

Merton's unidentified vestiges that continue to invent themselves: glimpses from a workshop experience

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In Oakham School's new auditorium, the front white wall was the perfect canvas for the projected Merton calligraphies. The silence deepened in the theater-style seating as the first image appeared to hover hypnotically in the air above us. One after another, a series of fifteen visual marks, from the New Directions edition of Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakable* flashed on, and then disappeared.

The stillness remained in the space that had held Merton's marks, black strokes, feathery extensions, and fingerprint-embedded blots. From small reproductions, these vestiges shifted to monumental apparitions through the magnification made possible by this setting.

The workshop 'Noticing and praying with the *nots* and *however* in Merton's "Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings"' was a Saturday workshop included in the Ninth General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. It was inspired by these fifteen images and four written pages included at the end of the book. The workshop structure was simple. After a short introduction to the theme and process, the image series was projected. Our task was to gaze in silence, and be present to the visual experience in a contemplative way. Then, for a second time, the fifteen images appeared across the front wall. This time, the silence was broken as we listened to some of Merton's words.

- The viewer is *not* invited to regard the abstract drawings presented here as 'works of art.'
- The viewer is *not* encouraged to judge these drawings in terms of familiar categories; the viewer is also urged *not* to consider him or herself in any way implicitly or otherwise judged by them...
- ...as though accusing them (some people) of *not* understanding something that is doubtless *not* intended to be understood.
- These are *not* 'drawings of.'
- Their meaning is *not* to be sought on the level of convention or of concept.
- These are *not* conventional signs...
- They do *not* register a past and personal experience, nor attempt to indicate playfully the passage of a special kind of artist...
- It is *not* important whether anyone passed here, because these signs are *not* sufficiently accounted for as records of 'events'
- No need to categorize these marks. It is better if they remain unidentified vestiges, signatures of someone who is *not* around.¹

In this chapter, 'Signatures; Notes of the Authors Drawing' from *Raids on the Unspeakable*, the word *not* appears twenty-three times. Originally written as Merton's artist's statement for his 1964 art exhibit at Catherine Spalding College, 'Signatures' was

his attempt at some verbal accompaniment to his calligraphies. The director of the Spalding's art program Sr. Mary Charlotte, proposed to display a collection of his original works. Lipsey's account tells us that Merton seemed pleased with the opportunity, and collaborated in its actualization. Later, he interacted with an expansion of the project. Merton's framed and signed calligraphies became a limited traveling exhibit, moving from site to site, with some new works added as others were sold. In 1967, they concluded their journey in a coffee house in Washington, DC. ²

Now, almost fifty years later, our workshop group gazed at some of the images included in that exhibit, deferring to Merton's artist's statement as his preferred guideline to viewing them. In 'Signatures', Merton's spare and poetic words provide a privileged glimpse. There is no other written work in which he puts forward his thoughts on his personal art-making with such insistent nudging. Chant-like phrases, whiffs of humor, energy, and gentle encouragement guide us into the realms of calculated valuing and protection. He proposes a zone of comfort and privacy, begging us, without directly saying so, not to speculate, not to read meanings into, not to diagnose or assign interpretation. In so far as was in his control, he creates a landscape in which to view the calligraphies.

The Oakham workshop took this as our context. While viewing the images, and hearing the phrases, we attempted to honor Merton's request, moving away from interpretation, and toward a more open receptivity. We tried not to meddle, challenge, tame, or possess.

Once the projected images disappeared, the workshop shifted into its next phase. Each participant received a black calligraphy pen. On the workshop table, a supply of papers of varying weights and qualities was available to utilize. In a 1963 letter to his friend, Ad Reinhardt, Merton teased about wanting some good papers for his ink work, '... why don't some friends ... who receive all kinds of expensive samples of paper send me samples of exotic and costly materials?'³ So it seemed fitting to include the opportunity to experiment with paper texture, quality, and weight as part of the experience. Putting pen to paper, participants settled into a period of meditative time. For this segment, I functioned as facilitator. For many years now, the cornerstone of my retreat and spiritual direction ministry has been developing Art-Journaling, a creative process combining contemplative seeing, with visual and verbal expression. These retreats focus on using art-journaling as a way of prayer and a tool for spiritual direction.⁴

It was important to make a significant clarification here, both for the workshop participants and for this writing. I am far from proposing that Merton used the 'art-journaling' process I describe: quite the opposite: we have been carefully attentive to his opposition to connecting any verbal explanations to his calligraphies. In referencing art-journaling, my purpose was to introduce a structure that would facilitate an expressive response helpful to verbal and visual journalers.

The conference schedule provided plenary gatherings and breakout sessions replete with deep and challenging ideas. In contrast, this workshop atmosphere was charged with meditative calligraphies having the potential to shift our awareness to the vocabulary of

the image. Seeing some abstract projections of black and white expressions was an invitation for some to experiment in marks and lines. Time was given for individual work with the possibility of visual and verbal journaling. Toward the end of our workshop, there was an opportunity for optional sharing. Some of the participants sensed that the time and process helped them to probe and integrate some of the significant themes that were emerging in the conference presentations. Others shared that during the time they approached more personal insights. The group was able to notice and dialogued about areas illuminated by the contemplative process.

A different kind of integration happened for me through the opportunity to present a workshop during which I could facilitate a creative approach to drawing and writing. I am not a Merton scholar, but Thomas Merton as a guide has invited, companioned and challenged my seeking since I was sixteen. I remember the day: my father came home from making a retreat and handed me a copy of *No Man is an Island*. It was an unusual experience for both of us: dad was not a retreat go-er, and I was not a reader of contemplative literature. However, with the enthusiasm of youth, I befriended the book, reading it chapter by chapter because it was a special gift. That simple encounter continues to manifest an influence.

My study of art began in earnest around that same adolescent era. Then and in the years that followed, I continued to encounter Merton's writings. Occasionally I would notice that some visual images accompanied his work, but admittedly did not pay much attention. When I encountered Lipsey's book *Angelic Mistakes* I was stunned and grateful. Its publication opened the door, not only giving us a gathered place to encounter selected 'drawings', but also revealing this parallel spiritual process that companioned Merton throughout his contemplative and creative life.

By that time I was developing a ministry combining my work as a studio artist, and art therapist. Through my spiritual direction practice and in my own art making, I became fascinated with design elements as parables. It was in the study of design theory that I began to notice the core parallels to the life of the spirit, and the dynamic of discernment. In prayer journaling and ministry, I pay attention to marks, lines, shapes and spaces. As with all visual art and especially evocative in line drawings, our minds seek the familiar. Each of us has enormous visual curiosity. We seek meaning and yearn to make sense of our world. We notice recognizable image, but we can also learn to gaze underneath it, seeking how it manifests qualities of visual expression. In some well recognized Merton drawings, we encounter an arrangement of lines and shapes that read as a representation of monks, or the faces of woman, or birds in flight to name a few. Using an art-journaling discipline, without negating the image, we can look again, this time noticing line quality, the use of space, the intensity of the expression. As we enter into that space of gazing, we are invited to contemplative receptivity.

In any work of art, be it by the Renaissance genius, the icon writer, the contemporary cartoonist, or our own attempts at mark-making, we can learn about design language through a contemplative noticing of art elements. In his pages of 'Signatures' in *Raids*, Merton intellectually and dispassionately begs us not to interpret his works. Because he

shares in the creative curiosity, he knows all too well that overwhelming human yearning to know. We try to make sense of things. We search out the secrets. The abstract focus in Merton's images scattered through *Raids* with his accompanying insistent words has potential to help us in suspending that yearning. We cannot know Merton's intent as he drew an open circle, or rubbed some drops of ink from one paper to another. In his meditative prose, he seeks a similar place of surrender:

There must be a time of day when the man who makes plans forgets his plans, and acts as if he had no plans at all. There must be a time of day when the man who has to speak falls very silent. And his mind forms no more propositions, and he asks himself: Did they have a meaning?

There must be a time when the man of prayer goes to pray as if it were the first time in his life he had ever prayed; when the man of resolutions puts his resolutions aside as if they had all been broken, and he learns a different wisdom; distinguishing the sun from the moon, the stars from the darkness, the sea from the dry land, and the night sky from the shoulder of a hill.⁵

The Oakham conference was in April. The following September I was in Kentucky to attend an ITMS retreat at Gethsemane, and then to spend a few days at the Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

Beginning with the ride into the grounds of Gethsemane, the geography was awash with heightened visual encounters: seeing the abbey structures, the gardens, the cemetery, and the soft hills, tracing the walking paths, sitting on the hermitage porch and looking out at the view from that vantage point. Later, we witnessed a full moon glowing between buildings as we approached the chapel doors at three in the morning to join the monks chanting the Hours. Things we had only read about took form; moving along the silent corridors at night, one imagined that not far must be the stairways Merton climbed on his fire watch.

At the end of the retreat, I spent a few days at The Merton Center at Bellarmine University. There I was cocooned in a cubicle with a computer whose screen delivered a visual parade: many digital files of Merton's art. Over the next few days, a wild variety of images marched across the screen. Here were drawings that spanned Merton's years, not just the ones from the 1964 exhibit. The variety of visual marks kept shifting how I would look. I would open up a particular file and respond with awe. Then I would click the next drawing and view it as a graphic artist. At times, I looked with the eye of an art therapist, and at other junctures, appreciated his meditative calligraphies as an art-journaler. Some of Merton's more narrative drawings opened up allusions from art history or mythology. As the parade of images moved before me, technical, personal and reflective questions arose. What is familiar? What resonates? What alienates? What invites? What yields nothingness? What makes me smile? What feels incongruent? I kept going back to 'Signatures' and hearing Merton's paced insistence: 'These are not drawings of... These are not conventional signs...'

Looking at the variety of works, other considerations of the art process emerged as possible influences. As a practicing artist myself, I wondered about Merton's tools. When making art, we use instruments. Better instruments help the quality of the expression, especially with art that is as stark as Merton's black on white renderings. Sometimes the vagaries of expression are just the result of not having that perfect brush or point, an instrument that creates a thick line or a thin line. One can notice the quality of a particular tool and how it can enhance or hinder smooth execution.

I also thought about the varying roles an 'artist' plays in the drawing process. Sometimes one is a student, learning a technique, exploring a new paper texture, testing out how a brush moves. Sometimes one is exploring the boundaries of one's individual artistic abilities. Sometimes one is encountering our own limits in imagination, translation or energy. Sometimes, one is being narrative, developing the cartoon side, seeking to be humorous, or ironic, using the drawing as the message. Some people who are especially high-verbal seek relief and refreshment in the opportunity to express something deep and intimate in a language that can be private and unknown. Some artists are devotional. Some are seeking mastery or developing a lifelong practice.

For Merton, all manner of art experience and art expression was a prime influence. The presence and absence of life-enhancing beauty spoke to him from an early age and continued to hold a deep sway. At varying times and circumstances, he engages art history, the sacred and liturgical art, ancient and modern art traditions and mysteries. Always a man of his time, he was involved, entangled, delighted, and dismayed by the current art movements. Abstract Expressionism especially as practiced by his friends appeared on the horizon of his awareness. He was deeply invited into the tradition of the icon and icon prayer. Zen was a transformative and ever evolving prayerful practice, and his calligraphies were an aspect of this transcendent pursuit. And yet, for all artists, and I am sure for Merton, not all art-making is related to mastery or mysticism. Sometimes it is just play.

As I packed up my notes and prepared to leave the Merton Center, I was already imagining a return visit, not as much for research perhaps as for presence. There will always be wonderings about the 'unidentified vestiges'. Do some of these vestiges want to reveal other levels of meaning? Do some of his drawings harbor the secrets he could not write down but wanted to explore and express? One of the last images I viewed was seemingly an example of one of his experimental printing processes.⁶ He utilizes a template that resembles a windowed envelope. Was it just an interesting piece of paper he picked up in the recycling bin? Was it from a bill, a hospital communication, a check for a manuscript? Did someone he knew send the letter that he rubbed with ink and printed from? I suppose despite my stern invitation to pay attention to his words in 'Signatures', I still am tempted to wonder. I want to know because I am drawn to this man whose sharing has accompanied my life in significant ways. And I want to *not-know*, to honor his wishes, to give him space.

On the retreat visit to his Gethsemane hermitage, I sat at Thomas Merton's desk, gazing out the window at the scene that he saw when he put his pen down and looked up.

In the gathering darkness, shapes and forms shift. From this place, at the end of the day, perhaps he could see just enough to distinguish the line that separated the curve of ‘the night sky from the shoulder of a hill.’ These distinctions were echoed in the hundreds of lines and shapes, spaces and silences I got to know better in a cubicle at Bellarmine. But in the end, I go back to the memory of the workshop at Oakham with fifteen images and their accompanied words. What I know about these fifteen calligraphies is that Merton chose them. For an artist, this choosing does not happen lightly. Somehow these particular few might indeed have the iridescence he wants to approach, the transparency, the nothingness, the meaninglessness. They are given to us with the most crafted words on his visual work he ever put forth.

As insistent as his descriptions of what these calligraphies are *not*, equally significant is a shift in tone that Merton accomplishes through a well-positioned *however*: ‘*However*, the seeing of them (the calligraphies) may open up a way...’⁷

So, throughout a history of being seen, in the original art exhibit of 1964, in the reproduction of these calligraphies in *Raids* and in our recent gazing at the projected images during our workshop, we interacted with this possibility. Perhaps seeing them does indeed “open up a way to obscure reconciliations and agreements that are not arbitrary—or even to new intimate histories”.⁸ He tells us ‘these writings are decidedly hopeful...’⁹

‘If these drawings are able to persist in a certain autonomy and fidelity, they may continue to awaken possibilities, consonances; they may dimly help to alter one’s perceptions.’¹⁰

Our interacting with them fifty years later was an experience and an affirmation that indeed they have persisted, and in persisting, they continue to offer us the potential to alter our perceptions.

In the midst of the challenging themes of the conference on the *Raids on the Unspeakable*, and the many *nots* encountered along the way, Merton’s great *however* still persisted in holding out the possibility of transformative change and transcendent hope.

Notes

1. *Raids on the Unspeakable*: Thomas Merton, New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964. p. 179-182.
2. *Angelic Mistakes*: Roger Lipsey, Boston and London: New Seeds, 2006, p.29.
3. *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, Thomas Merton, (selected and ed. Robert E. Daggy), New York: Farrar, Strass, Giroux, 1989, p.8.
4. *Inner Journeying through Art-Journaling*: Marianne Hieb, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005.
5. *No Man is an Island*: Thomas Merton, New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1955, p.260.
6. *Angelic Mistakes*: p.171.

7. *Raids on the Unspeakable*: p. 181.

8. *ibid*, p.181.

9. *ibid*, p.181.

10. *ibid*, p.182.