in the night, he kept the two blankets while old Kada had none. The next morning he could only feel his 'bad conscience' and the realisation that he had been *too immature to enter the kingdom of love.*[13] And he follows with this confession:

> **The truth is that I did not give my blanket to Kada for fear of the cold night. And that means that I love my own skin more than my brothers, while God's commandment tells me: 'Love the life of others as you love your own'. Love is defined as universal, lying at the heart of all things, but only where 'every vestige of hate, resentment and selfishness has been destroyed by (this) love.[14]**

So we find an essential agreement between Merton and Caretto; selfishness is part of our false and unloving selves. The pleasure of selfishness is momentary and ultimately an illusion, as it soon brings our hearts to a place of shame, and painful memory. This pain and memory however can act as instruments for good, setting the heart toward a pure intention, the desire not to repeat the selfish act which causes pain to our fellow traveller.

Only a person whose journey is taken with pure intention can be *clear-sighted and prudent.* [15] This raises the point that purity is closely related to seeing. Does this not imply, vice-versa, that the more we *see* what is pure and true, the more deeply our intentions will be affected? Seeing clearly could clarify the heart into further purity; there is a reciprocal movement between purity and seeing, as to see clearly also demands pure intentions. This happens in a painting created by an artist whose intentions are pure; the picture he creates allows others to enter into *true seeing*, in turn planting seeds of purity in the hearts of the viewers. On the other hand the person of impure intention is *hesitant and blind.* He is not aware of this "as blinded by his own

[13] ibid p. 4-5.
[14] ibid p. 8.
[15] NMI p. 55.

selfishness, he cannot even see that he is blinded". [16] So to have pure intention one must recognise and overcome his own selfishness as a preliminary step. A simple truth observed by Merton is this:

> **Before the Lord wills me to do anything he wills me to be. What I do must depend on what I am. Therefore my being itself contains in its own specific nature a whole code of laws, ways of behaving that are willed for me by the God who has willed me to be.** [17]

So the first thing God wills, before any requirement of our action, or doing, is simply for one to be truly himself, a person free, discarding the masks of illusion, and not pretending both to himself and others that he is really something he is not.

The Search for beauty

One aspect of the desire for pure intentions in art could be seen as a search for pure beauty. For the visual artist, this could be the beauty of the subject painted, and also the beauty of the finished piece. In 1654 Joost van den Vondel spoke of this pursuit in a poem written for the feast of St Luke, Patron Saint of Painters: "Just as the Sunflower turns its eyes in love toward the vault of heaven...so the Art of painting, from inborn inclination, kindled by a sacred fire, follows the beauty of nature".[18]

Merton himself describes beauty simply as *reality itself*, that which we see all around, yet a reality enhanced, and given value in the special way it is perceived. This perception operates on a spiritual level, awakening the underlying conscience to beauty, whereby Merton asserts that the same conscience is "able to attain some of its highest and most perfect fulfilments when either picking up the brush to paint or in lifting up

[16] ibid p. 56.
[17] ibid p. 57-58.
[18] Mancoff, D. N. *Sunflowers* 2001 (New York: Thames & Hudson) p. 43

the eyes to contemplate a work of art". [19]

Merton implies that there is something of great value in the forms of art, which are not immediately obvious to the casual observer. Taking sufficient time to really look at art, or if music, to listen, will allow that which is hidden to be revealed. The mind is awakened to the intrinsic spiritual and intellectual values that would otherwise remain hidden in works of art. Merton claims that the mind which seeks and responds to the hidden elements in art forms (be they poems, paintings, or pieces of music) embraces a vitality that "lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve".[20]

Merton is challenging us to set our minds to the test of art, and prove the wide spectrum of its capacity, both to reveal, to challenge and to inform, while giving visual pleasure. If the perception of beauty in the pure state can be a spiritual activity, so, by extension, could the act of painting, or the playing of some instrument, not be in fact a form of prayer? Merton supports this analysis as he writes that:

> **Art is not an end in itself. It introduces the soul into a higher spiritual order, which it expresses and in some sense explains. Music and art and poetry attune the soul to God because they induce a kind of contact with the Creator and Ruler of the Universe.** [21]

Contact is made, certainly, but even more than that, we are invited to participate in the very fundamental nature of God, as creator of all things. Sharing in the act of creating something; modelling its form through paint, clay or language, breathes *nous* (spirit) or essence into that work, just as in the Genesis account God breathed life into Adam. The most essential tenet of prayer then, is this fundamental identification with God, sharing

[19] NMI p. 34.
[20] ibid
[21] ibid p. 36.

in the primal act of creativity. We pray therefore, not only in words, but also in *action,* with faith, as the writer of the book of James takes the view that "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead". [22]

Prayer and Faith

By making one's intentions pure, one begins to operate in faith. If, as the Epistle of James argues, faith without works is dead, being alone, the artist can truly see himself as a person of faith. His heart and mind are not alone, his senses not deadened, but rather they are poured into a work which shares in the creativity of God, and so faith comes alive in the work he creates. This can be discerned in a work like the '*Starry Night*' (1889) by Vincent Van Gogh; this is no dead sky, it is host to a celestial dance, a poem, even a sermon, of life and light in the darkness. The sermon is visible rather than auditory, and it takes place not in the church (which as an institution Vincent ultimately rejected) but in the swirling host of the sky, and in the whole of the earth. The lights of the church are deliberately extinguished by Vincent, but the true light of the world is clearly seen in the host of bright stars above the church and houses. Everything is alive and rhythmic, pulsating with life amidst the darkness of night. Vincent's faith is in the God of nature and creation, of life and beauty. It seems almost a parody of the well-known passage in Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 that (3:1): "to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven". [23] Birth and death, laughing and weeping, all these things happen under the one sky, which speaks of eternal time.

If art can be prayer, then the next question to be asked is *what is prayer?* Perhaps it can simply exist as company with God, as with a friend, sometimes with words, sometimes without. Books analyse it and offer many fine examples of prayers, but still it is not certain that it must be confined to the word or to the book. Art makes contact with the

[22] TNOB: NKJV p. 1469: James Ch.2: 17. See also Ch 2: 21-22: Was not Abraham justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22. Do you see that Faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?'
[23] TNOB: NKJV: p. 751: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8.

soul, and if the soul makes contact with God then that may be said to be prayer, or communion. Merton adds that it is when we pray truly that we really are, that is, that we really are alive in the fullest sense, and that our being is "brought to a high perfection by this, which is one of its most perfect activities". [24]

To recollect then, art becoming prayer allows us to be, and to be more perfectly. On the other hand to live in the absence of prayer is to be in a state of spiritual sleep, or death. In order to be filled up with life it seems that we must constantly engage in the outpouring of ourselves, which may be called prayer, and art. For the artist it is an outpouring of his soul into his materials; clothing with flesh the bare bones of his materials such as paint and words, as he engages with the outpouring of God in his subject. The artist facilitates others in turn to succeed in their own outpourings; of words, music, prayer, love and grace. This outpouring could be seen as a type of the outpouring (kenosis[25]) of Christ on the cross, by which action he *emptied himself* in such a way that he became an offering, in a very physical sense as a type of sacrifice. Then also in the emptying of his own will where he was able to say, in the face of suffering 'not mine but thy will be done' his intentions were perfectly pure in that act of prayer to God.

Something of this kenosis is recognisable too in the very physical prayer of Mary when she poured out the precious ointment or perfume of spikenard over Jesus' feet; her pure intention surpassing any thought of the financial cost of her act. John 12: 1-8 records the words of Jesus in response to her, that this act should never be forgotten, but the story repeated often in her memory. [26]

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[24] NMI p. 43.
[25] http://net.bible.org/strong.php?id=2758:Philippians Ch. 2: Kenosis is to empty out or to deprive.
[26] TNOB: NKJV, p. 1255: John 12: 1-8 (also Matt. 26: 6-12; Mark 14: 3-9) John 12: 3 Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

Writers often describe their art in terms of kenosis. Patrick Porter is a contemporary poet and artist based in Denver, Colorado.[27] His work is influenced by the American 'beat generation' writers, and also by the Irish literary figures, James Joyce (1882-1941) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Porter said that "to me writing is how I pray; I'm pouring everything out of myself". His description of art as a form of prayer is that "art is from God, back to God, with sweat and thanks. If it touches others, let it be for the good of God, passing on that little spark, it's a responsibility". [28]

Porter is sensitive, as was Van Gogh, particularly to the suffering that he sees every day on the streets, in the individuals around him, and is dedicated to the portrayal of *truth* in his art. He does not paint any subject falsely, but selects the vagrant, the alcoholic, the isolated individuals in the hundreds of tiny apartment rooms alone with their thoughts, and he says that he creates his art *for them*. One example is *'Man with Shopping Cart'* (2006) (Fig. 13.)

Another relevant figure to this discourse is the American Writer Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), who in fact coined the term 'Beat' for himself and his companions, and is well known for breaking traditional literary ground in his novel *On the Road.* He wrote the initial draft of this book on a 100- foot roll of paper, in the style of what is now termed *stream of consciousness* writing, which is at the time of writing, a pure outpouring. Confessional and unambiguous, his story involves exploits of youthful hedonism and passions. Kerouac's 'Beat' spirituality enabled him to confess on one occasion: "I am not ashamed to wear the crucifix of my Lord. It is because I am Beat, that is, I believe in beatitude and that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to it". He also criticised those (such as TV interviewers) whose tendency was to speak only

[27] Porter, P. *Nervous Halo* 2001 (Beula, Colorado: Arts and Academic Press, Paul Dilsaver Publishers).
[28] Interview with Patrick Porter (7th October 2006).

against others, and formulated this opposing attitude in response:

> **Who knows, my God, but that the universe is not one vast sea of compassion actually, the veritable holy honey, beneath all this show of personality and cruelty. In fact who knows but that it isn't the solitude of the oneness of the essence of everything, the solitude of the actual oneness of the unbornness of the unborn essence of everything, nay the true pure foreverhood, that big blank potential that can ray forth anything it wants from its pure store, that blazing bliss.....no I want to speak for things...why should I attack what I love out of life. This is Beat. Live your lives out? Naw, love your lives out. When they come and stone you at least you won't have a glass house, just your grassy flesh.**[29]

It is striking to acknowledge just how much Kerouac sounds like Merton right at this instance; and could this not just be Merton speaking? There is the sense of the great-interconnected universe, the oneness of all things, like unshattered glass panes, who are casting out love and pure intentions one for another.

True Sanctuary

The artist has found the will of God when he discovers that he is truly called to the vocation of artist and ceases to strive for another place in this world to which he is less suited. Merton compares following the will of God to being in a sanctuary, a place of refuge.[30] For anyone to have pure intention, they must be true to their unique calling and gifts, no longer wearing any pharisaic mask of abstract perfection. As Merton's plain example reads, "it is better to be a good street sweeper than a bad writer, for by doing

[29] *Beat Generation: A Gale Critical Companion, Vol. 1.* 2003 (USA: Thomson Gale) p.21 (Original Source: Kerouac, J. "The Origins of the Beat Generation" Playboy 6, no.6 (June 1959): 31-2, 42, 79.).
[30] ibid p. 52.

things badly we become less real" [31]

Van Gogh faced this particular struggle. As a missionary to the mining community in the Borinage area of Belgium, his whole being and temperament worked against him, making him a figure of isolation and desperation. He became an embarrassment to the overseeing clergy, by giving away his good clothes and wearing rags, by starving himself and becoming unkempt. And although generous and kind, he yet frequently alienated individuals from him due to a harsh temper. [32] At this period in his life, his intentions were honorable, but not pure exactly, not *yet* anyway, for he rushed into responsibilities too heavy for his shoulders to bear. He lacked social grace, and oratorical skills, and obviously was unsuited to the career of an evangelist and teacher. Instead, his real gift and calling was to be in art, and another was hospitality; giving of himself and what he possessed he always shared freely. Fundamentally he was destined only to be an artist, and the closed door to mission work acted ultimately as a blessing to steer him to his true vocation, which he could pursue with pure intentions.

Van Gogh's Sunflowers as a visual symbol of Pure Intentions

The iconic symbol of Van Gogh will forever be the sunflower, as he himself was able to claim in a letter to Theo van Gogh, 1889, that *the sunflower is mine in a way.*[33] The sunflower is an entity of humble beauty and bright cheerfulness, but it has other less well-known symbolic associations of its own, particularly to do with piety and devotion. The history of the Sunflower brings us back to its country of origin, it being *The Golden Flower of Peru* [34], spreading to Europe in the early sixteenth century. The flower was known for its turning *as if in constant worship* [35] with its face towards the sun throughout the course of the day. These sunflowers were an illustration of ultimate

[31] NMI p. 67.
[32] Stone, I. *Lust for Life* 1934 (London: The Bodley Head Ltd.) p. 202-225: For instance, he insulted and alienated his cousin Mauve, his uncle Cor, and Tersteeg (the owner of Goupils Gallery) during his stay at The Hague.
[33] Mancoff, D. N. *Sunflowers* 2001 (New York: Thames & Hudson) p. 12.
[34] ibid. p.15.

devotion, and perhaps one source of inspiration behind the cults of sun worship in the Americas.

Throughout the generations the same flower would inspire in numerous ways, and come to mean many things for different people. "Over the centuries, the sunflower has appeared as the attribute of ardent lover, loyal courtier, faithful spouse, and pious soul". [36]

Vincent, and others, drew strength from having the Sunflower as their symbol of inspiration. Gauguin, during his short stay at the 'Yellow House' in Arles, could see this influence on Van Gogh; the brightness of yellow, which he loved: "those glimmers of sunlight rekindled his soul, that abhorred the fog, that needed the warmth" [37]

The Sunflower is one of a cluster of plants or flowers, known as the heliotrope, meaning to turn towards the sun. In the Roman Era, the Emperor would wear the heliotrope intertwined into a garland upon his brow. At about the same time in the Christian calendar, the sunflower was employed as a symbol to circle the holy figures of the Virgin Mary, the Trinity, and others, crowned with golden sun-like discs, as their radiant halos.

> **The characteristic movement of the heliotrope was seen as analogous to the pious soul, reaching in faith and fidelity towards the divine. To the fifth-century theologian Proclus, the heliotrope symbolized prayer as it turns in praise to a greater power** [38]

In the following centuries it became popular for paintings to portray bright flowers in their still life scenes; these were sought initially in the winter months, to remind families of the pleasure of summer in their botanical gardens. "Flowers depicted in art could lend brightness and beauty to a home throughout the year...and sunflowers became a stable

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[35] ibid.p.11.
[36] ibid.p.11.
[37] Gauguin, P. *'Natures Mortes'*, *Essais d'art libre*, 1894 (in Mancoff, D. N. *Sunflowers* 2001 (New York: Thames & Hudson)
[38] ibid. p. 25-26.

feature of painted bouquets". [39] For example, we have Jakob van Walscapelle Vase of Flowers on a Marble Base, 1672, oil on canvas. [40]

Other paintings attached religious significance to the sunflower, making it a potent symbol, among other symbols in their compositions, for instance in *Vase of Flowers with a monkey* [41] by Ambrosius Bosschaert, there are grapes for the Eucharist wine, a pomegranate for death and resurrection, and the Sunflower to represent the constancy of faith. Otto Van Veen introduced the Sunflower to Cupid, as an emblem of love, yet only *as a shadow of sacred love, which is ever directed toward the divine* [42]

Vincent painted a series of works on this theme during his stay in Arles. His plan was to produce twelve paintings to adorn his studio, or the guest room of his Yellow house, which he had invited Gauguin to share with him. These include the iconic *'Sunflowers'* (1888) (Fig. 14.) Gauguin clearly admired these paintings during his short stay, and held quite a certain belief in Vincent's potential from his own observations:

> **From that day Van Gogh made astonishing progress; he seemed to become aware of everything that was in him, and thence came all the series of sunflowers after sunflowers in brilliant sunshine.** [43]

Gauguin's observation was of a new Vincent, one who shone brightly when in relation to another human being; friendship became his light and this was expressed in the painting of the brightest flowers. It seemed to signify a turnabout in his circumstances, the opposite of loneliness, an affirmation of hope in the present, a hope of devoted friendship, a loyalty to himself symbolized in the loyalty of this flower to the sun. That Gauguin became a disappointing and weak friend was one of the biggest stumbling blocks, it seems, for Vincent's wholeness as a person, and indeed his health. This need for wholeness, in the context of meaningful relationships, was spoken of in

[39] ibid p. 38.
[40] ibid p. 39.
[41] ibid p. 40.
[42] ibid
[43] Ash, R. 2001 *The Impressionists and their Art* (London: Little Brown Publishing Co.) p. 42.

the book of Genesis: *It is not good that man should be alone.*[44] Yet true satisfaction in relationships was to elude Vincent, for despite the best effort of his loyal brother Theo, Vincent had no other devoted friend. The hidden message of the sunflower it seems, to Van Gogh, is that of a deep, and pure, pining for love and devotion, both human and divine.

Vincent could be compared to Clytie, the water nymph of greek legend, pining for and remaining devoted to the ideals of love and devotion. Clytie fell in love with the god Apollo, but the love was unrequited, making her unhappy. Sensing her misery, Apollo was kind enough to bring about a change in her, and her form took on that of a Sunflower, in which guise she could continue to adore her beloved. The flower was now synonymous with the ultimate loyalty to love: "the emblem of submission to love, always constant, never questioning, and grateful for this emotion as a life force, even when the deepest devotion is not returned". [45]

Vincent's pure intentions can be detected in his paintings of the sunflowers, the flowers that raise their face to the sun in an offering of love and devotion, becoming an echo of Vincent's reaching out to offer a glance of devotion to those who might accept his friendship and love. However, were the sun to be removed from the sky, the sunflower would certainly cease to function truly, and so it would die. As Vincent experienced the withdrawal of others from around him, he withered inside, not being able to fully experience himself as a true person.

The Author and Poet, Paul Tournier (1898-1986) wrote *The Meaning of Persons* (1957) and it is both a theological and psychological treatise. [46] Tournier reflects the various ways in which the polar opposites in our lives pull on us, creating an ongoing dialogue between our person, (as Merton's *true self*), and our personage, which is an elusive self.

Tournier expressed the pathway of life as proceeding through powerful, contradictory

[44] TNOB: NKJV, p. 7: Genesis 2: 18.
[45] Sunflowers: p. 23.
[46] Tournier, P. *The Meaning of Persons* 1957 (New York: Harper and Row).

forces: *at each step one hears opposites calling like the Sirens of Greek legend.* The true self is there speaking, but often goes unheard, as the voice of the elusive, and shadow self, or personage, is speaking at the same time, *trying to keep the true self hidden as much as possible.* The personage both reveals and hides the person, only giving glimpses of the person, or true self, when it seems fit or safe to do so. Miller (a commentator on the work of Tournier) finds that "the inner struggle between the person and the personage we have constructed to please others sets us up for making some major choices before we can move on to wholeness". [47]

From this account, it takes a series of choices to locate the true self. The development of the person takes place, not in isolation, but in relation with other people, and through the struggle of dealing with apparent contradictions. When others encounter the presence of another person who is not veiled by his or her personage, it helps to create the conditions for intimacy and deep dialogue.

This sharing of persons is what Tournier believes to be an unlocking in human beings; it is the ability to give and to receive love, and so the authentic person is born. The inner journey is conducted through the maze of opposites, an inner dialogue. The opposing actions of withdrawing and giving of self alternate throughout a person's life; to tell one's secrets is a powerful example of true giving to others, to allow them to become a confidant is to allow them to see beyond the personage. Miller, in his own reading of Tournier, asserts that:

> **No one discovers himself or herself in solitude. It is only by giving of self that one can find oneself. And to tell a secret is to give ones self...It is the most precious gift, the one that touches the deepest chords of humanity. By overcoming the natural resistance to open one's heart, overcoming timidity and constraint, the individual human being becomes a person. At the same time, you the listener have become more of a person because someone has chosen to entrust you with a secret.** [48]

[47] MTW p. 72.
[48] ibid p. 77-78.

In art we can enter into a dialogue with the artist as he meets us there at the painting; at the painting we are entrusted with his secrets and become a confidant. In this encounter we can both, artist and viewer, become friends, become whole persons in our giving and receiving. In this sense Van Gogh and Merton are ongoing friends of humanity; their works in art and writing live on, divulging to us their secrets, and revealing the heart of their true selves to us in the present, as if to be pointers for our own pilgrimage.

A flower is taken and offered as a token of love, and so perhaps on viewing Van Gogh's '*Sunflowers*' (1888) we feel beloved, for the subject of our admiration (the flower) becomes the token of the one who admires us; and offers us again and again the hand of friendship, in the timeless love offering of the sunflower. Sadly for Van Gogh, many times he attempted to be a true person, in the unlocking of himself and sharing of his feelings, it transpired that he would be shunned and alienated. Therefore it could be said that most of his unlocking can be found in his paintings, as it is here that Van Gogh shares his most intimate secrets and dreams.

Van Gogh makes the sunflowers appear as they *truly are*, and not as we humanly see them. He transfigures them and clothes them in their true glory, so that we see them as they really are, and not as they appear. What they *really are* is both subjective to Van Gogh, yet surprisingly universal. It is this desire and longing for the purity of heart that will attract and unite the hearts of all pilgrims on the journey to the true self. It is also the devotion to a life of prayer, in the case of Van Gogh and many others this is by creating art, which pours out of the soul as prayer. This testifies that the vocation of the artist is to pure intention, for by remaining true to his subject and so reflecting its pure essence of glory, the artist has shown himself to be true.

The Lesson of the Flower

Again the profundity of this statement by Georgia O'Keefe comes into focus: "Nobody sees a flower really, it is so small it takes time- we haven't time-and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time".[49] An artist like Van Gogh then is our instructor in the lesson of the flower. He opens up to the viewer the hidden world of the flower and makes it an arresting image, a stop-sign for the passer by. The artist has the time to see, since he is not living for this world, with its time-squeezing demands on life. He uses his timeless energy to invest time into the image of the flower, which in turn becomes timeless. The image of the flower makes us appreciate time, teaches us that beauty is eternal and waiting to be observed and offering a restoration to the weary. It is the paucity of weary eyes that must help to explain the mystery of the enigma of a Van Gogh sunflower painting, coveted above all others. As the picture of a sunflower captures time, so too does a photograph; art redeems the time for us, and an instant is made eternal.

We become alive to all other living and existing things through what Merton calls *true art*. The law of true art is the creative sympathy, or genius, of the artist who can employ the *secret gravitation that draws all things to God as to their centre.* [50] He also shows us that by faith, hope and pure intention, we are seekers of God's will: "Our intentions are pure when we identify our advantage with God's glory, and see that our happiness consists in doing his will because his will is right and good". [51]

[49] Cameron J. 1993 *The Artist's Way* (London: Pan Books) p.22.
[50] NMI p. 36.
[51] ibid p. 54.

God's will is made known to us as a voice speaking to our soul in secret, and it is received by us when *we come to live by nothing but this voice.* [52] When our actions become habitually pure, we act in *simple intention* for we are no longer aware of our intentions at all. Working in an atmosphere of prayer and of simple intention then, the artist can be essentially a contemplative, having followed that secret voice in his soul, and in the outworking of his true vocation. The will of God is also one of those unseen things, requiring faith, which may be defined as a firm knowing, despite whether, or without actually seeing. Merton says that this will *must always remain as much of a mystery as God himself.* As a stage on the journey, this part should retain its mystery:

> **when we speak of God's will, we are usually speaking of some recognizable sign of his will. The signpost that points to a distant city is not the city itself, and sometimes the signs that point to a great place are in themselves insignificant and contemptible. But we must follow the direction of the signpost if we are to get to the end of our journey.**[53]

The *Sunflowers*, indicators of pure intentions, remind us then of the necessity of pure devotion, and the clarity of sight that lead us further onwards into our pilgrimage journeys, and act as a symbol of the personal journey made in the heart of Van Gogh. They can act as a visual counterpart to the writings of Merton on the search for the true self, by operating in pure intentions.

A statement that would bind together the argument of this chapter so far is that *the true pilgrimage* is sought by the *true self*, which by *pure intentions* operates in *love*; and that such a person, if engaged in the arts, will by default be a *true artist.*

To have pure intentions is to be engaged in a type of mysticism that encompasses the heart of all religion. It is an inclusive mysticism that sees the body of humanity, or indeed the Church, made up of *head, hands, feet, flesh, and hard bones*, rather than sheltering its mysticism in an exclusive other-worldliness, or abstract mysticism that

[52] ibid p. 69.
[53] ibid. p. 62.

worships God, without seeing him in all others.[54] The pilgrim figure is engaged in this tradition of the mystical journey, it is an ascent to the very summits of human nature, and costs those who do achieve it a great deal. [55] As Evelyn Underhill says in *The Mount of Purification* (1960):

> **To enter (this world of contemplation) means exchanging the lovely view for the austere reality: penetrating the strange hill-country, slogging up stony tracks in heavy boots, helping fellow climbers at one's own cost. It means renouncing the hotel-life level of religion with its comforts and conveniences, and setting our face towards the snows; not for any personal ambition or enjoyment, but driven by the strange mountain love.** [56]

Hospitality and pure intentions can be seen as twin sides of the same mountain, which is love. As the pilgrim follows these paths, under the guidance of Merton, or any other mystic traveller having gone before, he will find his true self when he is looking towards love as a summit, and is concerned to offer hospitality to his fellow pilgrims on the same journey. The symbol of the sunflower is the same as the symbol of the mountain, they both represent love and devotion, and call for a higher looking, to something above and beyond the materialistic self. The pilgrim too is an apt symbol, as it implies one looking, and travelling towards something above the common life, however long that pilgrim journey is for, it is for one whose true self is always seeking light and truth.

[54] Underhill, E. *The Mount of Purification*, 1960 (London: Longmans, Green & Co.) p. 242.
[55] ibid p. 244.
[56] ibid.

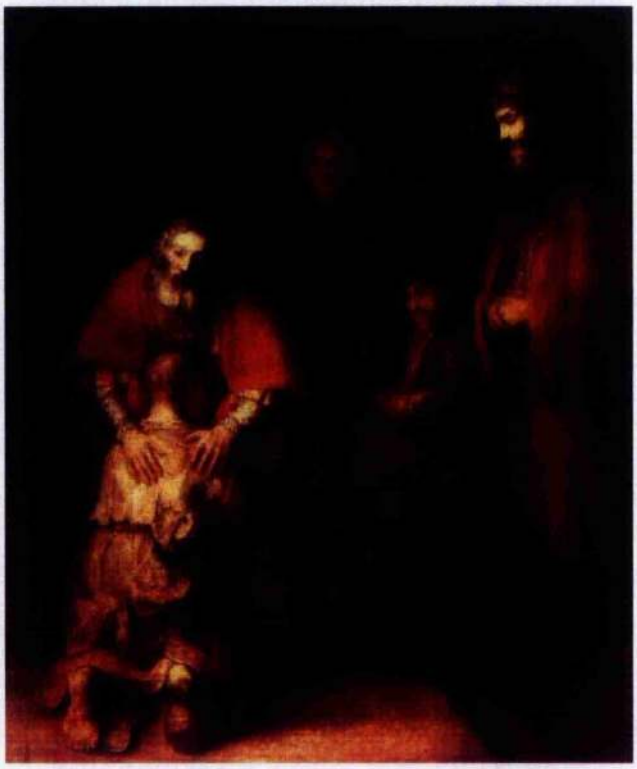


Fig. 1. Rembrandt Van Rijn *'The Return of the Prodigal Son'* (ca. 1622)

Fig. 2. Vincent Van Gogh *'The Potato Eaters'* (1889)

Fig. 3. Vincent Van Gogh *'Starry Night'* (1889)

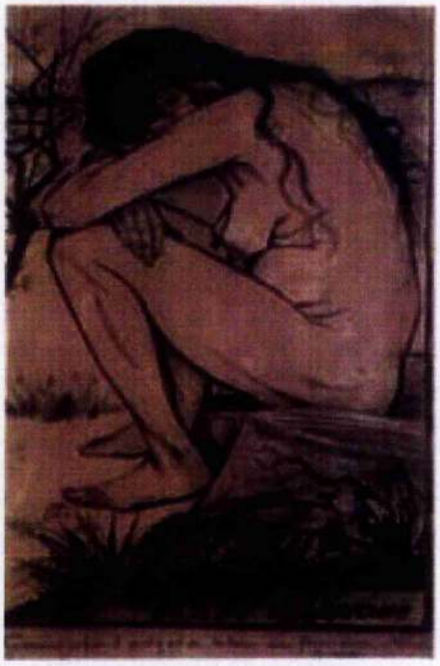


Fig. 4. Vincent Van Gogh *'Sorrow'* (1882)

Fig. 5. Thomas Merton: Untitled photograph of a Coleman stove (ca. 1965-68)

Fig. 6. Thomas Merton: Untitled photograph of splattered tins of paint (ca. 1965-68)

Fig. 7. Ralph Eugene Meatyard *'Lucybelle Crater'* (1970-1972)

Fig. 8. Ralph Eugene Meatyard *'Lucybelle Crater & her good, good Mertonian friend Lucybelle Crater'* (1970-1972)

Fig. 9. Ralph Eugene Meatyard *'Romance of Ambrose Pierce'* (1964)

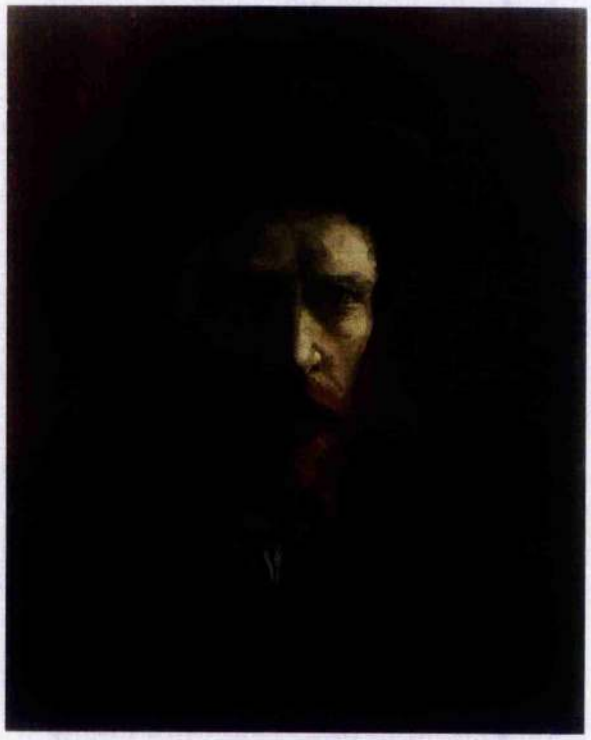


Fig. 10. Vincent Van Gogh '*Self Portrait with Dark Felt Hat*' (1886)

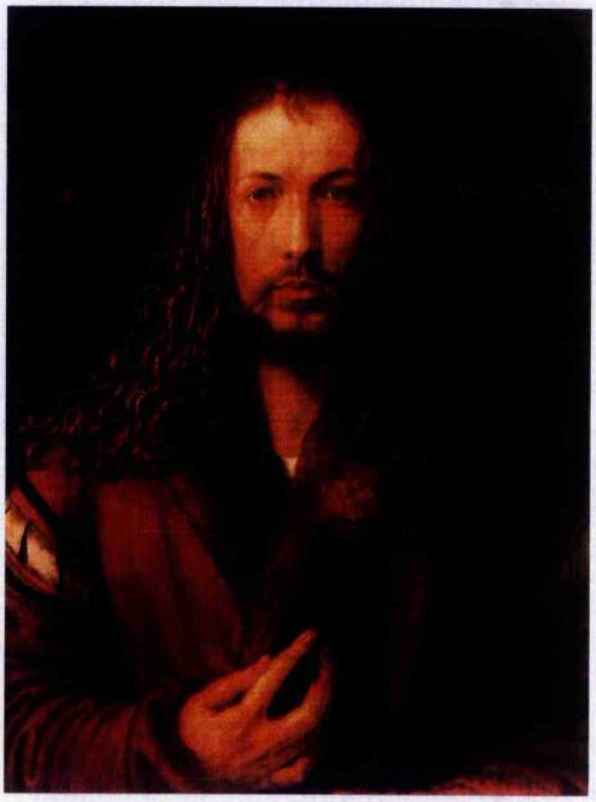


Fig. 11. Albrecht Durer '*Self-portrait with a Fur Coat*' (1500)

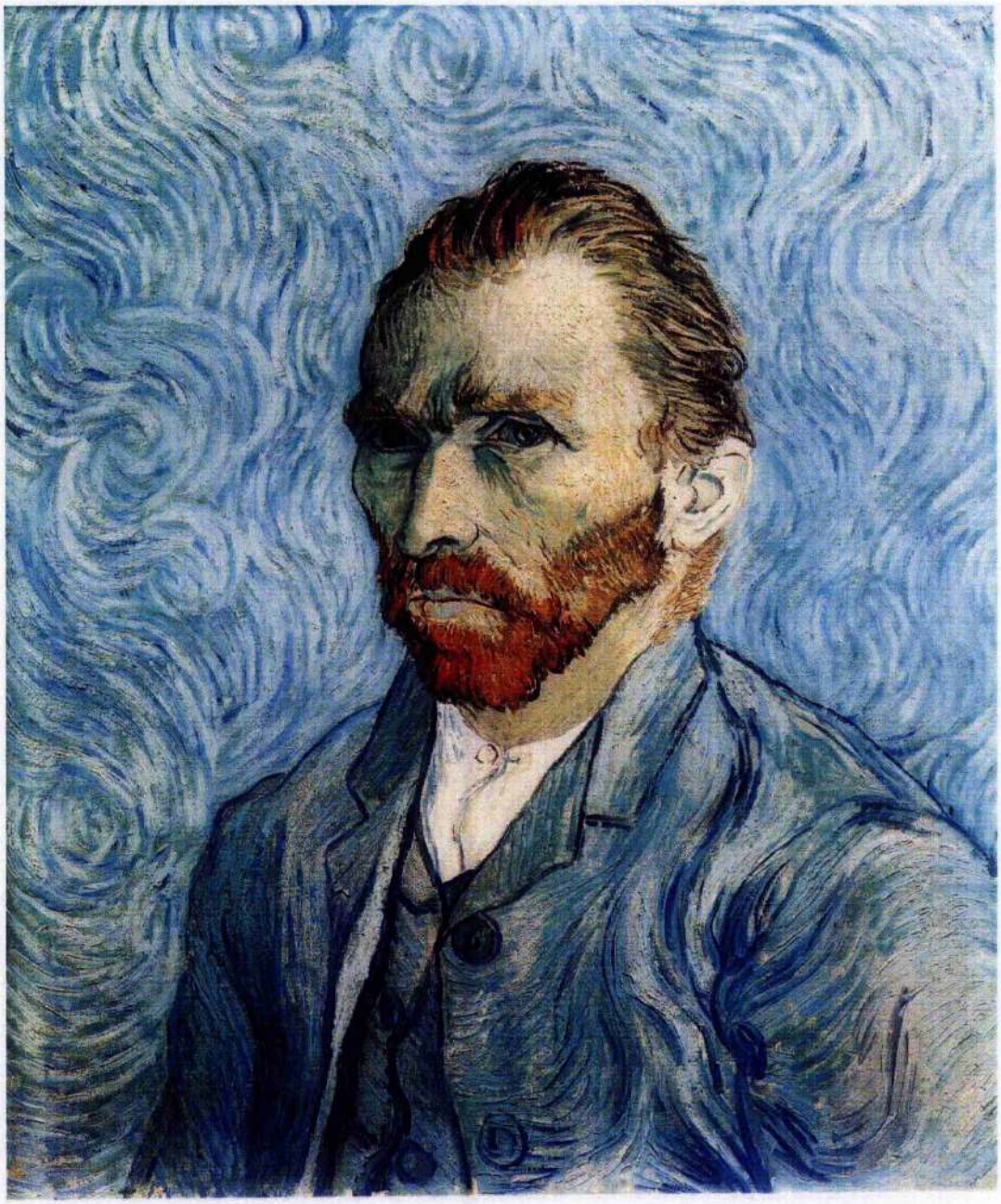
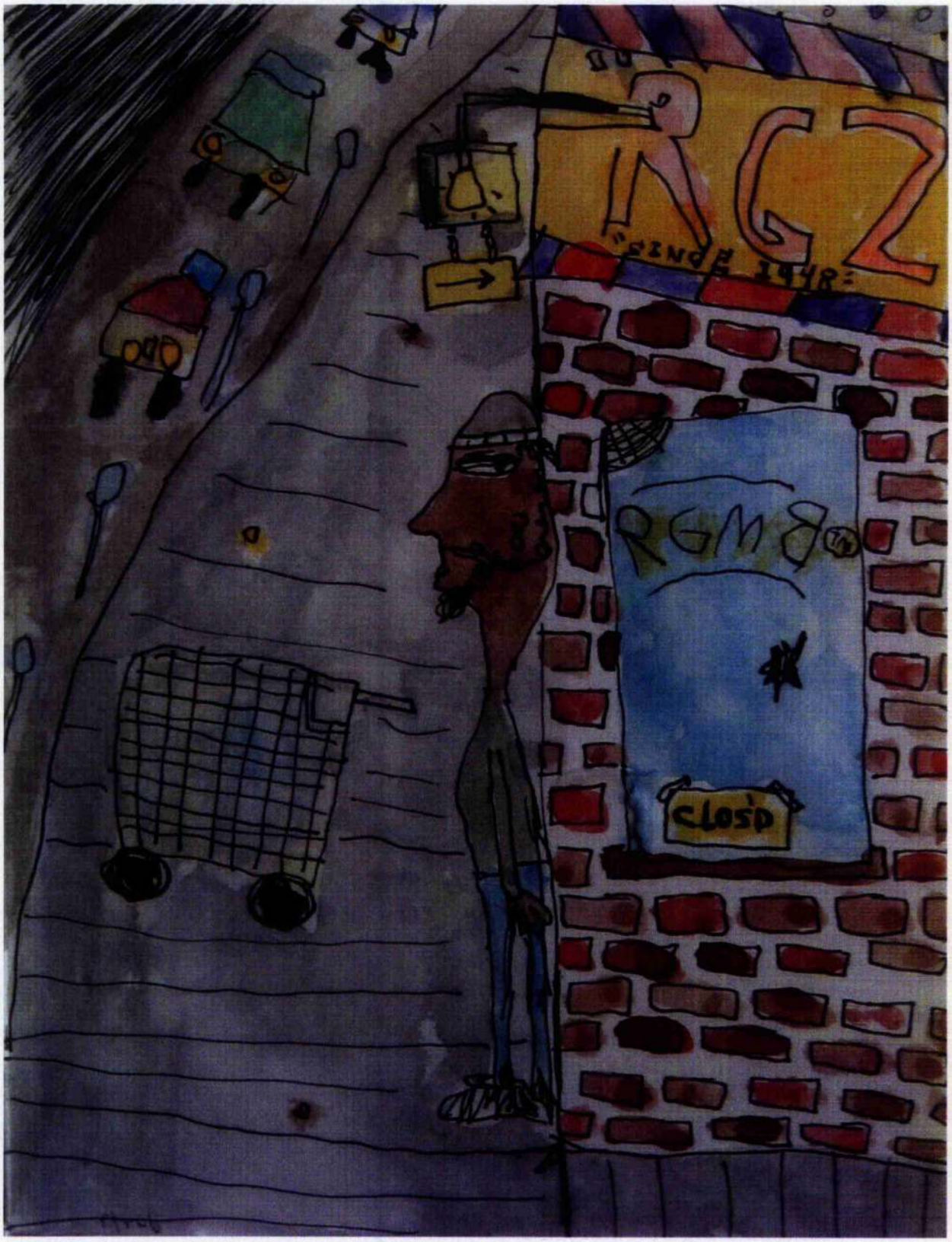


Fig. 12. Vincent Van Gogh '*Self-Portrait*' (1889)



13. Patrick Porter '*Man with Shopping Cart*' (2006)

Fig. 14. Vincent Van Gogh *'Sunflowers'* (1888)

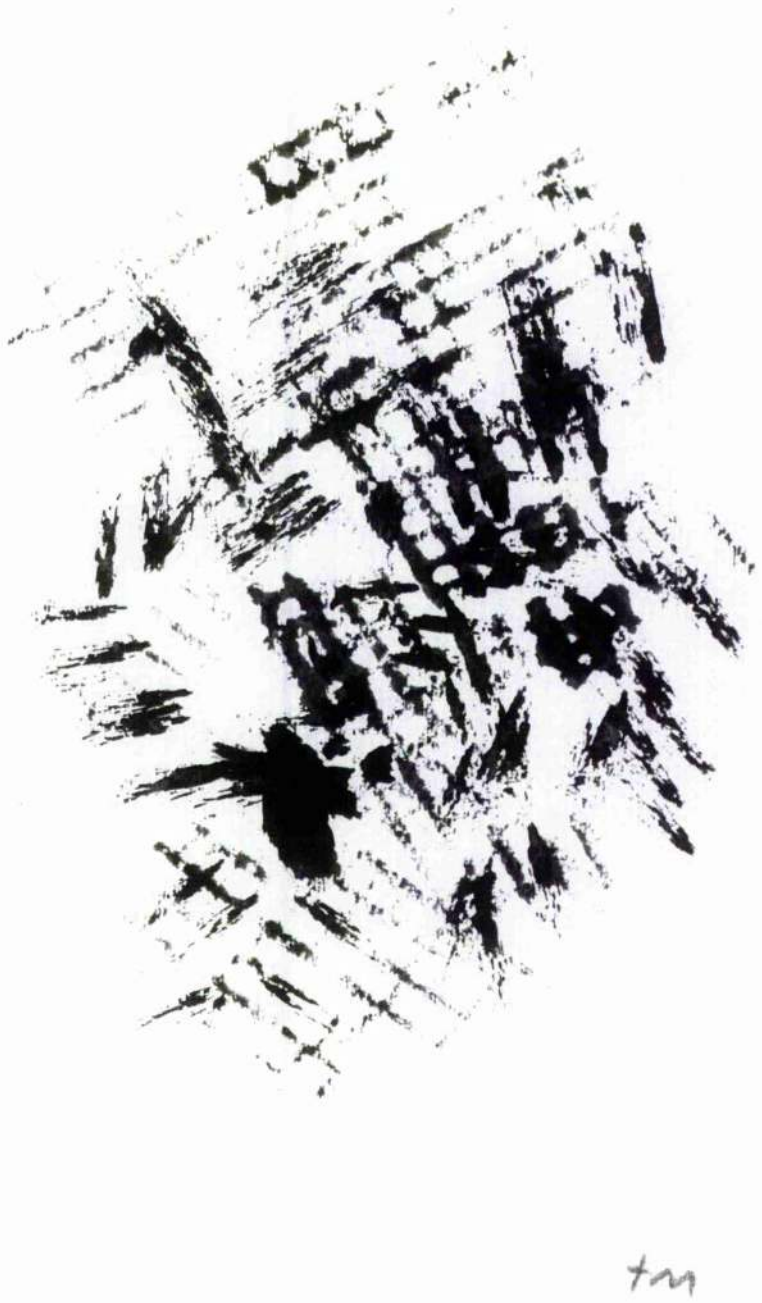


Fig. 15. Thomas Merton: Untitled calligraphy example 1. (ca. 1965-68)

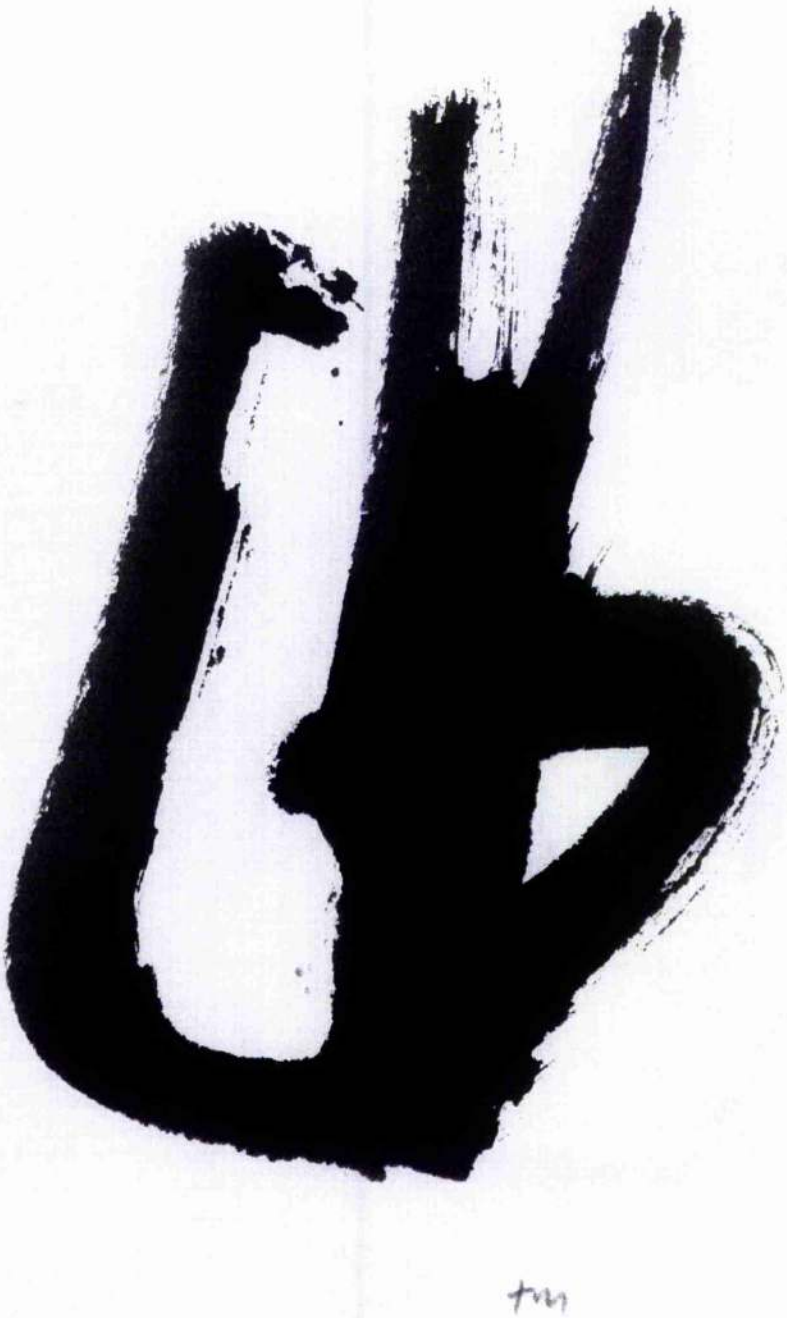


Fig.16. Thomas Merton: Untitled calligraphy example 2. (ca. 1965-68)

Fig. 17. Thomas Merton: Untitled photograph of grass (ca. 1965-68)

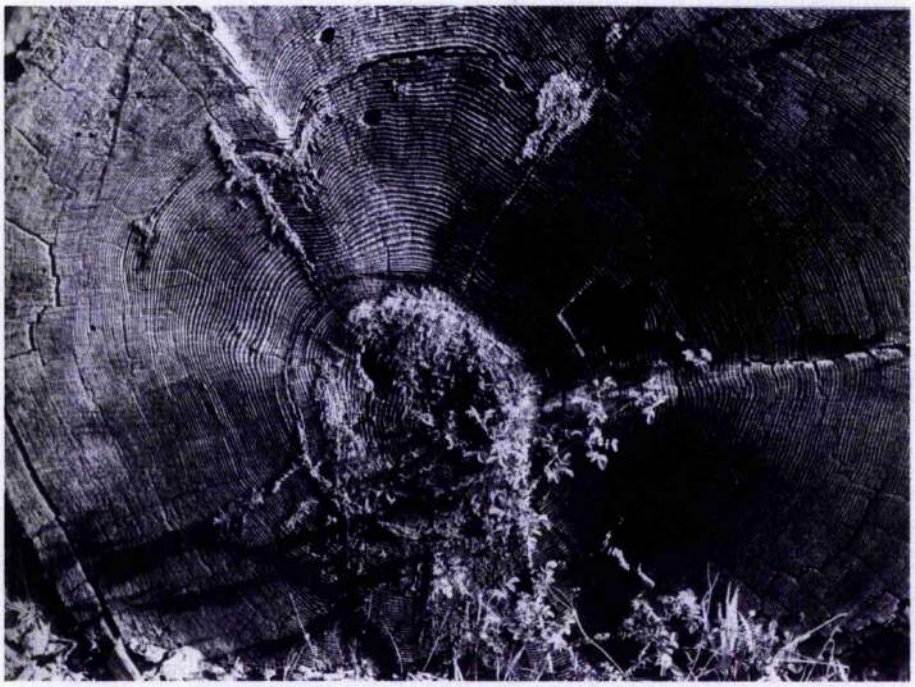


Fig. 18. Thomas Merton: Untitled photograph of the concentric rings of a tree stump (ca. 1965-68)

Fig. 19. Thomas Merton *'Gethsemani: Old Sheep Barn'* ca. 1965-68

Fig. 20. Vincent Van Gogh *'Wheatfield with Crows'* (1890)

Fig. 21. Vincent Van Gogh '*The Sower*' (1888)

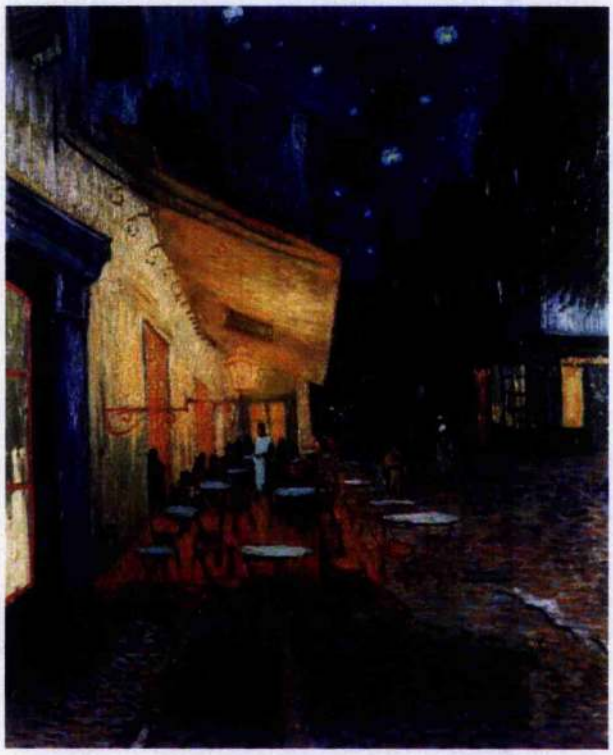


Fig. 22. Vincent Van Gogh 'Café *Terrace at night*' (1888)

Chapter 3
Hidden Wholeness: Van Gogh's Wheatfield with Crows

The art of Thomas Merton and of Vincent Van Gogh functions, arguably, as two quiet voices speaking, albeit from the fringes of the noisy din of the art world. From a place of almost imperturbable silence, Thomas Merton is able to observe the mysterious presence, which he speaks of as the *hidden wholeness* or the *dim light* within all things; which, as an artist and writer, he both sees and endeavours to expose. Perhaps it is this heightened *seeing* ability that separates the artist from the non-artist, and likewise separates the visionary and the prophet from the crowd.

Both Thomas Merton and Van Gogh are walking a type of pilgrim path which leads them to a sacred space in their lives, which secures the practice of art; and both herald, in voice and form, their perception of a real presence of spiritual truth and life from within that space. Through art they are able to expose a presence and a light, which might otherwise remain dimmed.

Is this capacity to see a disciplined seeing, of which all are capable? Or are these two figures gifted in some particular prophetic way? Merton's awareness of the light is that of a strong and unavoidable presence, which is difficult to keep in view. Sustained seeing has its difficulty, but in contemplation and perseverance one can learn to see truly, as it is the true self, with the clear vision of pure intention, that sees into the depths of all things. Let it also be admitted that it was the act of creating art that engaged the focus of these two figures to perform the difficult task of real seeing, again and again. In turn they left a real legacy of insight, in art works which operate as a veritable training ground for new artists and visionaries afterwards.

Van Gogh watched from the perimeters the success granted to his contemporaries such as Monet, Renoir and Gauguin. Merton though was content to be placed, and absorbed in the silence of the hermitage at Gethsemani, as large and bold works by Jackson

Pollock, Barnett Newman, and others of the New York School, began to fill American Art Galleries in the 1960's.[1]

But was his life there a kind of living entombment by which he missed out on becoming the artist he could have been? Instead it would appear that it was only in actual solitude that Merton found his *true self*, and by doing so he was able to create a *pure art*, unfettered to modern trends, with a life of its own. 'Signatures of someone who is not around' became his preferred appendage to his art.[2]

He was 'not around' the places generating the action and energy of contemporary artists, apart from the occasional company of one friend, Ad Reinhardt. 'Not around' to solicit or even desire the limelight; his consultations were more closely held with darkness, with solitude.

Amidst the rapid current of 1960's Abstract Expressionism Merton was making small abstract pictures under the remote guidance of this college friend, and artist, Ad Reinhardt, who made small 'black on black' paintings in the same decade. They also swapped works, Merton receiving a black painting, and Reinhardt several Merton calligraphics in turn. [3] Merton also began to incorporate an interest in Zen discipline to his own art; procuring the craft of free-flowing calligraphic marks (in the tradition of the priest-artist Sengai, and of Merton's friend, and colleague at Columbia University, D.T. Suzuki) into his own abstract vocabulary. [4] (Fig. 15-16.)

As it is impossible to stare long at the sun, likewise, according to biblical tradition, it is not possible to keep a steady glance at the shining and blinding countenance of God. Like Moses in the account of Exodus 33: 20, no one can look at the glory (or face) of

[1] Lipsey, R. *Angelic Mistakes, The Art of Thomas Merton* 2006 (Boston; London: New Seeds Books) p. 17: Merton mentioned in his journal of October 1960 that he had made a trip to the Cincinatti Art Museum, and he had 'liked the action paintings-deeply impressed by them'.
[2] Raids p. 182.
[3] ibid p. 16.
[4] ibid p. 12.

God and live. [5] Neither could it be possible to still the mind when standing before an action painting of the 1960's. Merton's art is striking in its non-resemblance to current art movements. Rather than representing or inducing action, they are like invitations to contemplation and to simplicity; suggestions of the essential essence in everything he represents; this is the pure and necessarily naïve art of a truly genuine, and somewhat primitive artist.

Flowing from his contemplative and true self, Merton's art allows us to be still, to settle, and be content with just a glimpse of light, an instance of contemplation. Rather than a brusque hand pushing its viewers to make a sudden response, it is instead an invitation to prayer and quiet reflection. We cannot see the whole of the light or truth contained in every painting, until we spend time there, adequate time in the presence of each one, allowing it to teach us. Lipsey asks if this is what Merton's art does, does it teach? Is it supposed to? I would say that it does, and so does the art of van Gogh, for these two figures teach us to pause and to really see the fragments of wholeness in all matter. It hardly matters what they have isolated for their own contemplative study, be it a splattered can of paint, or a tall sunflower, the result is a stirring and awakening in the mind of the viewer, who becomes a new participant in the original act of contemplation.

What did Merton detect when he first entered the old churches of Rome, and found himself attracted to, and deeply moved by, the mosaic art-work he found there? It was the sense of a pulling and drawing power in awe for this sacred space. This tracing of old churches became a pilgrimage that Merton found himself repeating. It began in him a new stirring of spiritual awareness, his inner eyes were opened to a sense of the

[5] Moses was not permitted to see God's face, but only a back view. (TNOB: NKJV: p. 107: Exodus 33: 19-23):
18 And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.
19 And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.
20 And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.
21 And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock:
22 And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:
23 And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

numinous in this art, and he could divine a hidden beauty there that both permeated and superseded the outward recognition of aesthetic quality or form.

The Art of Thomas Merton

The aptly titled *A Hidden Wholeness* was written by a close friend of Merton's, John Howard Griffin, and contains photographs both by Griffin, and by Merton. It is a commentary on the life and work of Thomas Merton, and, until the recent publication of *Angelic Mistakes* (2006) by Roger Lipsey, it has been one of the few works to comment on his art. Lipsey's book is wholly dedicated to the art of Thomas Merton, focussing on his works from the 1960's in particular, works which Merton himself was careful to have preserved in his legacy trust.[6]

The title of Griffin's book relates to a quotation made by Merton in *Hagia Sophia*:

> **There is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious unity and Integrity is Wisdom..... There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being...**[7]

Wisdom, at the heart of nature, speaks in the ways described by Merton, in purity, sweetness and in silence. Merton's affinity for nature and his depth of understanding of her wisdom comes from the many hours spent in the chapel of the woods, the forests of Gethsemani. Walking around the forest became another location for ritual pilgrimage and prayer. On the walk he begins to isolate and contemplate particular things: a tree stump, a clump of grass, a flower. Words, prayer and writing begin to flow from his own heart, in response to his own meditations on his environment. A work of art or a

[6] AM p. 7.
[7] HW p. 1.

photograph can speak in *wordless gentleness*, without any need for words that impose meaning onto an event. The work of art waits for the viewer to respond, and never makes him feel hurried, or even obliged, to do so in words.

So can this hidden wholeness be forced into the open by means of a photograph or some other work of art? Merton's photographs (represented in Griffin's book) define the subjects of his meditations. Merton takes a picture of a clump of grass growing through the stump of a tree, next to a stone wall, and we start to behold that grass in a way different than if we had just walked past it on our pathway. It becomes an object for contemplation, as was Merton's intention. Perhaps this could be viewed as a parallel to the biblical parable of the sower, which tells of the *good seed* which fell on stony ground, and flourished despite the adverse conditions to growth.[8] As I further dwell on the images I also realise how the walls are man-made structures, built to divide one area of land from another, and yet nature is able to push beyond these boundaries, to *climb over the wall* in a sense, to seek to unite that which is divided. (Fig. 17.)

This demonstrates the power of the image to concentrate on something so ordinary and allow it to develop into something mysterious, bringing to light its dimmed light. Of course the light will procure different responses, as each one makes his own 'connections'. Merton shows how that has happened for him in his poems and meditative writings. For example in a poem by Merton entitled *The Sowing of Meanings*, in the first verse Merton connects what he terms the *wheeling silences* of the birds in the perfect sky with *the bounds of our solitude (here below)*. Then verse 4 of the poem reveals Merton's conviction that every living thing connects to God's power:

> **For, like a grain of fire**
> **Smouldering in the heart of every living essence**
> **God plants His undivided power --**

---

[8] The Parable of the Sower is a parable attributed to Jesus, and found in all of the Synoptic Gospels (at Mark 4:1-20, Matthew 13:1-23, and Luke 8:1-15) as well as in the Gospel of Thomas (Thomas 9). See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Sower (3rd November 2006).

Buries His thought too vast for worlds
In seed and root and blade and flower

Verse 6 repeats the sense of connection between our looking, and our soul's response, and even transformation:

Then every way we look, lo! rocks and trees
Pastures and hills and streams and birds and
firmament
And our own souls within us flash, and shower us with
light,
While the wild countryside, unknown, unvisited of men,
Bears sheaves of clean, transforming fire. [9]

The image and motif of fire in this poem speak of the purifying presence of God in every living thing; it may be only a spark smouldering, but it is there. The idea of a *smouldering fire* is similar to Merton's other reference, that of a *dim light*. God's thoughts are buried deep, but still living, as a divine stamp or blueprint onto every seed that is planted. This helps to explain a work of art by Merton or by Van Gogh, as, it would appear, in their art they have *detected* the light, detected the fire within, and that they bring it out into our presence in a powerfully visual and direct manner, encouraging the viewer to find that deep existence, when he too truly looks and contemplates what he sees, be it a root, a blade, a flower or any other entity.

Merton's poetry is understood by its own linguistic voice; while his pictures, being silent, require much more of our interaction, and operate very much more like parables.[10] Merton's photographs are presented to us, without any written or critical commentary, and we are encouraged thereby to find our free response, to make *our*

[9] Merton T. *The Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, quoted in http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/M/MertonThomas/SowingofMean.html (20th April 1995)
[10] Following the pattern of language in the Rabbinic Tradition, the use of an Hebraic language allows for the setting alongside of items in a sequence, whereas in a language like Latin or English there is less of this sense of equality. For example, the phrase 'upon entering the room, she sat down, then she opened her books', in Hebrew the sentence reads 'she entered the room, she sat down, she opened her books' which has more of the sense of the three parts being set alongside each other.

connections, which can be laid alongside the photograph. These are the parables and we are invited to look for their hidden meaning. He is showing us images whose intrinsic nature is truth and beauty. This hidden truth, or wholeness, is what we start to see; things that cannot be seen to the naked eye, as in the photograph of the concentric rings of a felled tree, by allowing ourselves to truly contemplate this image, do we not in fact see *time*? (Fig. 18.)

A parable can take on a number of forms; that of an allegory or a fictitious narrative, representing moral or spiritual relations or it can take the form of an enigmatic saying, a proverb, or a simple comparison. [11] The Gospel of Mark claims that, in his teaching, 'Jesus did not say anything to them without using parables.' [12] He used stories closely related to everyday life such as farming and fishing, or as in the parable of the lamp (Mark ch.5. v. 21-22) he uses an everyday object to clearly illustrate the point he wished to reveal.

Merton does something similar in his meditative photographs of objects. The parable of the lamp might connect to Merton's photograph of his desk lamp, which can be seen in *A Hidden Wholeness*. The light from the window is shining in from the left side of the image adding a soft glowing presence to an otherwise dark room. We are aware of the strong presence of the desk lamp in the photograph, and of Merton's very personal objects, giving a sense of his presence not very far away. The pen sitting on the open page, half-filled with hand-written notes, and his glasses next to a pile of reading materials. There is a feeling of calm repose and of busy-ness altogether.[13]

In Jean Fincher's work *The Great Parable* (1993), a study is made of the meaning,

[11] Fincher, J. 1993 *The Great Parable*, (London: Julian Gerlaundes) p. 19
[12] TNOB: NKJV: p. 1164: Mark ch.5. v. 33-34.
[13] HW p. 34-35: Photograph of Merton's desk showing his desk-lamp, books, glasses and typewriter.

significance and use of parable in Mark's Gospel. A parable is an analogy; in a parable a parallel is drawn: one topic is presented in terms of another: the term 'parable', which comes from the Greek word 'paraballow', means 'put alongside'. Parable is a form of allegory; 'allegoria' means 'saying things otherwise'. Fincher observes that all of Jesus' enigmatic sayings are occasioned by events in the lives of the disciples, in such a way that 'an actual experience is used to point out universal truth, is employed as a parable.' [14]

In the same way, Merton uses actual experiences and natural occurrences both as subject matter for photography, and as a conduit for universal truth perceived by the viewer, who, in meditation of the image, becomes a type of careful listener, listening for the voice of truth in the parable.

Making Connections

The idea of connections was filled with mysterious significance for him. Speaking at a conference on prayer, he suggested that the group of contemplatives would be better to go out and absorb the *authentic atmosphere of prayer* in nature; the redwood forests, the sea, the sky, the waves, the birds, rather than seek for abstract words. 'Enjoy this. Drink it all in. It is in all this that you will find your answers. Here is where everything connects.' [15]

As Griffin asserts, what underpins Merton's artwork is the certain belief that everything inter-connects, even those things which are apparent opposites. By remaining loose, but interconnected, (as in a web) both religion and art work freely and often intertwine, but Merton would be unconvinced by the use of such a label as *religious art*, by implication

[14] TGP p. 22; Fincher claims that Jesus' entire body of teaching, including stories of miracles such as the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus walking on the water, and all the various healing miracles, are all parables. Furthermore, because of the tendency to take these stories literally, we have largely missed out on their hidden content which she describes as a form of Philosophy.

[15] www.gratefulness.org/readings/dsr-merton-recol.html: (15th January 07) Brother David Steindl-Rast O.S.B. is one of a group of contemplatives who met for a retreat held by Thomas Merton. This is a recollection of Merton's words to the group, pointing out the connections to be found everywhere, between prayer and the redwood forests, between faith and doubt, between Christianity and Zen religion.

an art *manacled to religious externals* and not free.[16]

As for Merton's own art, the isolation of the monastery meant that connection to modern art movements was diminished, and so what he did produce was even more remarkable given the limited range of influence he was able to work under. And yet there was a distinct advantage to this set of circumstances. Merton's art developed freely, unrestrained by social conventions and uninfluenced by the trends in popular art. I see this as an advantage, albeit perhaps not technically, but definitely in the visionary and spiritual emergence of his work. Any associations and connections he made were drawn from his experience of solitude, and are often related directly to nature.

> **Thomas Merton's approach to photography, and one of the reasons his photography is truly personal, lay in his use of the lenses primarily as contemplative instruments. He photographed the things he contemplated. His 'serious work' as he called it, is a meditation. He did not seek to capture or possess, and certainly not to arrange the objects he photographed. He lent his vision and his lenses to them in a real way: he was there and he did the mechanical things- focusing, composing- but he allowed the objects to remain true to themselves and to reveal themselves, and he trusted that the connections would somehow be made.** [17]

Merton refrained from possessing and capturing his subject, and this could be seen, alternatively, as parallel to the mystery of an icon. This relates to a definition by Nicephorus the Patriarch, whose view was that the iconophile (or supporter of icons) 'does not see the pictorial inscription of a face as a circumscription imprisoning and

[16] HW p. 3.
[17] HW p. 3-4.

limiting that face.' [18]

Marie-Jose Baudinet takes account of Nicephorus' position in discussing the subject of the face of Christ in pictorial or iconic representation. He presents the image as homonymous; it has 'the right to partake of the name of its referent without making any claim of its essence.' In defence of the icon he states that:

> **It does not divide; it entertains a double relationship with its model in time, in the form of a memorial, as well as in space, in the form of a trace, because it purports to re-present a God whose absence it respects. Thus, form delineates a conceptualizable area within a homogeneous space, but it does not enclose or contain it.** [19]

Merton's objects remain true to themselves as he allows them to maintain their own space, and freedom is intrinsic collectively to the object, artist, and viewer. The viewer then identifies the mystery within, for it is there, although it is not circumscribed to the object.

In the simple, yet striking, image of a tree, felled and lying on its side, Merton invites us to focus on the concentric circles, the rings formed naturally, layer upon layer, as each year the tree records it age. Counting the rings, I realize this tree is well over one hundred years old, and the connection I immediately make is with eternity, and then to the biblical idea that every hair on our head is numbered, and subsequently to God's promise to Abraham about the multiplication of his descendents. This is of course a subjective application, with the aim to show how a personal connection can be made. It becomes a meditation on counting, a type of photographic abacus, which has, as illustrated, the potential to carry out far-ranging connections in the viewer.

Nancy Carson Carter's article *Listening for the Light* (1984) speaks from the authority of her role as both a scholar and practitioner of photography. She never had any doubts about the contemplative nature of photography, but through an avid readership of

[18] *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* 1989, (New York: Urzone, Inc.) p. 150.
[19] ibid

Merton's works, combined with an encounter of his photographs, she discovered *what this might mean in the fullest sense.* What strikes Carter is the sense that Merton's photographic work can be interpreted as *amplifications of the vision in his writings.* [20]

This is a simple yet profound observation; a man with vision sets that vision out in writing, and then translates that vision into a work of art, which in this context is a meditative work. Art has the power to bring personal and spiritual vision out of itself in the fullest sense, and communicates directly, without words. An example is *'Gethsemani: Old Sheep Barn'* in which we find exemplified Merton's affinity for various apertures that open up from darkness into light, such as doors and windows.[21] (Fig. 19.) Carter applies theological insight, comparing the process of photographic development with that of the soul waiting inside the 'dark room of the womb, for the re-birth of light.'[22]

A similar concept can be found in Merton's writing in Seeds of Contemplation: 'Enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by his cross.'[23] In the midst of worship Merton recommends that the participant should enter into a deep and absorbing spiritual experience by simply: 'staying where you are and looking on. There Christ develops your life into himself like a photograph.' [24] There is a sense of stillness in this directive, it is astonishing in its very simplicity, nothing being required, no feverish haste to do, to go, to act, to perform, to write, to speak, but only to stand still as a watchman. This is the sense of renunciation, a giving up of all human effort and pursuit of the light which is the praise of man. Merton's challenge, the challenge echoed from the past through the Spanish mystic writer, and Carmelite friar, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) and others, is to allow God to be the light, and to put ourselves in the shade. The true self then develops as we

[20] Carter, N. 'Listening for the Light' in *Epiphany*, Vol. 51: Fall, 1984, p. 79.
[21] ibid. p. 80.
[22] ibid. p. 79.
[23] NSOC p. 102.
[24] ibid. p. 103.

trade our own blueprint for the blueprint of Christ dwelling and developing mysteriously in us.

The image of man himself in our own eyes is hereby transformed, as when Merton himself took the time to observe mankind through his own changed eyes;

> **I wondered how I would react at meeting once again, face to face, the wicked world. I met the world and I found it no longer so wicked after all…..Now, on the contrary, I found that everything stirred me with a deep and mute sense of compassion. Perhaps some of the people we saw going about the streets were hard and tough….but I did not stop to observe it because I seemed to have lost an eye for the merely exterior detail and to have discovered, instead, a deep sense of respect and love and pity for the souls that such details never fully reveal. I went through the city, realizing for the first time in my life how good are all the people in the world and how much value they have in the sight of God.** [25]

Removing beams of wood from his own eyes, (allowing true seeing to be made possible), then looking anew at people, looking at the world, where once he saw specks of wickedness, Merton began to see real goodness. This is not naivety that turns a blind eye on immorality, but an admission to the essential element of kindness in mankind at its deepest source. A similar radiance and kindness can be seen in many of Van Gogh's subjects also; past the weariness of the peasant faces, in for example the painting titled *Worn Out*, and another depicting the weary engaged in their task such *as A Woman with Spade* (ca 1885).[26] For a moment we see beyond their poverty and weariness, we see their love holding them together and binding them to the earth, to each other and to God.

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[25] Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 1953 (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co) pp.91-2.
[26] http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/van_gogh_vincent.html Toronto, Provenance Research Project. (18th June 2006).

How did Merton, first of all, come to the point where he could look at others in a new way, as if with fresh eyes, and new insight? Where did he attain this true *seeing* ability? Well the answer could lie in his development of his true self, through contemplation, and true looking at the seeds of truth planted in all things, whether great or small, so that each tree in the forest, each flower, would become an epiphany of light into his soul. It is the same for Van Gogh, he saw people in their true state, he saw past the 'peasant' exterior, and portrayed them not only as poor and pitiable creatures, but he displayed their inner strength, their emotions, their true value as persons, their humility and family love and unity. This dignified wholeness is represented clearly in the *Potato Eaters,* with the humble workers connected materially and visually to the earth by painting their faces and hands as brown as the soil and the clothes they worked in. It is also present in the many drawings and painted studies of peasants in the fields. And could this not be both a meditation, but furthermore, a ploy of Vincent's to suggest that the religion of the hard-working peasant is ingrained into the physical daily grind, and into the land, into haystacks and trees?

The whole area of images was a testing point for Merton, who was committed to the *Via Negativa* or the Way of Rejection, which actually has its basis in the *renunciation* of all images, except the final one of God himself. He felt a tension initially between his religious and poetic/artistic selves, assuming that he must reject the latter, but later discovering to his joy that they were both permissible and, vitally, the crux of his true self.

Merton shows the value in slowing down, to take a breath, and find the space simply to spend time looking. The practice of an art-form, whether photography, painting or another form, can provide this opportunity, for it requires our patience and time, and becomes a pause from the ordinary. Merton would define these times as 'unspeakable', a time when we encounter the void. In *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Merton is reminding himself of the void which underlies all the good intentions and aspirations of the world;

It is the emptiness of the end. Not necessarily the end of the world, but a theological point of no return, a climax of absolute finality in refusal, in equivocation, in disorder, in absurdity, which can be broken open again to truth only by miracle, by the coming of God. Yet nowhere do you despair of this miracle. You seem to say that, for you, this is precisely what it means to be a Christian; for Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable. I am glad you say this, but you will not find too many agreeing with you, even among Christians. [27]

Merton may be right to think there are not many who would follow this line of thinking, but for an artist like Van Gogh, who faced the crushing of all his hopes in life, he did stand like Merton before the face of the unspeakable, before the abyss of *sorrow*. Van Gogh allowed truth to become miraculous by the painting process, and through the use of colour and line he brought the ordinary into the realm of the extraordinary, the supernatural, the eternal.

Before the time of his death, he poured himself into his art, and, like an icon, if we dwell upon those works today, we might still encounter something of his spirit there, at the meeting place of the painting. At this place, we must be willing to be unburdened, and pour out something of ourselves too. To benefit most certainly we have to remove our own false masks in order to view these works properly, and in turn they will speak as parables and as seeds of contemplation to their viewer.

The photographs and calligraphy of Merton are independent of written commentary, and yet they stand beside his written works as a parallel testimony to the visions of his heart. Merton was careful indeed, in revealing his calligraphic work, to emphasize the need for the viewer to lay aside the critical tendency to analyse, to construct meaning

[27] Raids p. 4-5.

where none should be sought: 'No need to categorize these marks he wrote. It is better if they remain unidentified vestiges, signatures of someone who is not around.' [28] and in the notes that accompanied the public exhibition of his drawings he reiterated their essential nature: 'They desire nothing but their constitutional freedom from polemic, from apologetic, and from program.' [29] This 'signature of someone who is not around' seems to me bear a very close relation to that 'incarnation of an absence' identified by Baudinet in his discussion of the icon.

The Hidden Wholeness in Art

Merton's delineation of the hidden wholeness within all things can be found and illustrated by art. Kandinsky describes, for one example, how Cezanne can make a living thing out of a tea-cup, or rather 'in a teacup he realized the existence of something alive.'[30] This is its hidden quality, that which connects each living and non-living entity to another in the wholeness of life. Cezanne painted these things as he painted human beings, 'because he was endowed with the gift of divining the inner life in everything.'[31]

It would appear that Cezanne had a gift, as with every 'true' artist; the peculiar gift of divining and opening up that inner life, or hidden wholeness, in the everyday, commonplace artefact or scene of nature.

And here we find again the old peculiar paradox, that God is transcendent yet also wholly immanent, he is both outside and above created things, yet he is also poured out, energising all things, and present in each of us. Such an artist as Cezanne is able to draw out that divine essence and make it actually to become visible, we start to see the hidden

[28] ibid p. 182.
[29] ibid. p. 179.
[30] CSA p. 17.
[31] ibid.

wholeness in all things when an artist lifts the veil above the ordinary, and shows what is really inside things, what is in all of us, and we cooperate by our looking.

A Painting of Wholeness: Wheatfield with Crows

This revelatory painting serves to describe succinctly the range of emotions felt, and expressed, through the spiritual heart of Van Gogh. It is also one that pays particular homage to creation and in turn, the creator. Vincent used often to stand out in all sorts of weather, just to feel the power of the elements, and to observe the colour of the ground once newly saturated with rain. He found pleasure in uncomplicated things, whether elements of nature, or of everyday hard-working people. Living uncomplicated lives, Vincent found them to retain that essence of true self that found expression in his art.

Vincent, having become mysteriously one with nature during his artistic life, had reached a place where God spoke to him in the dark, in the brooding times of stormy weather, and where he felt an affinity with creatures often disparaged for their uncomely blackness. Cliff Edwards in *The Shoes of Van Gogh* (2004) says of the artist:

> **The sun in his head, a thunderstorm in his heart, who painted miners and peasants, found saints among housewives and thistles, and turned finally to wheatfields, crows and stormy skies.**[32]

This painting, *Wheatfield with Crows*, dates from July 1890 (Fig. 20.) and was painted during the last six months of Vincent's life, while he was living in Auvers-sur-Oise. This was the final stage of Vincent's travels, a return to the North. He arrived in Auvers in May 1890, and at first he was pleased with the rural setting of the village, with its

[32] Edwards, C. 2004 *The Shoes of Van Gogh* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.) p. 119.

picturesque cottages and farms. [33] He made upwards of seventy paintings here, in the space of only two and a half months, testifying to the inspiration of this landscape. His use of colour changed too, leading to experimentation with monochromatic paintings, such as the *Landscape with cottages* entirely worked in blues, and with complementary works in orange and blue. [34]

The journey was always fruitful for the artist, it refreshed his eyes, and his artistic vision together. Even so, these months were hard on Vincent, he was suffering acutely in his poverty and from the lack of self-esteem brought by his unsuccessful career.

Vincent's crows have been attributed the role of signal to his impending death through a foreboding and dark image; moody blue skies and over-ripe wheat, with a swarm of black necrotic crows in the midst of a storm. This bleak and narrow interpretation does little to appreciate the understanding that the crows, and all creatures, were deeply admired by Vincent, a man who held a close relationship to nature. In Zen Buddhist thought there is an alternative point view, for Zen Artists knew that while anyone could find beauty in the graceful heron or stork, only the enlightened could find beauty in the crow.[35]

Vincent himself, being a keen collector of Japanese art, procured a folding album of 8 kacho-ga, prints with flowers and birds as their main theme, including Hiroshige studies of the common black shrike.[36] Another point is that Vincent was not averse to stormy and brooding weather, in fact he was glad above all things for the effect such weather would have visually on the ground, to the earth he wanted to emulate in painting: *When it was over at last, and the crows were flying again, I was not sorry I had waited,*

[33] VGD: p. 176.
[34] ibid p. 177.
[35] Shoes p. 118.
[36] Kodera, T. 1991 *Catalogue of the Van Gogh Museum's Collection of Japanese Prints,* (Zwolle, Holland: Waanders).

because of the beautiful deep tone which the rain had given to the soil (Letter 227).[37]

It would appear that Van Gogh was glad to see the crow's flying, and that his real interest was in colour, this time, deep, dark colour. The search for complicated, subliminal messages in Vincent's art, including this painting, would be to miss the point of Vincent's vision, which was to represent the wholeness found in nature and in every creature who remains true to himself. As with the fact of Vincent's mental illness, which draws surveyors of his work to reach all too easy parallels between 'madness' and unusual artistic expression, these are too often foregone conclusions.

Co-incidentally, a book Vincent had enjoyed reading was *The Bird* by Jules Michelet. In it, the crow is described in more appreciative terms:

> **They interest themselves in everything, and observe everything. The Ancients, who lived far more completely than ourselves in and with nature, found it no small profit to follow, in a hundred obscure things where human experience as yet affords no light, the direction of so prudent and sage a bird...**[38]

For Vincent, the very ordinariness of the crow marked it out for special interest. He showed, by painting, that the ordinary is extraordinary; that everything however seemingly insignificant, has a special role in creation and that no creature, however offensive it may appear to the eye, should be left out of a work of art, because by nature, it *is* a work of art.

Perhaps Vincent even saw himself personified somewhat in the crow. Not renowned for a handsome appearance, not seen as a contributor, but a burden on others; one to be shooed away as if by the scarecrow, banished and rejected. However the crow, like

[37] http://webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/11/227.htm (12 May 2007)
[38] Michelet, J. 1869 *The Bird* (London: T. Nelson) p. 16.

Vincent is no fool. He sees past the falsity of the scarecrow, and picks away at his straw heart until the scarecrow unravels and falls out of his tattered clothes. So the false self in everyone is ready to crumble, to wither in fright at the true face of a true soul, confronting his life as a mirage, there is no real satisfaction for the thirst of the soul in life of materialism and selfishness.

There are several works by Millet that Vincent admired. In this instance he may have referred back to *The Sower*, and *Reaper with Sickle,* which shows crows descending into the ripe wheat. For Millet, the crows were the humble participants in the great festival of nature 'swooping down upon the plain' in swirls of blackness. Rather than attend to the grand celebrations held at Notre-Dame, he affirms, in a letter to the Artist Rousseau, his preference for an alternative subject matter 'the solemnity of a man walking in the midst of a flight of crows.' [39]

It was on a journey to Paris with his brother and family that Vincent once saw the painting by Puvis de Chavannes, titled *Between Art and Nature.* Its shape was unusual, frieze-like, and it impressed Vincent enough to produce thirteen or fourteen canvases of a similar measure, which was about 40 inches by 20 inches. This created a wide panorama, corresponding more closely to the view the eyes would actually see in nature; similar in fact to the very recent additional features in modern cameras with their optional 'panoramic' view settings for landscapes.

> **The very breadth of the painting allows the paths to diverge in front of us, as though we must choose which path we will take. The emptiness of the paths encourages a sense of loneliness, and under the dark sky this solitude encourages a feeling of melancholy. This seems to be a part of what Vincent intended.** [40]

[39] Sensier, A. and Mantz, P. 1881 *Jean-Francois Millet, Peasant and Painter*, trans. H. de Kay (Cambridge, Mass.: Osgood, J.R.) p. 111.
[40] Shoes p. 121.

This observation by Edwards is backed up in Vincent's own words in a letter, written about 10 July, 1890, in which he describes three recent canvasses:

> **They are vast fields of wheat under troubled skies, and I did not need to go out of my way to try to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you will see them soon--for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I almost think that these canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words, the health and restorative forces that I see in the country. (Letter 649)**[41]

There is an unusual paradox in Vincent's associations with the countryside. On the one hand, this sadness and loneliness, which he expresses in 'troubled skies'; on the other, are health and restorative forces, the panacea to his ills, which he finds under the very same skies. He expressed and felt both joy and despair, and this comes through in the colours around him, which are heightened in his paintings. In *Wheatfields with Crows,* there is the joyous yellow of the wheat juxtaposed against the sorrowful black clouds of the sky. Most of the sheaves of corn stand merrily and proud in thick bunches, but a few others bow their heads low, as if in shame, or grief, at the side of the path.

No one is denying that Vincent did suffer acute loneliness and poverty, but his was a fascinating and worthwhile journey, particularly in relation to what he could say to others, his followers. Picasso sees the journey that he is on, an individual adventure each one of us has had to find.

> **As soon as we saw that the collective vision was a lost cause, each one of us had to begin an individual adventure. And the individual adventure always goes back to the one which is the archetype of our times: that is, Van Gogh's- an essentially solitary and tragic adventure.** [42]

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[41] F:\Vincent van Gogh The Paintings (Wheat Field with Crows).html (3rd March 06).
[42] Shoes: Preface p. XII.

Suspected of hidden symbolism, *Wheat Field with Crows* has been analysed as a painting ripe for semi-magical interpretations. Writer Yvonne Korshak accuses the painter of scattering subtle imagery throughout the canvas. These images, when detected, include a *giant bird filling the sky*, a *cloud presence* and a *Gabriel-like trumpeter within the cloud.* This, I feel, is an over-interpretation, although there is truth in her assessment of Vincent's *spiritual longing* which must find an outlet by fusion with his art:

> **In Van Gogh's canvases can be found the evidence of resolution on the plane of art of conflict between realism and imagination and between his aniconic Protestant conscience and his need to visualize images of salvation. Van Gogh's method of working includes the projection of spiritual longing through images that are merged with the natural landscape, and a fusing of realist and spiritual content.**[43]

I agree with Korshak that Van Gogh did manage to visualize images of salvation, but not in the manner described by her. He was a realist, not one for painting half-concealed angelic images that might be interpreted in any number of ways by different viewers; but for painting the mysterious wholly embraced in the ordinary, a far more challenging enterprise, and ultimately more 'Vincent'.

The empty paths in this painting, the empty shoes in another, the vacant bedroom at Arles; these could be seen as a true self-portrait of the artist who feels he is invisible at times. However he made his pact with nature and with God, to become integrated to the forces that surrounded him, as he saw, and sought to express more clearly to others, the defining relationships in nature. I see some of these forces at work in *Wheatfields with Crows*; the birds relating to the fields, the fields relating to the weather, the peasants (although absent) relating to the earth, the cycles of life and death repeating.

[43] F:\Vincent van Gogh The Paintings (Wheat Field with Crows).html (3rd March 06).

Hidden Wholeness is found in the inter-relationships of one creature to another, their interdependency within the food chain; It is the wholeness made real by the interplay of extremes; thunderstorms and sunshine, freezing and burning, flowers in spring and the barrenness of winter. It is the great providing hand of nature, of potatoes for the kitchen table, wool for clothes; and in return, it is the farmer tilling the soil and watering the plants in due season. Vincent displays the thought of the writer in Ecclesiastes that *there is a time for every purpose under heaven.* [44]

There was a time for Vincent to live, and he spent that life in intensity of work, as if in a fury, and in intensity of emotion and longings. There was a time to dance, and he showed this in the whirling stars in the night sky. There was a time to embrace, and he embraced simple folk and loved them, sharing what he had with them. There was a time to die, undoubtedly a sad and premature death, but even this was redeemingly a triumphant death as Vincent re-emerges again and again as a source of inspiration. He is a source of light and joy through his art, he is a healing figure to the wounded, guide and representative of all seeking truth and the essence if the true self on their own journeys.

[44] TNOB: NKJV: p. 751: Ecclesiastes 3:1.

Chapter 4
Light from Darkness: A Paradigm of Pilgrimage

The end of the Van Gogh journey was uncannily similar to that of Thomas Merton, as both suffered sudden and violent deaths. Merton's an accidental electrocution while on his final pilgrimage to the East, and Van Gogh's, sadly, a suicide. We are left wondering where life would have taken them next, what other explorations they might have made, and new gifts of art and writing they could have left behind. In this context, I would view what they did leave behind as quite remarkable, since they both spent about ten years each producing works of art, at the peak of their creative impulses, yet perhaps without ever fully voicing their yet to be formed mature outlook and vision. So these works could perhaps be seen as seeds to be planted and fully germinated in new artists to come. Each painting by Van Gogh and each ink drawing, print or photograph by Merton can in this way be looked upon as a *new seed of contemplation*, offering itself for an impulse of growth in the eyes of its beholder.

Although Van Gogh did not survive his arduous pilgrimage (that being the pursuit of an artistic dream at the cost of all else) nevertheless, as has been mentioned, the *seeds* of his true self can be detected through his art, which remains as his legacy of the survival of spirit and hope in a world of pain and disillusionment. That his art still speaks and offers solace to others (such as is accounted by Henri Nouwen for example) is tantamount to the wholeness he found in all things and which he offers us the vision of. It is found readily by faith, indeed by those whose vision is clear and prudent (having removed the mask of the false self) in seeing and understanding parables. The gaining of true insight and wisdom therefore becomes a necessary key in the unlocking of a Vincent painting, which was born out of his own peculiar insight, the inkling wisdom of the true self in seedling form.

Merton survived the pilgrim journey he set out upon, by entering a deep darkness that would lead him in turn to a greater revelation of divine light and personal fulfilment in a life of contemplation and solitude. He contributed the story of his journey to us, by means of a written legacy, and in his art-work, maps by which we can trace the progress of our own selves on the journey to wholeness. During Merton's life he recorded his progress in journals and continually set himself goals, whether to write a new book, meet someone important to him, (such as the great Zen teacher T.D. Suzuki) or to travel to Asia. He always had plans to advance further into his understanding of other cultures; to further comprehend the subtleties of Zen religion, and most interestingly to merge the vocation of priest more fully with that of artist. He found his model for doing so in the priest-artists of Zen Buddhism, and he wished to emulate this within the catholic tradition. [1]

Fire Watch: A Journey into Darkness

In the epilogue to Thomas Merton's published journal *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) there is an account made of a *Fire Watch.*[2] This is the task of watchman to protect the monastery, which for Merton becomes a journey which necessarily begins in the night-time (and a counterpart to most of his journeys, whether great or small, which take place in day and in light). This peculiar factor brings with it a surprising reversal of all the questions Merton once had for God, since he finds that in the calmness of the mind and stillness of night, memories are stirred, and God has a few questions of his own to place before the unsuspecting Merton.

> **Alone, silent, wandering on your appointed rounds through the corridors of a huge, sleeping monastery, you come around the corner and find yourself face to face with your monastic past and with the mystery of your vocation.** [3]

[1] AM, p. 31, 148.
[2] A Reader: p. 210-223.
[3] ibid: p. 213.

Merton, in this self-directed monologue, talks as if he was in the belly of a huge sleeping creature, which enfolds him in that breathing rhythm of womb-like comfort, and yet lying dormant, are the potential hazards of being swallowed up and digested. This conjures up a comparative image of Jonah in the belly of the whale. While Merton is here by choice it nonetheless still comes to him by surprise when he perceives that this isolation has been devised by God, to strike as a flashlight into his conscience, to search his soul 'with lamps and questions in the heart of darkness.'[4]

Merton's teaching assures us that the true person is a person of faith. In writing, his penchant is for the light, yet paradoxically this light can only be reached from within a place of darkness. The *Fire Watch* episode clearly demonstrates this, for in what *could* have been just another round of the monastery, Merton both creates and enters a paradigm of pilgrimage; a journey into the heart of night and spiritual darkness becoming the threshold of illumination. For faith requires hope, and we cannot hope for something that can be clearly seen; to be hoped for, something must not be visible, must not be readily obtainable. It is the directive of Romans 8: 24: for 'we are saved by hope. But hope that is seen, is not hope. For what a man seeth, why doth he hope for?' [5]

Merton's writing implicitly invites a response; it seems that he solicits our own connections, to discover and interpret the hidden wholeness in all things. One quite legitimate response could be through poetry, and so the following poem consists of an exploration of how one can seek meditatively to retrace Merton's physical footsteps on this night-watch round. It is a response in the form of another journey, or it could be seen as a parable, a poem which came into being from thoughts running 'alongside' those of Thomas Merton.

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[4] ibid.
[5] Open Bible: p. 1333: Romans 8: 24.

The pronounced physicality of the poem actually elicits a heightened awareness in the reader of its concurrent spiritual substance. Merton appears acutely aware of the movement of his feet, his breathing pattern, and the response of his senses to various stimuli such as the cool earth and the contrasting warm corridors. In the dark, his senses are easily excited by smells and sounds, and he notes the softer nocturnal lights of moon and lamps. Likewise, there is an awakening to the parallel responses of the soul to this same atmosphere, to the voice of God heard only in the dark, the quiet and soft voice of God:

Nocturnal journey
innocent footsteps no longer heavy
but soft and shoeless.
The last of the retiring monks, to bed,
disperse by light of yellow lamps.
The mother of God can rest
as the last song bids her goodnight.
A heavy clock carried on one shoulder
announces the Fire Watch, balanced
by my silent feet,
as I shuffle towards the light of a window
facing the dark garden,
Psalms are unfolded.
Fifteen minutes pass and the night
becomes eloquent with wet trees, as
moonlight slides over the shoulder of the church.
I envy the lesser weight borne
by her shoulder than mine,
and so I unravel my burdens,
laying down the heaviness of day.
My breathing is slowed
but the senses, heightened, as
sounds, smells and mysterious voices
flood my mind.

Earth cools my warm feet
as I begin my round
tracing the long catacomb,
locked doors obeying keys,
I reach a room of burned sentiments

letters to Dom Frederic wilfully disposed,
feeding the old furnace
with unloved voices.
From paper to concrete I move
forward upon cat's feet,
moonlight sourcing jars on the shelves.
Hints of food lead dizzily to the kitchen,
my eyes discern differently colored walls.
Nothing on fire here, except a little scripture verse
"little children, love one another!"

From where we live to where we pray,
just a few more solitary feet,
steps descending drum under my
rubber soles,
a curious half-stirred recipe touches my nostrils
the smell of duck and cotton,
mixed with the smell of bread,
second station by the bakery door
I punch the clock.
Drumming stairs turn quickly to iron,
And start to ring instead.
steam rising from wet clothes
forming a misty halo for this holy face,
engraved at the third station.
Heat rises to greet me
in every crooked passageway, and stifles me,
where each blue door recalls a saint.

Fragments of texts, confessions, directions,
but I read instead the old walls,
whispering their stuffy, fusty smell-language
of my first days,
of frozen straw delaying sleep in the dormitory,
and frozen hands held up in prayer
at that first Christmas,
when everything in the whole world was only God!

White candles burned
and the sweat poured down our ribs,
it was summer,
and the way of the Cross shut us up with

the heat, by tightly closed windows.
But now it seems as if this past
had scarcely existed
with this huge clock ticking on my
right hip, and the flashlight in my hand
and sneakers on my feet.
Things I thought little of before,
neither expected not measured,
not causing great effort,
suddenly mattered to me more.

Caverns, catacombs,
layers unfolding their hidden depths.
The church yawns and stretches
causing shadows to move
boards to creak,
the eyes of my torch
locate Malachy's altar,
keys rattle and echo
the night is filled
with angels praying in the dark
waking up the sleepy walls.
I feel a nearness to something
both living and illusory
walls, roof, arches, tower
form a crowd of spectators waving
ready to crumble
and burn like paper
to blow away in the night.[6]

Merton also wrote a type of *darkness prayer* which is included here to contrast between a night-time pilgrimage experience, and that of the day. For the night serves to heighten the senses and the soul to the great dark side of spirituality, revealing too God's rich dealings with man in wrestling prayer, as it was with Jacob, who struggled by night with the angel of God, and is said to have *prevailed*.

[6] Hutchinson, P.H. *Retracing Thomas Merton's Fire Watch*. Unpublished Poem, 2005.

GOD, MY GOD, 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 night-time 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 with shame.

Is it true that 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.[7]

There is a hint in Merton's written prayer that God's unanswerable question rotates around the essentials of life, of what really matters. The discovery made is that it is something other than those seemingly important things that are made to happen by great human effort, as if God was keeping a tally on such works for merit. The point made is that effort alone does not automatically transfer any great value to anything; instead of talking to God so much it becomes apparent, as it was to Merton, that there is a time for listening, and instead of working overmuch, there is time to rest. This looking and listening can be done most effectively after the pattern of Van Gogh and Merton. In times of solitude, perhaps even a type of disciplined asceticism, paring down busy lives to find space, a sacred space even, where there is an environment of simplification. This can become truly desirable to those who are earnest to find their own true self, and are seeking a methodology from which to take stock of their own lives. Kenosis[8] applies again, in the emptying of deeply buried feelings and prayers, removing masks and

[7] ibid
[8] http://net.bible.org/strong.php?id=2758:Philippians Ch. 2: Kenosis is to empty or deprive.

illusions, being open to the questions of God, and being able to hear the voice of the true self within, perhaps for the first time.

Praying in the Cloud

Sometimes it can be sensed that prayers are absorbed as in a cloud, covered in a veil of darkness, and we wonder if our prayers and desires are only illusions. This is a place described by Merton, of anguish and conversion, where 'the voice of the father fills our hearts with unrest and fear, telling us that we must no longer see ourselves.' [9] It is a place wherein it is common to feel abandoned by God, and left in the face of many temptations. In this place, Merton says:

> **we realize more clearly than ever before our great need for God (and yet) we try to pray to him and it seems we cannot pray. Then begins a spiritual revaluation of all that is in us. We begin to ask what is and is not real in our ideals!** [10]

The *Cloud of Unknowing* [11] has been written by one who felt covered in the reality of this 'cloud', and it clearly stands in the line of Merton's influences. It belongs to a body of fourteenth century religious and devotional writing by an unknown author, thought to be a priest and Carthusian monk. Its call is to contemplation through love, where one is called to strip away all thoughts of *knowing* God by the powers of the intellect, and reach out to him instead by piercing through the thick darkness of the cloud of *unknowing*.

Piercing through the cloud is described as a struggle, a piercing with longing darts of love. This love requires the stripping back of all that is human, and intellectual, and a forgetting of all that is past and even present. The content of this contemplation is the pure knowledge of God in utmost simplicity; God in essence, that is, not simply the head-knowledge of his qualities and attributes. This takes form when the will has no other

[9] NMI: p. 47-48.
[10] ibid: p. 48.

desire save a *naked purpose towards God.* [12] Merton and Van Gogh both show this pure, almost naked intention in their pursuit of simple and bright vision, applied to their life and work. Working with light is what unites them most clearly, as they find and fetch light out of darkness.

Travelling in the desert

There are times when the word of the light comes as a lamp to our feet, and there are clear signposts to direct us. Other times we find no visible sign anywhere, and start to stumble. And so at these times 'it takes the humility and spiritual poverty to travel in darkness and uncertainty, where so often we have no light and see no sign at all.'[13]

A place where this might be found true is the desert, and it is true whether that be a desert real or metaphorical. Merton, in *No Man is an Island*, insists that: 'in our lives lies the desert of emptiness through which we must travel in order to find him.'[14] How often this desert speaks of a dry period, a time of great poverty. In order to find God, Merton must first find himself, and so we find him disappearing into the 'desert' for a time.

There, like many desert inhabitants before him, he enters the chrysalis of a fictional self, where as D. Jasper implies, *he can both lose himself and also be himself most fully.*[15] This is a cocoon inhabited by autobiographical writers; a world where imagination bleeds into reality, and limitations and boundaries disappear. Only in the desert is it safe to perform this act of disappearing; the desert too becomes a place of *dazzling darkness*, where one takes his darkness into the light, and his light into the darkness.

The desert is a stage where one can act out the polarities of his character, and test his conscience. It is a place which offers comfort in the state of being truly alone, to think, to

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[11] Spearing, A.C. (Translator) 2001 *The Cloud of Unknowing and other works*, (London: Penguin Books)
[12] ibid: The author of The Cloud of Unknowing repeatedly says that love is the essence of the whole effort: *Indeed, the very heart of this work is nothing else but a naked intent toward God for His own sake.* Chapter 24).
[13] NMI p. 66.
[14] ibid. p. 74.
[15] TSD p. 57.

repent; and this is what the writer requires, solitariness in a place of both light and dark, heat and cold, spirit and desolation. The friendship and the fear of God come together in one arena, as experienced by Moses before the fearful light of the burning bush.[16]

Merton's desert, though, is not the physical desert of exhausting heat and burning sand, but rather, anywhere that becomes his solitary place, such as his hermitage or the forest. The exhaustion, the burning, the tormenting voices come there as surely as they did for desert mystics without exception; and Merton meets them face to face, not shying away behind the shade of rock or pleasure of the oasis.

Reflecting on his life in the Hermitage, in *The Silent Life*, Merton realises another purpose for the contemplative in the desert arena; 'the apparently hopeless task of cultivating the desert- the sandy wastes of the human spirit deprived of God.'[17] Merton feels that the monastic life is a call to the wilderness *because it is a call to live in hope.* Therefore, he aspires to prayer, for God's spirit to cultivate and refresh the desert hearts for which he implores, and he is assured this is not a hopeless task. This is how Merton *becomes every man*, by entering the wilderness path for them, on their behalf, and by his writing and art, alerting every man to the signposts to start his or her own pilgrimage to the desert, and to new life. His life and work become now the hand that leads others to the path, the doorway, the threshold of the *true self.*

The imagery of Light and its usage in Poetry and Art.

The imagery of light is frequently used by poets and artists, and is a common denominator in the works of Merton and Van Gogh. Light can be employed either to diminish or saturate a scene with darkness, to make contrasts, to accentuate characters and places. *In the Shadow's Light* (1987) is a body of work by the French Poet Yves

[16] Exodus 3:2, in *The New Open Bible*, NKJV, p.70.
[17] Merton T. *The Silent Life* (London: Burns & Oates) p. 19.

Bonnefoy, [18] which harnesses the power of the imagery of light in fascinating directions. One can make connections with this body of poetry both to the type of spiritual thinking underlying the work of Thomas Merton, and to the spirituality found in art, and ultimately to the wholeness and interconnectivity of all things.

In the poem titled *Le Souvenir* (The Memory)[19] light infiltrates dreams, *streaming on the waters.* Apparently, the couple in the poem are unable to see this light, since they are masked. Earth is also lost to the light, contained in *a heavy mass of shadow.* While listening to nothing but silence, the country is suddenly lit up into a *bright expanse* and 'further still the torches of the mountains, the rivers, the valleys are burning, far from any earthly sound.' It is at night-time that joys flow into the dream, but, as with Thomas Merton, (in the *Fire Watch*) there comes to him a question, which he really does not want to face, scattering as it will his *peaceful images* to the muddy shore. Wounded by this invasion, Bonnefoy turns away. He is drawn towards the light of a fire *languishing in the Church*, which wakes up momentarily but is soon tucked back in under its eiderdown of ashes for *the hour has not yet come to carry the flame.*

Perhaps the hour has not yet come for Bonnefoy to answer the questions of life; can he ever leave the fondness of memories behind, can he disassociate himself from his favourite dwelling place, the peaceful old monastery? Can he face the unknown future, though it entails the questions of death, and the putting away, forever, of childhood? It is a deeper darkness surrounding him now, as he has gone *down into the night*, (as, once again, did Merton in the *Fire Watch*) and so, although desiring the comforting light of the fire, this is the time to be spoken to *in shadow*, the shadow of being alone.

> **And alone once more in the night that draws to an end,**
> **One wonders if one even wants dawn to reappear,**
> **So strongly is the heart drawn to those voices**
> **That are singing over there, still, and grow dim**
> **As they fade away on the paths of sand.**[20]

[18] Bonnefoy, E. 1991 *Ce Qui Fut Sans Lumière*, or *In the Shadow's Light*; translated by John Naughton; with an interview by Yves Bonnefoy (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press)
[19] ibid. p. 2-11: (Part I)
[20] ibid. p. 7.

Suddenly it occurs to him that this shadow-time, time of question and communion with oneself, the searching of one's own soul, might after all be preferable to the reappearing of the dawn, where the deepest matters are once more veiled in light, and so hidden. It has become, this darkness, a time of profound awakening, this time when sleep is usually preferred. Day comes, and the Earth walks alongside him as a friend *like a young girl, barefoot in the grass* and then they part company, having alternate destinies. It is hard to bid farewell to the Earth and Bonnefoy admits 'I envy the god of evening who will bend over your ageing light.' [21]

Shadow is an oft-repeated motif in another poem entitled *Les Arbres* (The Trees).[22] Bonnefoy can create both a sense of space and also of nearness, just using this one image. The shadows of two people seem almost to touch as *for a whole hour we looked at the trees*. Shadows are cast by their shoulders as they lean against a stone, and by the almond trees, and by the tops of the walls. This seems to create a long avenue of shadows, extending to *the oak trees down there*.[23]

La Branche (The Branch)

...words are sometimes said for the last time
In the Eternal, without our realizing it.
A fire is burning in one of the still empty rooms;
I listen to it as it seeks in the mirror
Of the embers the lost bough of light
Like the god who believes he will create
Life and mind out of the night,
Whose knots are serried, are endless
Are a labyrinth.[24]

[21] ibid. p. 9.
[22] ibid. p. 13.
[23] ibid.
[24] ibid. p. 55: (Part II)

This poem is about childhood coming to an end, to its death. It is like placing a branch onto a slowly burning fire, and holding onto the end of the branch for as long as possible. The night is seemingly endless, full of knots, twists and turns; labyrinthine, like the rooms and passageways of a monastery. Perhaps the fire represents old age seeking to consume the *lost bough of light* which is a lost childhood. This old god wants to see again both the life and mind it once knew, which are now buried in the night and out of reach.

When I think of Van Gogh and Merton though, I am compelled to think that they reach for the branch at the other side of the stream, so to speak, in that they seem to be grasping always into the future, into endless possibility. This too is a labyrinthine pilgrimage, towards the god of the new, of the indefinable and ever hopeful. When Van Gogh recorded the hunched and dark figures of weary peasants he was not merely arguing for social change (although he did clearly indicate the misery caused by extreme poverty, and certainly aimed to expose the harsh and debilitating elements of their lives to others) but running parallel to this, he could point to the reverse side; the beauty and honour of living a poor and humble life, portraying lives whose richness in spiritual compassion and family love is rarely accessible to those who live in greater comfort. As he said himself: 'I often think how peasants form a world apart, in many respects so much better than the civilised world.'[25]

This duality of expression comes across clearly in the *Potato Eaters* (1885) showing brown, dusty, and ugly faces, harrowed lines on weather-beaten faces, hands calloused by the effect of the cold conditions; but it is also a painting of love, a portrait of communion round a humble dish of potatoes, a sacrament of togetherness, the light from the oil-lamp performing, it seems, the function of church candles at a communion service. For Van Gogh, this was the real church, a home celebrating and affirming each family member, welcoming him, and in so doing, welcoming Christ.

When Merton visited the Tibetan Buddhist monks he was hopeful to bring back something he could add to western monasticism. He aspired to bring home new ideas and amalgamate the best of all worlds into a new monastic vision and real world, which he achieved in a small way by resurrecting the principal of the hermitage life into Gethsemani, in his creation of a Zen Garden, and in his art-work, a unified melange of eastern and western brushstrokes, ideas and effects.

Leading back to the poetry of Bonnefoy, in *Sur des branches chargées de neige* (On branches heavy with snow) [26] snow falls and brings with it *fragments of light*; wet hands reach out to touch this soft endless powder, as if to grasp *some crystal of reality, perfectly pure*. The whiteness of snow serves to deepen the hues of other colours such as the blues and purples of nature. By contrast, the road is whiter; 'it is the same light there, and the same peace.' By making the road whiter, it seems to be immediately transformed into a symbolic road; snow purifying our vision and making our path, our journey ahead, much more transparent. I find that this relates in some way to the bright vision of Van Gogh, which serves likewise to purify *our* vision. He heightens the colour and deepens the contrast between light and dark tones in his paintings, almost without exception. This transformed seeing enables us to see more truly than before the purity, goodness, and vitality in ordinary things.

Art through Windows and Mirrors:

Both the art and the letters of Van Gogh can be viewed as windows, allowing us glimpses of the artist's world, imagination and thought. I would allow that they go even beyond the temporal realm that Van Gogh lived in since they allow us glimpses of unseen, spiritual qualities that remain unaffected by time or place. Similarly the books and journals by Merton operate in the same way. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton describes how we can shine as a window in display of God within, as he pours his light of love into us:

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[25] Letter T404 (Nuenen, 30 April 1885), Complete Letters, Vol. 2, p. 371.
[26] ISL: p. 59: (Part II).

Love comes out of God and gathers us to God in order to pour itself back into God through all of us and bring us all back to him on the tide of his own infinite mercy. So we all become doors and windows through which God shines back into his own house. [27]

Art can behave as a window on a deeper reality; the reality of the artist's selected world, his true self, in fact, even if subconsciously submitted to the limits imposed by the frame. Van Gogh and Merton both open windows into hidden depths, a view to regard the wholeness of their subject, that which we cannot see, or rarely take time to see. A starry sky is no inanimate matter to Van Gogh, the whole sky rocks and cavorts as if to celebrate some hidden festival, just as Merton elsewhere describes the festival of rain or of nature, that which we tend to brush aside as an importunity, rather than see it glistening on the streets and bringing our senses to light. Merton speaks of city dwellers walking in the rain: 'They do not see that the streets shine beautifully, that they themselves are walking on stars and water, that they are running in skies to catch a bus or a taxi.' The lie that is spread abroad is that 'only the city is real.'[28]

Van Gogh's personal intensity is intangibly linked with the forceful intensity of colour in his canvas; in this mirror we see captured something of the artist, something of the subject, and something beyond both, a transcendent quality, real life, real power, emotion and character. Each subject acquires a strong character, be it a sunflower, a field, a cypress tree. However, as bright and reflective as this mirror of art may be, the biblical tradition supports Merton that it is at best only a *dim light*, it can only serve a temporal function, and can only be by way of introduction to a greater spiritual light, found at the end of this life's journey. As 1 Corinthians 13: 12 explains: 'For now we see through a

[27] NSC p. 52.
[28] Raids: p. 9-12.

glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I also am known.' [29]

Merton and Van Gogh confirm the Corinthian emphasis: art is not *meant* to reveal the full truth, as if to set it upon an open platter; it offers only a dim reflection of the truth; a promise yet to be fulfilled in the recipient by way of a *seed* of truth, and it therefore asks of the viewer to make the truth come about by faith, by watering the seeds sown by art. Art, like a parable, serves as a dim reflection, of a much greater reality that is the Kingdom of God, yet this reflection becomes clear in relation to how much one is capable of true seeing, one's capacity to understand parables, one's attunement to his true self and ability to source light even that hidden in darkness.

Now we see and understand by way of parables but *then* we will understand clearly without parables; in fact many things in the 'now' will be found redundant in the 'then'. In the 'now' we have temples of worship, while, for instance, in John's vision of the New Jerusalem there is no temple. Now we have art, but then there will be no art; as with everything on earth that is so necessary to keeping our faith alive, all these things will be subsumed in the fulfilment of faith, which is the promise received.

Even though we do see, it is apparently better for us not to see too much, or indeed too clearly. Nevertheless, sometimes the light breaks in and interacts with the present, in brief but glorious 'glimpses' of the eternal light. Visions of God's glory were granted to a select few in the Old Testament, like Ezekiel and Daniel, and to John in the New Testament. Ezekiel saw, as recorded in Ch. 8: 2:

> **there was a likeness, like the appearance of fire-from the appearance of his waist and downward, fire; and**

[29] 1 Corinthians 13: 12. KJV. See also 1 Corinthians 13: 12, TNOB, p. 1356: *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know, just as I also am known.*

from his waist and upward, like the appearance of brightness, like the colour of amber.[30]

Daniel also had a personal vision of a heavenly creature in Ch. 10: 5-9:

5. I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, a certain man clothed in Linen, whose waist was girded with gold of Uphaz! 6. His body was like Beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like torches of fire, his arms and feet like burnished bronze in color, and the sound of his words like the voice of a multitude. [31]

To most people, the view of God and of the heavenly kingdom is limited to the parable, and to what we can visualise from these visionaries. We must not see too much, or perhaps, we will seek to escape prematurely our call to this world. As Paul ascertains, we are living in our bodies as tents, we are pilgrim travellers, ready to encamp in the kingdom of heaven. He admits this is 'far better' but in the interim he determines that his eyes should be fixed, not in the skies, but on the race set before him, he must 'finish the course'. Through Merton's employment of the writing of the Russian philosopher and writer Berdyaev (1874-1948) in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1964) we note how Berdyaev echoes this Pauline sentiment when he says that 'eschatology is not an invitation to escape into a private heaven: it is a call to transfigure the evil and stricken world.' [32]

It would be useful at this point to see if the parable can be interpreted in a new way, in light of Merton's study on the self. If Jesus speaks by way of a parable, then its meaning is open to anyone who can see. So the question is, what does it mean to see in a spiritual sense, and is the offer open to anyone to see? It seems that it is the willingness to look, the desire to see that matters. We all have eyes, we all have ears, but we must let them see

[30] TNOB: NKJV, p. 924: Ezekiel 8: 1-4.
[31] TNOB: NKJV: p.989: Daniel 10: 5-9.
[32] Raids: p. 5.

and hear, or we can remain deaf and blinded; we can choose to discard, or choose to don the mask, the false self. It therefore stands on our own decision; our willingness to see is our invitation to see, and it determines our pilgrim destination.

The relation of the Christian to the world was the subject of reflection for the Church Fathers too, such as Augustine. He took an ascetic view, more in terms of flight from the world, (like Anthony too), while Luther reflected more intensively on the Christian remaining in the world, with his activity on behalf of self and others. Ultimately they both agree to the eschatological position of the conflict between the Kingdom of the world, and the Kingdom of God. If art can function here, it can accomplish a place of interaction between the two Kingdoms, between temporal and eternal matters. To see a Van Gogh representation of the Starry Night is to see a concurrence of the two realms, a reconciliation of spirit and matter, as light interacts perfectly with darkness, and so earth with heaven.

When Thomas Merton visited New York and saw the Van Gogh exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, he wrote as if the paintings were living and burning entities: 'And the Van Goghs, wheels of fire, cosmic, rich, full-bodied honest victories over desperation, permanent victory.'[33] This element of permanency is the incredible Van Gogh legacy to the world, interestingly highlighted by Merton here.

Light and Darkness in the Art of Van Gogh:

In *God and The Art of Seeing,*[34] Kidd and Sparkes discern in Van Gogh's paintings the *colours of darkness*, although we see a continual shifting from darkness into dazzling light even within the one oeuvre. At the beginning he used dark and sombre tones, especially in his paintings of the peasant community; those early portraits in which he

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[33] http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/Real/real-8.html (20th January 07).
[34] Kidd, R. & Sparkes, G. *God and the Art of Seeing* 2003 (U.S: Smyth & Helwys) p. 191.

sought to represent the figures as deeply embedded to the earth as the humble potatoes which formed the staple of their diet. In this he succeeded, and in the ugliness by which he sought, not to denigrate, but to represent their honesty and dignity as creatures of poverty on the earth. Van Gogh viewed peasants as rough and uncouth, yet these were precisely the characteristics that allowed them to be one with nature in such an authentic way.[35]

In December 1884 he made a great number of studies, a series of painted and drawn heads of peasants, in imitation of a series from *The Graphic* entitled *Heads of the People*.[36] Light is used sparingly in these studies, to highlight the facial features, but leaving the background and the peasant's garb in typically dark rendering, leaving them to all appearances both coal-stained and cold.[37] Light was a motif which was central in Van Gogh's work, such as the lamp hanging above the table of *The Potato Eaters*: 'the burning lamp being a symbol of love: sometimes his own, sometimes the love of his friends and, occasionally, quite early the love of God.'[38]

He relates the light first of all to his own father, for despite their frequent disagreements, the symbol of light is a lasting legacy to this man who sowed the first seeds of compassion in the heart and life of Vincent. From the letters Van Gogh described his father as one: 'who so often goes long distances, even in the night with a lantern, to visit a sick or dying man, to speak with him about One whose word is light, even in the night of suffering and agony.'[39]

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[35] ibid p. 191-192. See also: Van Heughten, S. 2005 *Van Gogh Draughtsman*, (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum) p. 62: Van Gogh's belief in physiognomy- a nineteenth century 'science' based on the premise that a person's nature was reflected in their facial features, and in which people were frequently compared to animals-prompted him to search for the most strongly defined features.

[36] VGD, p. 62: ill.25: Hubert Herkomer, 'Heads of the People drawn from life', from *The Graphic* 12 (9 October 1875).

[37] See for example, 'Head of a Woman', and 'Head of a Man', both Dec 1884-January 1885, 14x10cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. (VGD, p. 63: figs. 44 and 45).

[38] GAS: p. 182.

[39] *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 3 vols. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958) Vol. I pp. 140-41: Letter T110.

As Van Gogh travels, and as he moves further South, he is differently affected by the environment, especially in relation to the strength and warmth of the sun, and to the degree of light which can be seen more and more infiltrating the work he will produce as a result. Vincent was drawn to make several paintings and drawings of the sun, in which the body of the sun appears large and radiant, its rays stretching to the extremes of the canvas or paper he is working on. For example, while at Arles he created *The Sower* (1888) (Fig. 21) [40] and herein a large yellow sun is given centre stage, with its rays in orange and yellow flickering to the edges of the canvas. Van Gogh lets the light continue to radiate and flood into the field, highlighting the scene in the sun's glory. Van Gogh is painting 'after Millet' and so they together, while at different times, are reflecting on and painting a parable. A parable of course contains a hidden light, a truth, which is 'thrown alongside' the story told. It could be said that the way Van Gogh 'throws' light onto the canvas here helps to mediate the light of the parable for the viewer. The warmth of the scene helps us to admit that this is a good work being carried out, that the Sower is scattering seeds of life and light. New life will spring from each seed sown, and so he plants in hope and truth. It is a work of intercession, mediating and representing light and life, and so it seems to me that it is prayer.

At St Remy Vincent produces his *Sun above the walled field* (1889) [41], a drawing showing a grand sun, with halo around it, and rays again touching the paper's edge. Van Gogh utilises much sketching detail in the way of mark-making as he defines the broken rays of the sun, the marks made in repetition act as if in meditation.

In night-scenes, light is used in equal measure, as the stars, heralds of nature, are set to illuminate the *Café Terrace at night* (1888) (Fig. 22.) [42] in Arles, complemented by the

[40] 'The Sower' c. 17-28 June 1888, 64x80cm, Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, in *Van Gogh Draughtsman*, p. 132: fig 112.
[41] 'Sun above the walled field' end May-beginning of June 1889, 47x57cm, Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, in *Van Gogh Draughtsman*, p. 143.
[42] 'Café Terrace at night' (Place du Forum), c. 16 September 1888, 81x65 cm, Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, in *Van Gogh Draughtsman*, p.146: fig 130.

iridescent orange glow of house and café lights. The stars too can be compared to seeds, scattered abroad through the night sky by God, and in the painting, by Van Gogh, each star is a parable of light shining in the darkness, full of life, energy, rhythm and song.

We realise finally that the essence of the true self is the reflection that we are of God, yet while on earth, his face must remain hidden from us, just as it was to Moses, (lest he would die!) so we can never fully recognise ourselves on the temporal plane, we must only be permitted to see through a glass darkly. In the same way everything in life is shrouded in this mysterious light, it is an unclear reflection, a parable. Jesus spoke in parables, perhaps as it was all that the finite mind could hope to comprehend, when Jesus spoke of the infinite.

The entire biblical journey could in fact be interpreted as one flowing endlessly between darkness and light, in paradoxical unity. In entering into arenas of darkness, one is enlightened; this begins the true turnaround of the self, for true progress is only made when God examines us, as with Merton's experience of the lamps and questions of God, night after night. Art too, starts to question us, when we enter that arena, under the spotlight of true, lamp-bright, questioning, real art.

True art is a parable, inviting us to draw alongside it, casting our prayers and the pearls of our insight before what we see. Such art allows and invites our recognition of the truth embodied both there and within ourselves, therefore it becomes a twin-sided mirror, a liminal entity, a place where we find the interpretation of our true self, beside the work we have come to interpret.

Conclusion

Art can be described as the confession of the artist to God, and this confession takes the form of the voice and actions of one who is either on the journey towards the true self, or of one who has attained it. Art is a gift from one traveller to another, that of a wounded figure offering the gift of healing and hospitality, and friendship through his or her art. Art can be a magical, liminal place, offering a sacred space for reconciliation, a meeting place that defies time and space; it is an image that may often function as a parable, and it may interpret the viewer just as much, or more, than it's perceived opposite, (i.e. as an entity to be examined and interpreted).

In the analysis of Merton and Van Gogh, they have been observed as two distinct figures, yet with some striking similarities. There is a penchant and passion for art, a desire to understand and connect with others, a deep inner seeking of the depth of the meaning of self, self-introspection and a faithful recording by way of Journals and letters, of honest feelings, desires and dreams, both realised and aspirational.

Their pilgrimage is towards the true self, an intentional purpose for Merton, and although it might be said to be unintentional for Van Gogh, he can be observed to attempt this in his own way. His self-introspection is real though often frustrated by intangible goals. He had an uneasy temperament, and faced unrequited human desires in his admittedly sorrowful life. Yet he fully entered in to the sorrow of others and became a self-sacrificing pilgrim, living simply, to help others, and as this thesis has shown, his works of art can be viewed as living objects, parables, liminal places where two very different realities dare to coincide and live on by planting seeds in their viewers.

In the end Van Gogh's art is his triumph over adversity, the legacy of a long-suffering yet persistently optimistic individual who finally faced his darkest night with suicide, after struggling with illness, poverty and rejection. His paintings reveal his fast paced and progressive pilgrimage; he had a sense that he would not have long to live and paint, and so he filled the short years with hundreds of moving and inspiring works. These trace a path towards wholeness, and his own integration, spiritually, emotionally, practically, sympathetically, with the Earth and its peoples.

Merton's journey is also that of an overcomer, and this idea of a spiritual and

triumphant pilgrimage is the interest not only of Theologians, but of Philosophers, Poets and Artists alike. Art presents, as in a Portrait, a Self infused with inner meaning and vital qualities, bringing the Soul's hiddenness into an open scene, the Self unveiled, and falsity exposed. Van Gogh and Merton, in the words of Meister Eckhart, *take leave of God*, in some ways, for God's sake, in order to pave new paths to God for others, through using Art as parables of the journey to God and to the true self. They both reject the stringent and intransigent spiritual inheritance of the past, from family and from the established church. They pave out new directions and plant new seeds for future ways of relating to God, Merton, in adopting Buddhist principles, and reinstating solitary living within a monastic group, and Van Gogh by rejecting a strict family religiosity and putting people before dogma.

The result of these two maps of pilgrimage is the wisdom to embrace life in its entirety; the fullness of pain, anguish and of joy together, and expressing the wisdom that anguish is not always overcome but can be embraced with peace.

Henri Nouwen describes what he envisages as the ideal future leader, as a person of prayer, as a 'contemplative critic':

> **the man who is able to recognise in others the face of the messiah and make visible what was hidden, make touchable what was unreachable. Through his compassion he (the man of prayer) can guide others out of the closed circuits of their in-groups to the wide world of humanity; and through his critical contemplation he can convert their convulsive destructiveness into creative work for the new world to come.**[1]

This blueprint of the contemplative, prayerful critic seems to collate elements of Van Gogh (who, for one, makes visible what was hidden) and of Merton, (a man of prayer, compassion and contemplation who breaks out of his own closed circuit in his insightful embrace of eastern art, culture and elements of Zen philosophy) and it may be that this model is within reach of many of today's artists and contemplatives, who will continue to have a positive influence, who will foster compassion and contemplation, who will seek to be true selves and true artists.

[1] The Wounded Healer: p. 47.

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