

# The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air<sup>1</sup> by Thomas Merton

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How the valley awakes. At two fifteen in the morning there are no sounds except in the monastery: the bells ring, the office begins. Outside, nothing, except perhaps the bullfrog saying 'Om' in the creek or in the guest house pond. Some nights he is in Samadhi, there is not even 'Om'. The mysterious and uninterrupted whooping of the whippoorwill begins about three, on spring mornings. He is not always near. Sometimes there are two whooping together, perhaps a mile away to the woods in the east.

The first chirps of the waking day-birds mark the *point vierge* of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes. They begin to speak to him not with fluent song but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the *point vierge*. Their condition asks if it is time for them to 'be'. He answers 'yes'. Then, they one by one wake up, and become birds. They manifest themselves as birds, beginning to sing. Presently they will be fully themselves, and will even fly.

Meanwhile, the most wonderful moment of the day is that when creation in its innocence asks permission to 'be' once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was.

All wisdom seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point. Man's wisdom does not succeed, for we are fallen into self-mastery and cannot ask permission of anyone. We face our mornings with determination, we know the time and we dictate terms. We are in a position to dictate terms, we suppose: we have a clock that proves we are right from the very start. We know what time it is. We are in touch with the hidden inner laws. We will say in advance what kind of day it must be.

For the birds there is not a time that they tell, but the virgin point between darkness and light, between non-being and being. You can tell yourself the time by their waking, if you are experienced. But that is your folly, not theirs. Worse folly still if you think they are telling you something you might consider useful – that it is, for example, four o'clock.

So they wake: first the catbirds and cardinals and others I do not

<sup>1</sup>Extracts from the unpublished Journal of Thomas Merton.

know. Later the songsparrows and wrens. Last of all the doves and crows.

The waking of crows is most like the waking of men.

Here is an unspeakable secret : paradise is all round us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off 'one to his farm and another to his merchandise'. Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static. 'Wisdom!' cries the dawn deacon, but we do not stand and attend.

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We are now in the most perfect days of the Appalachian spring, late April: days of dogwood and redbud blossoms. Cool clear days with every delicate shade of green and red in the thinly budding branches of the oaks and maples. Later, in the burnt haze of summer, Kentucky's soaked green will be monotonous as a jungle, turning brown in the heat. Now it is France, or England. The hills suddenly look like the Cotswolds.

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Yesterday I got a letter from one of the last Shaker Eldresses, at their community in New Hampshire. It was an answer to an inquiry, and she enclosed a rather touching little leaflet about how the Shakers now faced extinction without concern, convinced that they had not been a failure, that they had done what the Lord had asked of them. I find this easy to believe. The Shakers have been something of a sign, a mystery, a strange attempt at utter honesty which, in trying perhaps to be too ideally pure, was nevertheless pure – with moments of absurdity.

They were absolutely loyal to a vision that led nowhere: but which seemed to them to point to a definitive eschatological goal. And perhaps they were not as deceived as one might think. Can such definitive visions really be pure illusion? Even in leading 'nowhere', are they perhaps not significant? Could the Shakers do the perfect work they did (in their furniture, for instance) if their vision were not real? The witness of their craftsmanship is certainly most impressive.

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The poems of Bert Brecht are like sackcloth and brown bread. To what extent is their healthy disillusionment itself an artifice? I think he is genuine. But if so, how does he believe what he seems to believe? Or does he believe it? Or is his Marxism a matter of convenience? It would be silly to suppose that a Marxist poet with official backing could not be also a good poet. I don't know how much of a Marxist Brecht really is. But I like him, in any case: and I like his poems better than his plays. I like his poetry better than that of the esoteric American pontiffs of the day. Brecht is a most individual poet, more so than many who are intensely conscious of their individuality.

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J.M.

I read a depressingly inane magazine article by a Logical Positivist – someone wanted my comment on it.

What can I say? The burden of his teaching seems to be this: ‘Since we cannot really say anything about anything, let us be content to talk about the way in which we say nothing’. That is an excellent way to organize futility.

After all, even nothingness has its dignity: but here not even the dignity of nothingness is respected. There must be the mechanical clicking of the thought machine manufacturing nothing about nothing, as if even nothing had at all costs to be organized, and presented as if it were something. As if it had to be talked about.

The atheist existentialist has my respect: he accepts his honest despair with stoic dignity. And despair gives his thought a genuine content, because it expresses an experience – his confrontation with emptiness. But these others confront only the mechanical output of their own thinking machine. They don’t have the decency or the sense to stand in awe at real emptiness. In fact, their rationalizations seem to be a complacent evasion: as if logical formulas somehow could give them something to stand on in the abyss.

And now: just wait until they start philosophizing with computers!

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Karl Barth asked (in a Christmas Sermon preached in 1931), ‘Is perhaps an unconditional faith in all sorts of principles not the typically German form of unbelief?’ A cogent question, with which I have no quarrel except that it restricts itself to Germany. Why not everybody else?

Barth says remarkable things in this sermon. Man must assuredly be able to live without principles as well as with them, for the ‘Light which entered the world at Bethlehem is, if its testimony is to be trusted, certainly *the most unprincipled reality* one can imagine’.

The Incarnation is not something that can be fitted into a system, and though I know Barth draws from this many conclusions with which I would not agree, yet I think what he says must be remembered, and in this I would lean toward Barth much more readily than toward Teilhard de Chardin for example. ‘Divine revelation,’ Barth continues, ‘cannot be discovered in the same way as the beauty of a work of art or the genius of a man is discovered . . . It is the opening of a door that can only be unlocked from the inside’.

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There are seven fascinating lines in the book of Wisdom about ships (14: 1–7): how the wood of ships carries men across the sea, even though ‘a man went to sea without art’. It is a lovely and basically humorous passage, with all the bustle and business of building the ship and planning the voyage, and trusting life and fortune to a piece of wood, and going off to sea without knowing what it is really all about, and

praying to a piece of wood even more frail than the wood that carries the voyager: and all the while God draws the madman over a safe path among the waves and saves him in spite of his nonsense and his idol: 'For blessed is the wood by which justice cometh'. If the author of Wisdom has nothing but approval for ships and shipbuilders, he has no patience with idols and their makers.

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*Parmi ses signes il y a les vaisseaux qui, sur la mer, sont comme dans le désert.* This is a line which sounds a bit like St John Perse. Actually it is from a French translation of the Koran (xlii – 31). It moves me deeply, with its spirit of loneliness, independence of men, dependence on God, emptiness, trust . . . the spirit of the desert which, for Moslems, is not the prerogative of a few. It is for everyone.

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The lapidary sentences of Isaac of Stella: splendid austere light, fire struck from stone. In his Easter Sermon, he sees faith as a resurrection because it is an act of obedience to God who is Supreme Life. To believe: to obey him Who is Life, and consequently to live. To live by submission to the Supreme Authority of Life – self commitment and submission to God's Truth precisely in its power to give life, *to command to live*.

Hence faith is by no means a mere act of choice, an option for a special religious solution for the problems of existence. It is birth to a higher life by obedience to the Source of Life: to believe is thus to consent to hear and to obey a creative command that raises us from the dead. And what can be a deeper motive for belief?

We believe, not because we want to *know*, but because we want to *be*. And supernatural faith responds to the mystery of that natural faith which is the core and center of our personal being, the will to be ourselves that is the heart of our natural identity. The higher faith is the will not only to be ourselves, but to find ourselves truly in Christ by obedience to his Father.

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To be a solitary but not an individualist: concerned not with merely perfecting one's own life (this as Marx saw is an indecent luxury and full of illusion). One's solitude belongs to the world and to God. Are these just words?

Solitude has its own special work: a deepening of awareness that the world needs. A struggle against alienation. True solitude is deeply aware of the world's needs. It does not hold the world at arms length.

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'If as Christians we thought that Church and Synagogue no longer affected one another, everything would be lost. And where this separation between the community and the Jewish nation has been made

complete, it is the Christian community which has suffered. The whole reality of the revelation of God is then secretly denied and as an inevitable result philosophy and theology take the upper hand, and Christianity of a Greek or German or some other freely chosen kind is invented. 'Karl Barth.

In consequence of this, Barth sees clearly that Nazi anti-semitism was also an attack on Christ. Some Christians have no way of conceiving such a truth!

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The South American poets who had a meeting in Concepcion, Chile, last winter, considered the two North Americans present to be 'innocents' – should one say fools? Especially . . . . . who was continually making a huge fuss about how poets needed lots of drugs and sex and was always the first one to go home.

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Bishop Nanayakkara of Kandy in Ceylon was here last week. He said that he got to know St John of the Cross when the books were sent to him as a present by a poor working woman in the United States. He is glad to have the Little Brothers of Jesus in his diocese, and says he told one of them, who is a shoemaker, that if the other shoemakers have a party and invite him, he ought to go: for if he is not able to go he is betraying his vocation!

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Conversation with a priest who was visiting the monastery the other day. He spoke proudly and in great detail of the skill with which he had arranged for himself a completely private audience with Pius XII, through the mediation of Mother Pasqualina, and doubtless with the help of a few hundred dollars to a good cause. He beamed at his success. It was like listening to someone calmly, blissfully, describe how he had been in an earthquake, a plague, or some other natural disaster – without any real idea of what was happening.

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The Ox Mountain parable of Mencius: Note the importance of the 'night spirit' and the 'dawn breath' in restoring to life the forest that has been cut down.

Even though the Ox Mountain forest has been cut to the ground, if the mountain is left to rest and recuperate in the night and the dawn, the trees will return. But men cut them down, cattle browse on the new shoots: no night spirit, no dawn breath – no rest, no renewal – and finally one is convinced that there never were any woods on the Ox Mountain. So, Mencius concludes, with human nature. Without the night spirit, the dawn breath, silence, passivity, rest, man's nature cannot be itself. In its barrenness it is no longer *natura*: nothing grows from it, nothing is born of it any more.

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Czeslaw Milosz has sent some of his translations of Zbigniew Herbert – a fantastically good poet – along with a letter in which he challenges me on my love of nature, my optimistic attitude towards it, my not reflecting how cruel nature is, and so on. In other words, I am not manichaeian enough: do I have a right at a time like this to be (or to imagine myself), immune to certain poisons? (Others are convinced that I am *too* manichaeian but I have never taken them seriously).

Should I really experience nature as *alien* and *heartless*? Should I be prepared to imagine that this alienation from nature is *real*, and that an attitude of sympathy, of oneness with it, is only imaginery? On the contrary: we have a choice of projections. Our attitude toward nature is simply an extension of our attitude toward ourselves, and towards one another. We are free to be at peace with ourselves and others, and also with nature.

Or are we?

There is this problem: it was the swine in the SS who most loved nature, and who turned to 'her' as a relief from their orgies, to keep themselves after all human in the midst of the hell they had created for themselves by creating it for others. They would torture others, and then turn around and be at peace with nature! The problem is this: that since in fact it is those who are most beastly who often tend to speak in the simplest and most innocent terms of the happiness of life, does it follow that one should not permit himself to be happy in such a time as ours, on the ground that the mere fact of enjoying life, or any aspect of life, automatically puts one in connivance with those who are systematically ruining it?

In any case, there is certainly a trite and completely false naturalism that is part of the totalitarian myth – or simply part of the mentality of mass society (campers, national parks, driving to the beach, etc., etc.). But does that mean that one cannot retain any claim to honesty and authenticity without making a cult of the ugly, the irrelevant?

Sartre's meditation on the root in *La Nausée* seems to me to be just as forced and just as trite as any romantic effusion of Lamartine on a moonlit landscape . . . just as pitiable as the cry of the kid on the waterfront promenade at Bouville when the lighthouse turned on: this cry which made the hero of *La Nausée* turn in disgust from the Sunday crowd.

(Where I meet the hero of *La Nausée*, and agree with him: in the café, listening to 'Some of These Days!')

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I wonder if it is a sin against poverty to read St John Perse. His poems abound in all kinds of magnificence, in every sort of rich words. To read such poems is to live and move in splendour. Your heart becomes a tropical palace, opening out on the seven seas and all the continents, with spice ships coming to you from everywhere, and the soft voices of

the Antilles speaking from the heart of the sun.

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The democratic primaries are coming up. There is a man running for county jailer who ought to know the job well. He has been in jail four times as a moonshiner. He is a 'good Catholic' too. Everything recommends him for the office.

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Flycatchers, shaking their wings after the rain.

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## Church Art

To have a church in suburbia apeing the restraint and dignity and the solemn abandon of the age of faith, is far more hateful than having tip-up plush seats and electric altar lights as favoured in the States. If Tooting likes the ensemble of its drawing-rooms, let Tooting give what it most likes to God: this would be just and right. If we do not like our churches to reflect the sort of life we have, let us have a different sort of life, and the churches will change inevitably.

David Jones, from 'Beauty in Catholic Churches'.

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