LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

# From Dwelling to Indwelling: Thomas Merton's Experience of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val

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**Abstract:**
In the light of Wendell Berry's words, this article seeks to explore the powerful impact of a landscape experienced as a child on Franco-American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and later recalled in memory. It focuses on the village of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val in the Aveyron valley, South West France. Merton, who was born further South in the town of Prades in the foothills of the Pyrenees lived in Saint Antonin-Noble-Val between the ages of 11 and 13, from 1926 to 1928. Merton's own claims for this place are powerful. Speaking from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, USA., Merton described the town as containing 'my whole life' and all he had ever known. It 'saved him', leaving him 'mortally homesick'. The impossibility of revisiting the village was 'the only real sacrifice' of his life as a monk. By exploring his experience of dwelling in the village and later being indwelt by the memory, I shall sketch the character of the place, tracing its location or place on the map, its locale or physical shape and character, and its sense of place. I shall then present Merton's experience of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val including his interpretive reflections on place, alongside those of contemporaneous thinkers with whom Merton claimed kinship: Gaston Bachelard, Flannery O'Connor, Simone Weil, Martin Heidegger and François Mauriac. Finally, having presented the place, with the life it contained, and the varied interpretations on the nature of place, by human geographers, novelists and spatial theorists, I shall close by exploring the shift between dwelling and indwelling, referring to Cistercian perspectives, and by concluding that memory, bound to a given place, is a powerful, multi-layered and transforming reality.

**Keywords:** Landscape; memory; childhood experience; dwelling and indwelling.

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Memory
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament.

Wendell Berry (2013)

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and Wendell Berry (1934-) are readily placed side by side for their shared home in Kentucky and their role as writers, Merton being the monk-poet of Kentucky and Berry, the farmer-poet. In an article identifying their shared concern for place and ecological issues, J.S. Porter refers to Merton's immense care for the loblolly pines in the Kentucky landscape. He cites the words of Brother Patrick Hart, who after Merton's death in 1968 was considered the 'chief architect of Merton's stature and reputation' (Inchausti 2019).

In that loveliest of tracts, *First and Last Memories* in which memory is distilled into art, Brother Patrick Hart recounts his first experience of Merton, as the then Master of Juniors, leading monks in the planting of loblolly pines. Merton 'gave instructions about how they should be planted, heeling them in after one of the novices opened the earth with a spade'. Brother Patrick notes that there was little concern for the environment in Kentucky in the early 1950s 'except for individuals like Wendell Berry and Thomas Merton' (Porter 2017: 13).

Porter recognises how Hart's memory of Merton is distilled into art. Berry's words in the epigraph above, go one step further, as memory is distilled into sacrament. Both imply that memory is not rooted in the past, but has its own dynamic and a capacity to take on newer and richer forms.

The development of interdisciplinary studies on the interrelationship of memory and place (De Nardi et al. 2020; Hoelscher and Alderman 2006; Said 2000), spotlights the bond identified by Berry in the epigraph. In one extensive compendium, which seeks to provide 'insights into the significant and diverse role memory plays in our understanding of the world around us' (De Nardi et al. 2020: preface), Jeff Benjamin claims that memory is 'deeply woven into considerations of place, and, akin to imagination, it holds creative power'. Even in the sciences such as archaeology, he claims, it is a 'realm where dreamers and artists merge', insisting that 'to create is to remember something into being' (Benjamin 2020: 214). Such creative potential, however, is underpinned by paradox. Benjamin draws attention to Paul Ricœur's assertion that the peculiar quality of memory is its 'fundamental contradiction, the presence of absence' (Ricœur 2004: 7). To remember is in part to resurrect a past, but it is a past transformed, as a new reality emerges from its absence. For

Benjamin, to engage with this absence is 'to piece together a presence out of this formless cloud' (Benjamin 2020: 214), in effect, to work out what that new reality is.

The words of Benjamin hint at imagery resonant of sacrament, the playing with a reality which is both numinous and physical. Benjamin echoes Berry's understanding of the harnessing of place with memory, and the journey leading from the encounter between the two, which results in a complex and layered identity. Later in the same poem Berry refers to 'the abundance of place', through which 'the songs of its people and its birds, will be health and wisdom and indwelling light' (Berry 2013). Within the physicality of place is a quasi-mystical underpinning.

This article seeks to explore the encounter between a landscape experienced as a child and its reshaping through memory in the life of Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton. I chart a process from inhabiting a place to being inhabited by it, in such a way as to make the place a life-companion. The stamp of this living with – a form of conviviality - is such that it shapes identity and communicates a wisdom concerning personal geography, emerging as that 'indwelling light' identified by Berry.

The complexity within place demands a multifaceted lens to take in its various dimensions. American landscape photographer Robert Adams suggests three elements are necessary to fully capture a landscape:

> Landscape pictures can offer us three verities—geography, autobiography, and metaphor. … Geography, if taken alone, is sometimes boring, autobiography is frequently trivial, and metaphor can be dubious. But taken together, the three kinds of information strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact—an affection for life. (Adams 1996: 14)

To present a place, therefore, is not simply to depict its spatial character, but to reveal the life and meaning stamped within it.

Studies by landscape architects on the elements within place imitate Adams' triple prism. Norsidah Ujang and Khalilah Zakariya present place in figurative form, citing J. Montgomery's diagram, where place is situated at the intersection of three interlocking circles, representing respectively physical form, activity and meaning. Place is hence constructed by associating a physical environment with psychological, social and interpretive processes (Ujang and Zakariya 2015: 710).

A similar triple focus is identified by some geographers, who introduce a greater precision on how to present the physical form of a place. Gabriel Harrington, referencing cultural geographer Tim Cresswell and political geographer John Agnew, identifies the three elements within place as location, locale and sense of place (Harrington 2016: 1). Location is the place on the map. This is found via measurable coordinates of map making. Locale is the physical shape. This can encompass a wide spectrum of spatial characteristics: interior or exterior; natural or human-made; medieval or modern; urban or rural; chaotic or orderly; alien or familiar. Locale will also include the detail of architecture and urban design. Together they suggest that the third aspect, sense of place, emerges from the human interaction with a given location and locale which grants the place meaning.

Returning to Berry, within his wider œuvre, the word 'place' is a layered reality, which according to a study by Drew Kennedy Thompson has three distinct meanings: a particular location, a dwelling place, or 'a description of selfhood or self-understanding' (Thompson 2009: 50). It is as if place and person are grafted one to the other, so that each is 'in place' or 'at home'. Berry's poem, 'The Farm' outlines the process: 'You make yourself a place;/ You make yourself a way/ For love to reach the ground' (Berry 2018). Bound to this concept of place, therefore, are the elusive qualities of Adams' 'affection for life' and Berry's 'love reaching the ground'.

In each of these cases, the third element: sense of place, which encompasses metaphor, meaning, an 'at-home-ness' or a being in place, is the most challenging to quantify and hence, definitions are various. On the one hand, sense of place signifies an intrinsic quality within a given geography. On the other, the concept is undermined in a refusal to acknowledge the possibility of an earth-embedded character, and hence any sense of place becomes a fabrication. A third perspective relies on breaking down the meanings in the word 'sense', with the intention of combining the sensory impact of a place with a making sense of it, to form an overall interpretation.

Neal Alexander examines the term *genus loci* or spirit of place as a means of identifying an inherent spiritual reality within the physicality of place. He quotes Seamus Heaney's 1977 essay *The Sense of Place* to illustrate this understanding, in which Heaney contends that the land of Ireland with its dual pagan and Irish Catholic traditions, is 'a repository of collective ideas', 'a cryptic fabric of signs' with spiritual significance. When the writer seeks to unearth the buried life within, Heaney, echoing Berry's words, suggests that the Irish 'sensing of place' is distinctively 'sacramental' (Alexander 2017: 41). By contrast, Alexander, with reference specifically to mid-20th century poetry, the period when Merton was writing, identifies landscapes void of any inherent meaning. Quoting Eric Falci, he refers to landscapes which dissolve into 'murky indeterminacies, and spaces made and unmade by modernity's alterations, accidents, and disasters' (Alexander and Cooper 2013: 5; Falci 2009: 201). His own definition of sense of place avoids such polarisation. He adopts that two-fold process, involving the engagement of 'our five senses in apprehending place' and a parallel 'making sense' of the sensory encounter (Alexander 2017: 39).

In the light of these various paradigms on the character of place, I shall present Saint Antonin-Noble-Val firstly through its geography, including its location, locale and the interpretation of its character. I shall continue into autobiography, the specific stamp which Merton's experience of the place creates. I shall then through his interpretive lens on place together with perspectives gleaned from contemporaneous thinkers with whom Merton claimed kinship (Gaston Bachelard, Flannery O'Connor, Simone Weil, Martin Heidegger and François Mauriac) lead into a discussion on dwelling and indwelling. I shall close by suggesting Merton's own method of apprehending place, and his understanding of indwelling through memory, provides a model of attentiveness conducive to engendering conviviality with place – a living and feasting with. It is as if through his attentiveness he enables the landscape to reveal, in the words of cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, its 'personality' (Tuan 2009: 537). From dwelling within the initial welcome of the place, there emerges an indwelling dialogue and ongoing conviviality, which imparts transformative power.

**Saint Antonin-Noble-Val**

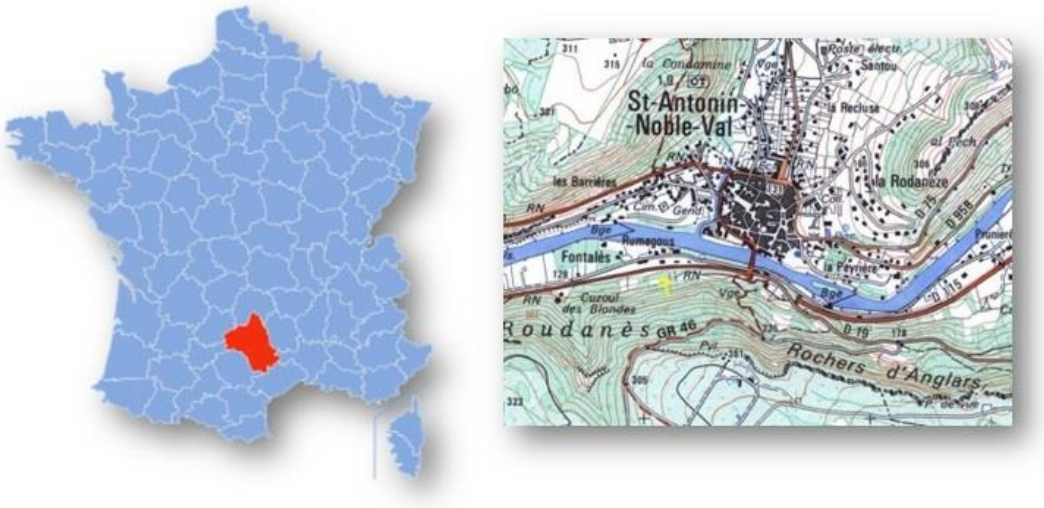


Figure 1. Maps of the Aveyron and Saint Antonin-Noble-Val.[1]

Saint Antonin-Noble-Val is situated in an area of limestone gorges and plateaux at the meeting of two rivers: the Aveyron and the Bonnette in South West France. The first name of the town, Condat, meaning confluence, reflected this topography. In Roman times it was identified as *nobilis valis*, a name recognising the majesty of the site. The appropriacy of the name is best understood when approaching the village from the West, where one of the largest man-made forests has taken over the flat plains of sand known as the *Landes*. Leaving the forest, there is a gradual, then startling transformation of the landscape. The extreme flatness and regimented rows of trees initially give way to undulating fields of orchards, which then drop away precipitously revealing only the topmost branches of trees, and high cliffs arise on each side of a deep gorge. One set of cliff-faces are bleached bright white, looking as if a giant pot of paint has tipped over the side of each one. The other, with a contrasting mosaic of warm terracotta tones, ochre and gold, signals the varied aspect of the limestone in the locality.

Travelling along the Aveyron gorge, the honeyed stone is shaped into a human-made landscape which clings precariously to rocky cliffsides, as if growing organically from the surroundings. Church towers and spires, free-standing campaniles, mini-castles and crenelated dovecots replicate the rocky limestone outcrops. Above the valley on the plateau, the distinctive shapes of domestic buildings plant surprise. Stone bread ovens are shaped like apsidal chapels. Shepherd's huts, wells and hen houses are topped with conical rooves of spiralling *lauzes*. There are open-air laundries, and the walls of the solid farm buildings, which provided shelter for farmers and cattle side by side, are punctuated by tiny circular openings beneath the eaves due to the heavy tax on windows.

This built landscape (Figure 2) illustrates how, like several of the neighbouring villages, Saint Antonin-Noble-Val has maintained the character of the medieval period. The townscape is thus endowed with a sense of ancient and hallowed venerability. Most exterior walls are over 60cm thick, reinforcing this sense of solidity and stability. Changes are evident in ghostlike traces of former buildings, like an architectural palimpsest, as

Figure 2.

centuries of stone masonry layer over each other. This stratification is echoed in the narrow winding streets, crammed within the original perimeter of the defensive walls. Timber framed buildings infilled with rubble, clay or tufa signal the proximity of the limestone landscape and oak woodlands, whilst clay pantiles reflect the differing geology to the east of the Causses or limestone plateaux. They create a counterpoint in the roofscape balancing the grey limestone *lauzes*. Wendell Berry's poem, *A Country Town on a Summer*

*Evening* captures the apparent organic quality of this locale perfectly: 'This town has grown here /Angular and white / a thing of nature' (Berry 1962).

The name of 'Saint Antonin' was added to 'Noble Val' in the seventh century with the founding of a Benedictine abbey dedicated to the saint, thus grafting a Christian presence onto the topography. This namesake has an unclear history, being associated with any of five centuries.[2] The legend identifies a saint who converted the Rutenes, a Gallic group of people living in the central part of France, to Christianity. He was martyred further south at Pamiers. His head and right arm were offered to the village and delivered by two legendary eagles, who transported the relics along the three rivers of the Garonne, the Tarn and the Aveyron.

As Catharism, the Christian dualist movement of the 12th to the 14th centuries spread to southern France from the East of Europe, the town became a Cathar stronghold, situated as it is on the junction between Quercy, Rouergue and the Albigeois, key centres of Cathar thinking. As a result, the town was under siege in 1212 as part of the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229), a crusade ironically fuelled by advice from Bernard of Clairvaux, a key figure in the founding of Cistercian order to which Merton would later belong. This led to the destruction and dismantling of the abbey which continued into the later Middle Ages. The subsequent looting of the medieval architecture is evident throughout the town, with many facades being animated by superimposed gothic arches and medieval sculptures. Such a process, common in so many French towns, illustrates Ceri Houlbrook's description of landscapes as data stores, or libraries which become 'a perpetually changing environment with aspects being lost and others introduced, in an inevitable narrative of revisions and transitions' (Houlbrook 2020: 393). For Alexandra Walsham, this is especially characteristic of a religious landscape, which becomes a 'porous surface upon which each generation inscribes its own values and preoccupations, without ever being able to erase entirely those of the preceding one' (Walsham 2011: 6). Monastic presence and ecclesial power cannot be erased from the Saint Antonin landscape, with crosses in stone and metal relocated, including a 15th century stele, originally in a monastic graveyard, but now parked next to the market hall. The town's infrastructure readily acknowledges the coalescence of divine with social order as if a whole sacred geography held sway. It thus reflects what John Inge identifies in *A Christian Theology of Place* as a medieval urbanism in which geography is the handmaiden of theology' (Inge 2003: 127), with 'locality as a vital ingredient' (29).

The coalescence of Christian witness and topography, found in the very name of the town, is therefore multiply evident. There are streets, squares, gateways and cliff tops named after saints: Saint Pierre du Couvent; Saint Angel; Sainte Sabine; Saint Alauze; Lieu-dit pech de Saint Jean, or, they identify the presence of religious orders: rue des Cordeliers; rue des Carmes; rue des Dames Noires; Porte and Place des Capucins; Grotte du Capucin; Place des Cordeliers. This pairing of urban infrastructure and Christian witness is especially visible in a secular building, the *Maison Romane*, a medieval court of justice and the oldest civic building in France, built around 1150. The stonework has the fluidity of 12th century masonry, widely evident in the cathedrals and cloisters of this period. Ornate capitals on the first-floor clerestory depict the biblical stories of Adam and Eve and the journey of the Magi, alongside depictions of unbiblical seven deadly sins. Overlaying this theological

imagery are sculptures of local flora and images which identify the laws to be applied to each offence or sin, suggesting that civic justice was equated with divine justice. Theology, ecology, geology and social order are melded together in stone.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.


Figure 5.

Beyond the late Middle Ages, a rural exodus led to a loss of prestige for the town. Recovery would begin only in the early 20th century when a railway and a spa was built, with the intention of encouraging tourism by popularising the town's unchanging medievality.[3] It was the year the spa was opened (1926) that Thomas Merton, aged 11, would arrive in the village with his father, on a steam train winding up the valley, between the high walls of the gorge.

**From Geography through Autobiography to Metaphor**

Before exploring Merton's evocation of the town of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val, biographical details will help identify the pivotal position it holds in Merton's life. Saint Antonin stands out in Merton's memories of places in France as the French town in which he was resident for the longest time (1926-1928), and the one he recognises as most instrumental in shaping his identity. Other locations include Prades in the foothills of the Pyrenees, where he was born and lived for eighteen months, (1915-1916), Montauban where he went to boarding school, and Murat, where he spent his vacations when his father was working elsewhere (1927-1928). Merton's childhood from birth to age 13 included just under five years in France. In the interim he lived in New York (Douglaston and Long Island) and Bermuda (1916-1925) alongside his maternal grandparents, his mother dying in 1921, when he was six. When his father decided to take him to France, his younger brother John Paul (1918-1943) would stay with their grandparents. The intention was to find a home in France for Tom and John Paul where Owen Merton could make his living as a painter.

Merton would spend three years in Saint Antonin and his departure from the town would bring to a close his residency in France and the brief period when life was lived alongside his father. He would only return to France as an orphaned lone tourist in his teens, after the death of his father in 1931, by which time his home had become another boarding school, in Oakham in the East Midlands of England. Merton's maternal grandparents died in 1936 and 1937 and his brother in 1943. By the time he was revisiting his memories of Saint Antonin in the writing of his autobiography, he had entered the Cistercian Abbey in Kentucky, which was to be his home for the rest of his life (1941-1968). Saint Antonin-Noble-Val, therefore, became a distillation of one rare period in his childhood when he was not always under the care of guardians, and when his father, brother and American grandparents were still alive.

There are various layers to Merton's recollection of Saint Antonin. One vantage point hones in on a child's carefree fascination with the world, as if he were seeking to recreate a Blakeian 'song of innocence'. Merton had not long completed a Master's thesis on William Blake. He traces his innocent delight in the contours of a place which invited adventure and freedom. The communication of innocence, however, is in the sense of being unwounded, (*in-nocens*) or at least less so than he would become, by the rapid sequence of early deaths within his close family and his abandonment to guardians. The importance of family links or 'ancestry' within a place, is identified by Tim Ingold as a necessary element in 'what it means to "dwell"' (Ingold 2022: 173). Dwelling is made

possible when place is stamped by the presence of one's predecessors. Merton was remembering a land closely associated with the presence and activity of his parents. They had met as artists in Paris and represented a way of looking at the world through painterly eyes, which he would inherit. France provided a memory of a shared dwelling place.

This rootedness in familial presence led Merton to downplay in his account of these years the indifferent parenting of his father. Owen Merton constantly abandoned his son to schools and to strangers. At the *lycée* in Montauban, Tom was bullied and was frequently ill, spending weeks in the sanitorium with respiratory illnesses. He repeatedly begged his father to be allowed to leave but to no avail. He left only to be transferred to another boarding school in England. Owen's death just three years later, transfixed Saint Antonin as the preeminent place where his father was often to hand. It was here that he would absorb his father's love for the Midi as a lasting legacy, and where he was granted, albeit briefly, a shared context and a shared home, ever lost to him on leaving France.

Such selectivity of memory is identified by Pierre Nora in his work on *lieux de mémoire* or places of memory:

> Memory is life … in permanent evolution – open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation. [Furthermore] memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic. (Nora 1989: 8)

Nora highlights how memory of a place is an unreliable and instable source. In remembering a place of shared ancestry, Merton's perspective may be out of focus.

The second layer in Merton's description excavates signs which point to his eventual monastic vocation. In this respect his account is resonant of renowned spiritual autobiographies. Soon after the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the work was acclaimed as 'a twentieth century form of the *Confessions of St. Augustine*' (John 1997: 65). Merton had read Augustine's *City of God* and *The Confessions*. Equally, the work was shaped by Merton's extensive reading of Jesuit or Ignatian spirituality. He had read and studied the poetry of Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, on which he had planned to write a doctoral thesis before becoming a Trappist. Ignatian spirituality seeks to identify the traces of God within each day, a year or in a lifetime. To reflect on past experience through an Ignatian lens is to 'love Christ intimately by grafting one's life story to his' (Hampton Wright 2020). Merton's accounts of the places in which he lived in France becomes an application of such Ignatian practice. In this way, Saint Antonin becomes a key stratum in Merton's life, criss-crossed with what he would perceive as the graces which led to his monastic vocation. The town would hence offer a concrete continuity between his childhood past and his future as a monk.

The third layer in Merton's recollection unearths a painful sense of loss within the expressed bond with the place. This ambiguity of delight and pain, of intimacy and distance, highlights a certain fragmentation within the remembering process. It is resonant once again of a *lieu de mémoire* in which there is a sense that 'memory has been torn' (Nora

1989: 7). Furthermore, it recalls Benjamin's identifying the need to replenish and heal 'this formless cloud' (Benjamin 2020: 214), the new reality emerging from the clash of presence within absence. There is something in the indwelling memory for Merton which speaks of profound suffering.

**Merton's Experience of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val**

***1. A Song of Innocence***

Figure 6. The station at St Antonin-Noble-Val in 1895 [4]

The 11-year-old Merton, travelling on a steam train along the gorge, would see the drama of the cliffs, the precipitous drop of the river and the villages before Saint Antonin clustering around bastides: Bruniquel, Penne, Cazals, all of which now, a hundred years on, are designated as being among 'the most beautiful villages in France'. Merton was captivated as the geography and geology impressed itself upon him:

> The valley seemed to get narrower and deeper as the train followed its narrow single track between the river and the rocks. If you went to the window and looked you could see the grey and yellow cliffs towering up so high they almost blocked the sky. (Merton 1976: 35)

He would later recall, on receiving postcards of the area, how this deep impression drove him to pore over maps:

> The postcards and the map certainly gave me the *mal du pays*. When I was eleven, I used to spend hours looking at the Michelin map, the red roads, the yellow roads, the roads without colour, the pale green forests and I not only looked at the map but went where my feet could carry me. (Merton 1990: 396)

His explorations on foot were sometimes in his father's company. Locals who knew Owen Merton would describe how he set up his easel in odd corners of the town where the

Figure 7.

medieval buildings and abbey ruins invited a watercolour. At other times Tom was on his own. He recalls a long climb to a remote cave in the surrounding landscape named after a Capucin hermit (Merton 1996: 396). Christian witness was encountered even beyond the town in the wildest of places.

The extent to which the medieval spirit became grafted into his life is especially evident in his father's purchase of an abandoned 13th century chapel, the 'stones and the window and the door-arches' of which were incorporated into the house he had built (Merton 1976: 43). Such an action illustrates how medieval architecture was fashionably collected by those born in the non-European Anglosphere, (Owen's father was a New Zealander). This was a period when the American George Grey Barnard purchased medieval ruins and transported them to New York. Ironically, his most significant purchase was from a former Benedictine Abbey, St Michel de Cuxa close to Prades, Merton's birthplace, an abbey that Merton identified as the source of prayers for his monastic vocation. Barnard purchased fifty-one capitals in the pink marble of Villefranche de Conflent and had them shipped to New York to be eventually adopted by the Metropolitan Museum in 1925. The museum created a setting evoking the Roussillon abbey in what is now 'The Met Cloisters' in New York (Bonnery 2009: 17). Owen similarly created his own 13th century setting, which is recalled with deep affection by Merton as 'a beautiful little house – simple and solid' (Merton 1976: 59-60). As the house incorporated ecclesial remains, Merton joyfully advertises the stations of the cross within his adopted playground on the steep hill behind the house, offering a remarkable viewpoint down on the town. The way of the cross was a tradition set in motion by the Franciscans, popularised in the late 15th century, and which partook of a wider European phenomenon in which high places were selected for the fourteen stations of the cross, representing key moments in the passion of Christ. The aim was to tether the landscape to the practice of prayer and the memory of Christ. Once again, a place of childhood freedom and discovery reiterates the enmeshment of geography and theology.

Merton's childlike delight in the place is pre-eminently evident when he revisits the town in an unpublished novel. In his synaesthetic recall of the sights, smells, sounds and the joy of swimming with the local children, he underlines the sensory magnetism of the place:

> I have come back to see the red fermented muck of grape left in the streets when the wine press is taken into the house again in autumn . . . I have come back to see the rusty iron crucifix that stood near the Place de La Condamine in Saint-Antonin ... I have come back to see the blue river curving under the bridge, and to hear the paddles of the laundresses echoing under the arch. I entered a great competition with most of the boys and youths of the town, in which we all jumped into the river and swam after a duck that was thrown off the bridge. (Merton 1968a: 241)

Merton's description demonstrates how a sense of place can emerge from its assault on the senses. He identifies the colours: red, rust, blue; the sounds of the water: the splash of paddles, the jumping in fully immersed, then swimming; the scent and taste of fermented musk; the cinematic panning through stills of streets, houses, crucifix, archways, town

square, river, autumn; the childish summary of it all being a 'great' event. He is immersed in the aesthetic beauty of the place and the joy of being in the company of other children, caught up in communal fun.

The memory of this vignette seen through the eyes of a child, not yet orphaned, has something of the character of a sanctuary. In his definition of a *lieu de mémoire*, Nora points out the significance in the medieval meaning of *memoria* as sanctuary (Nora 2005). Merton, through memory, can take refuge in a place of adventure, friendship and belonging and as a sanctuary, his recollections establish a natural flow between place, memory and the sacred.

### *2. Following the Star*

Merton's aesthetic and sensory appreciation of Saint Antonin is coupled with the task of identifying the hand of God in the place he loved, his way of 'making sense' of the town. His first sighting interprets the place as one wherein he would find the way to a Christ-guided life:

> That afternoon we took a peculiar antiquated train into the country. We felt something like the Magi after leaving Herod and Jerusalem, when they caught sight once against of their star. (Merton 1976: 34)

This interpretation continues as he highlights the centrality of the church in the town as a keystone to the surrounding landscape. It signals a space where topography and the built environment, from medieval bastions to modern suburban development, are oriented to God:

> The Church had been fitted into the landscape and becomes the keystone of its intelligibility. Its presence imparts a special form to all the eye beholds: hills, forest, fields, the white of Rocher d'Anglars, the red bastion of Rouergue, the winding river, the green valley of the Bonnette even the white stucco villas of the modern Bourgeois. (Merton 1976: 37)

By Merton's own admission, it is this orientation which shaped his life. He suggests that the town's saint prayed for his Christian vocation (Merton 1996: 327), and he identifies the mysticism within the very dust of the medieval streets inscribing his own inner world:

> The tone and value of my own interior world . . .is the tone of 14th century mysticism of the Latin Fathers of 12th century monasticism. . . It is therefore of great importance to me that I have known the narrow streets of Cordes. It is important to me that I have walked the dusty road under the plane trees from St Antonin to Caylus and from Caylus to Puylagarde, to have passed through the nondescript, dusty subprefecture of Caussade and to have stood by the tower of the hanged men or on the fortified bridge of Cahors. (Merton 1968b: 185-6)

This medieval stamp provides a key to his own identity. The presence of family and that of his other predecessors, the medieval monks and mystics who walked the streets before him allows him to comfortably re-dwell there in memory as ancestry, identity and place coalesce harmoniously.

### *3. 'That is my part of France. I love it still and always shall'*

Such harmony, however, is diminished and torn apart by a painful sense of loss. He describes Saint Antonin as a place that he has 'never been able to forget', that he has 'never stopped thinking about along with 'all the places around' (Merton 1996: 327). The memory of the region leaves him 'mortally homesick for it' (Merton 1968b: 185-6). Singling out the Aveyron to his friend John Harris, a Devon school teacher, he will claim that in its wildness it trumps all the limestone valleys of France (Merton 1990: 111), and he confesses to Jacques Maritain a deep sense of ownership and love: 'What a tormented history that country of mine has for that is my part of France. I love it still and always shall' (Merton 1994: 41). This depth of affection is highlighted when he claims that not being ever able to return is the one sacrifice of his monastic life, the rest paling into insignificance (44).

Merton begins to discern a greater reality in his years in Saint Antonin than in the rest of his life: 'Sometimes I think I don't know anything except the years 1926-27-28 in France, as if they were my whole life, as if my father had made that whole world and given it to me instead of America, shared it with me'. This primordial significance endows it with redemptive power as he recalls the years before his arrival there: 'I realized today after Mass what a desperate, despairing child-hood I had. Around the age of 7-8-9-10, when Mother was dead and Father was in France and Algeria. How much it meant when he came to take me to France. It really saved me' (Merton 1996: 328).

These are claims of some magnitude for a place lived in for three years. It sets Merton pondering the importance of place in each individual life. Observing that 'We do not realize our own setting as we ought to', he insists that 'It's important to know where you are put on the face of the earth' (Merton 1953: 197-8), to take notice of our 'own appointed place' (Merton 1980: 345). It is not an option to refuse to 'dialogue with (our) surroundings' (Merton 1997a: 48). To 'experience all the times and moods of one good place - no one will ever be able to say how essential, how truly part of a genuine life this is' (Merton 1968b: 161).

This appreciation of the huge importance of place underlines for Merton the magnitude of God's entanglement with place and the individual inhabitant: 'All this was in some way sacramental and all of it had me turning somewhere. I did not know where', and this sense of a mysterious significance leads him to deduce: 'I know I must keep alive in myself what I have once known and grown into: and if anyone else wants a part of it, I can try to pass it on' (Merton 1968b: 187).

This attribute 'in some way sacramental' which demands 'keeping alive' has a direct resonance with the biblical and Eucharistic words: 'Do this in memory'.[5] When a place becomes a participant in signalling divine intervention in a life and is understood as divine gift, uniquely given, its presence in memory points vividly to a more than material reality. This is the trajectory encapsulated by Wendell Berry's words in the epigraph. The memory

is born in the materiality of the location and locale. The expansiveness of memory gives it an organic instable quality. Merton's recollection initially creates a child's adventure story set among wandering monks and mystics. It takes on a further perspective as a story of father-son companionship enriched by the palette of colours, shapes and tones of the place. The third aspect within his recollection gets stuck in the clash between the intimacy he recalls, and an alienating sense of loss. Stepping beyond geographical reality and historical recall, the reaching for a presence within absence becomes both song and lament.

The breaching of the boundaries of time and place finds a happy symbol in the garden planned by Owen Merton. Wishing to immortalise his family's presence in the landscape, he planted two poplars, which he named Tom and John Paul. Poplars continue to grow on this site, understood as having grown as seedlings from those planted in 1928. When Merton left Saint Antonin, his 'heart tightened at the loss of my 13th century', at the loss of his own personal legend. It is deeply poignant given his father's subsequent early death to hear him admit: 'It is sad too that we never lived in the house that Father built' (Merton 1976: 60). Saint Antonin whilst rooted in eternity for Merton is a repository of longing and loss.

## The Significance of Places

Not everyone has a medieval place of beauty to recall, but childhood memory of finding some kind of niche, a nest, a refuge, a graspable space, according to Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) in his *Poetics of Space*, explored by Merton in the late 1960s, is grafted deep into consciousness (Bachelard 1961: 41-4). *The Poetics of Space* leaves the panorama of a war-torn world and turns to those contrasting places which invite poetic reflection, from wide vistas to domestic space (24). Referring to the paintings of Rouault, Bachelard highlights a soul-like quality in the depiction of interior space (11). Reflecting on the re-creation of interior space recalled through memory by poets, he claims that in seeking to name a dwelling place it is this soul-like primordial quality which is sought (32). He thus anticipates what Heaney, as noted earlier, will later describe as unearthing a buried life which is distinctively 'sacramental' (Alexander 2017: 41). Bachelard further highlights how such a quality is granted to the very terms used to delineate the memory of a life. The resonance of the word 'home', is shared by those milestones: the path taken, the crossroads lingered at, the bench sat upon (Bachelard 1961: 30). These concepts re-emerge in memory as deeply significant. Bachelard indicates therefore that whilst places fill geographical space, they also map a life and are permeated both by human vitality and the primordial quality to which he refers. Geography, autobiography and metaphor, identified by the landscape photographer Robert Adams, re-emerge as crucial aspects in the definition of place.

Merton clearly appreciated Bachelard's work, but had reservations:

> In his study on houses, rooms etc., he suddenly opened up a whole set of obvious questions for me … Good as he is, subtle fascinating, Bachelard does not go deep enough. The spaces and houses, the attics and garrets, the cellars and homes are those of reverie and not of meditation. (Merton 1998: 296, 298)

Figure 8.

This going deeper wherein place is given attention through a contemplative lens is explored by four contemporaneous writers with whom Merton expressed kinship:Flannery O'Connor, Simone Weil, Martin Heidegger and François Mauriac.

## Beyond Reverie: Towards a Contemplative Lens

### *1. A Strange Geography*

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), a fellow resident of the American South interrogates the geography within which a Catholic writer operates. Although Merton and O'Connor never met, they each had a mutual interest both in each other's writing and, significantly, in the place which nurtured their respective work. The particular challenge met in interrogating the geography within which a Catholic writer operates is addressed by O'Connor in her 1957 essay, *The Fiction Writer and His Country*. She begins by claiming that there is an assumption that a writer's identity is dependent on knowledge of his or her region: 'To know oneself is to know one's region', but continues 'and to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around' (O'Connor 1988: 806). This dual concern, not only to name place and self but to name it in relation to 'Truth', demands the paying of attention to where one is placed geographically, with a corresponding attention to where one is placed on an eternal landscape. According to O'Connor, the necessity for this dual interrogation by the Catholic writer is to avoid the dangers of abstracting holiness, by separating out the material world from an appreciation of its supernatural dimension. She considers such a separation as not simply detrimental to nature, as it empties it of divine possibility, but also as compromising an understanding of grace: 'When there is a tendency to compartmentalise the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the sense of the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost' (812). O'Connor insists that Catholic writing, to be true to itself, is called upon to interweave the material and the spiritual: 'If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is' (811). The task of the Catholic writer, therefore, according to O'Connor is to attend to 'grace as it appears in nature' (809), thereby reinforcing 'our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete observable reality' (811). This according to O'Connor produces a strange geography (805): 'The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location' (848).

### *2. Earth-bound Memory and the Imprint of Eternity*

O'Connor's conviction that place bore an imprint of eternity was shared by Simone Weil (1909-1943). On arrival in New York, she was stateless, like Merton, and attended Mass at Corpus Christi Church, where Merton had been received as a Catholic. She shared with Merton the experience of geographical displacement arising from her exodus from Europe as a Jewish refugee, escaping the Nazi Holocaust. Merton would in time promote her works among the novices he taught and emphasise his admiration for her marginalised stance in the Catholic world. He placed her alongside Charles Péguy (1873-1914) for their shared position not 'in the middle of the Catholically approved and well-censored page, but only on the margin (where) they remained as question marks: questioning not Christ, but Christians' (Merton 1968b: 40). Furthermore, he describes her particular relevance to a European and specifically French landscape, admiring her as a 'brilliant and independent

French thinker -- able to articulate the deepest concerns of Europe in the first half of this century, where one of her charisms was that of living and dying as a sign of contradiction for Catholics' (Merton 1968c). He shared her interest in the period of the Cathars: 'I have been thinking of Toulouse, as I have come across some rather interesting books about the Albigensians - I still think of towns like Cordes with the greatest fascination' (Merton 1994: 41), and he makes a direct comparison between her thinking and that of the Cathars, who were excommunicated and suffered persecution:

> Though her spirit was at times explicitly intended to be that of the medieval Cathars and though her description of her mystical life is strongly Gnostic and intellectual, she has had things to say of her experience of sufferings of Christ which are not only deeply Christian but also speak directly to the anguish and perplexity of modern man. (Merton 1968c)

Merton was profoundly involved with her manner of seeing and thinking.

The displacement which Weil experienced, and Merton shared, led her to insist that having roots is one of the vital needs of the soul. She seeks to rescue from neglect a concern for geographical, spiritual and cultural roots: 'Every human being is rooted in an earth-bound poetry, which when it reflects the light of divine utterance provides a connection between concrete place and cosmic belonging.' Weil claims that without this connection, 'there is a painful uprootedness (Weil 1963: 137). Reflecting O'Connor's 'strange geography', Weil makes a plea for mindful attention to the materiality of physical surroundings, which she equates with attention to the divine: 'It is essential to be aware of divine presence embedded in all external matter, without any exception' (14). This attention leads into a readiness to being read by whatever is contemplated, thus subverting the subject to object hierarchy where the human objectifies and adopts a stance apart from what is being observed. Instead, 'thought is to be suspended, so as to leave it available, empty and penetrable by the object of one's attention' (76). The model Weil provides is the biblical acquiescence of the natural world (92).[6] Weil hence underlines the importance of a contemplative engagement with the world, a readiness to be shaped by what is disclosed and an acknowledgement of an incarnational perspective in which place is divinely indwelt. Weil's conviction concerning the enmeshment of materiality and divine presence is a key conviction that Merton would share. Their mutual empathy for the region of what is now designated Occitania, is also highly significant.

Given the persecution against Jews and their allies, which led Weil to leave France, first for America, then for England, Weil discovered a source of alternative thinking in what she termed the 'Occitan inspiration'. Focusing on the period of the Cathars, she perceived a comparable kind of brutality. She identified the spirit of religious tolerance in the towns of Occitania, which welcomed the Cathars, as the very antithesis of the Nazi-controlled France in which she was living. She considered therefore that the widespread destruction wrought by the anti-Cathar crusades marked an end of a civilising presence and of religious freedom. Focusing specifically on the architecture of the period, she drew parallels with the majesty and the purity which she saw in Greek architecture. Set against the weariness within her contemporaneous political landscape, Weil believed that to

meditate on the beauty of a past age, whilst acknowledging the deep suffering experienced there, might provide a transformative focus, a chance to breathe a purer air (Weil 1942). There is a hint that this acting in memory of a suffering people would transubstantiate the present. The act of remembering becomes sacramental.

### *3. 'Dwelling is to spare, to preserve, a staying with things'*

The focus of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) on dwelling and mindful *habitus* captured Merton's attention. He regularly refers to Heidegger in his journals and makes use of Heidegger's (1889-1976) term *Gelassenheit* as the title of a poem in *Cables to the Ace* (Merton 1980: 452). This is a term which has direct resonance with Weil's openness to being read by a place.

When reflecting on human interaction with place in the modern world, Heidegger identifies a particular dynamic holding sway. He interprets the process of ordering the material world into systems of information as 'calculative' or 'technological' thinking (Heidegger and Lovitt 1977: 23), and designates this process as 'enframing', or a refusal to listen to the material world by confining it to *a priori* categories (14). Such compartmentalisation according to Heidegger impairs the ability of the individual to experience the world in its radiant fullness: it 'blocks the shining-forth and holding-sway of truth' (28). To counter this limitation, he proposes meditative thinking, accompanied by a 'letting-things-be' or a yielding to the time and place, which he terms *Gelassenheit.* For Heidegger this practice facilitates mindful dwelling, (Heidegger 1966: 50), which is to reject the imposition of personal judgement, in effect to refuse to 'enframe', and instead, to let things be as they are, in their located presence. In Heidegger's words: 'the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve . . . dwelling itself is always a staying with things' (Heidegger 1971: 4). A call for a form of contemplative stillness becomes the means of mindful dwelling.

### *4. An Indwelling Geography*

Merton's Catholic landscaping of France finds a parallel in François Mauriac (1885-1970), more famously associated with stamping a Catholic sensibility onto the landscapes of South West France. It is, however, his specific exploration of the impact of childhood experience of place in the light of a Catholic perspective, which resonates with Merton's observations. Moreover, his focus on a child's vision is noted by Merton when he chances upon Mauriac's words describing Mozart as a child. Both Merton and Mauriac saw their own childhood as a period when they were not permitted to complain about the struggles they experienced. Mauriac identifies Mozart as a child who similarly could not complain. Merton copies the description in the original French as if highlighting a shared fate (Merton 1997a: 304).

In *A Bordeaux Childhood* Mauriac presents the child's experience of place as a powerful indwelling presence. Memories become an inner motivating force, animating the present, and resonant for Mauriac with a divine imprint. As a result, the places of childhood don't let go of you, even beyond death (Mauriac 2019: 41). The place becomes a conduit

– divinely bequeathed revealing 'the hand of God with startling clarity', and holding up the 'the flag of eternity' (46), demonstrating that the places given as a child are divinely mapped onto a life, and are grafted to one's very identity (54). The place remembered is both a milestone and a compass-bearing of identity, measuring the path taken (45). This means that its history is the 'history of his own body and soul, its houses and streets, the very events of his life' (11). Like Merton, Mauriac singles out the centrality of the church and clock towers, which he perceives as stamped with his carefreeness, his struggle, his sense of right and wrong, his recall of childhood dreams (12). He sees that the adult he became was 'already there in that child sitting at the turning in the road where I stop even now to write these lines' (29). Unlike Merton, he can lay claim to an always present awareness of grace in the material world exclaiming: 'What children other than us Catholics were so preoccupied by the state of grace' (16). Mauriac is convinced that to acknowledge place as divine gift and as divinely indwelt creates a buffer zone to subsequent feelings of uprootedness and fragmentation. By salvaging the significance of one place in a given life, it becomes important to tend to the significance of all place.

Underpinning the powerful richness of Mauriac's childhood memory of place is a suggestion of suffering, of that child who could not complain. Mauriac speaks of the need to merge himself into the forbidding greyness of the school building: 'It was essential to become a grey stone in a grey building, to avoid on all accounts standing out from the crowd. If you don't fit in, running away is your only option' (39). Mauriac, however, found an escape route in churches, which offered a strange place of freedom from conformity:

> Everyone is free to participate in the strangest of actions, of joining your hands, kneeling down, face turned toward the vaults of the building. It was natural thing to talk as if to yourself. Praying is before all things, the right to speak on your own. (35)

Memory of place is shaped by pain, but equally provides a sanctuary from that pain.

**From Dwelling to Indwelling**

Merton's mother, Ruth Jenkins (1887-1921) wrote: 'there is no more fascinating subject in the world than the influence of surroundings on human character' (Mott 1993: 6). She thus identified the close alliance between place and identity, which Merton unearthed in his recollection of Saint Antonin. The magnetism of the town, within his memory, and its grafting to self-understanding, enabled him to find that niche, that graspable space resonant of primordial sense of 'home' identified by Bachelard. To a degree he did 'enframe' the town. In writing an autobiography within the auspices of cloistered life, he was obliged to highlight features which anticipated a monastic vocation. Nonetheless, Merton's subsequent nostalgia for the place and the prime role it is granted in the shaping of his life, speaks beyond a dutifully accomplished assignment. Merton is taken hold of by the place Saint Antonin-Noble-Val in the manner Mauriac describes. It will not let him go. Child and adult meet in the same time and place. The strange shift wrought by memory leaves in its wake poignancy and loss, as intimacy and distance, presence and absence merge.

In Ingold's examination of the essential elements which lead to being able to dwell in a place, we can recall he mentioned 'ancestry', the significance of which has been evident in relation to Merton's experience. Tracing the links of his own particular ancestry was crucial to Merton. Ingold identifies memory as a further key element for authentic dwelling, describing it as 'an inner cabinet of the mind', which is 'stored and preserved from the vagaries of everyday life. . . Remembering, then is a matter of retrieving from storage – or "calling up" – items of information relevant to the situation at hand' (Ingold 2022: 171). Memory thereby creates an oasis, subject to a dynamic of its own, that can be trawled for specific purposes. This process demands a journeying towards self-knowledge in the present and to remembrance of the past. To partake of this journey is to take on what Ingold terms a 'dwelling perspective', by which he means 'the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence' (184). To dwell is thus to acknowledge both an inseparability between the individual and the place, and the interpenetration of the place and the self as the character of being.

This sense of interpenetration is key to understanding 'indwelling'. At one level, indwelling can be simply understood in a chiasmic pattern: an individual dwells in a place and place through memory indwells the individual. Given the Catholic theological underpinning of Merton's thinking, however, indwelling can take on a broader connotation.

The concept of 'mutual indwelling' in Christian theology relates to the three persons of the Trinity: God, Jesus, Spirit, who are said to indwell each other, living in close intimacy. In John 15:4, this sense of indwelling is applicable to human beings: 'Dwell in Me, and I will dwell in you'. Indwelling, however, can reach beyond the human into material places. Hopkins' assertion that 'Christ plays in ten thousand places', is powerfully reiterated by Merton:

> There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. . . It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me. (Merton 1980: 363)

Hence to be indwelt by the town of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val is not so much a specific experience of place as a way of seeing. It is not a unique context but an ultimate human context. For Merton and the Catholic thinkers with whom he confessed to kinship, geography cannot but be divinely shaped, divinely indwelt and divinely active in an individual's life. To dwell, reflecting Ingold's assertion, is to be in intimate relationship with the place inhabited, but in Merton's case, it is equally an intimacy with God.

An understanding of Eucharist adds further layers to a sense of indwelling. The Trinitarian dimension met in the concept of indwelling is a feature of Cistercian Eucharistic theology. Through Eucharist the recipient is united to the three persons of the Trinity resulting in a reciprocity of movement between the three persons and the human. This dynamic however is closely tethered to the action of memory and that drawing together of past and present cutting through chronological time which memory brings. Through the

sacrament of Eucharist which applies the exhortation: 'Do this in memory of me', God's saving action becomes present and real. One further dimension emerges on considering the nature of the memory. Eucharist focuses equally on God's saving grace and the Passion of Christ. Hence, through this association with Eucharist, 'indwelling' is characterised by the coalescence of suffering with redemptive possibility.

Such coalescence is evident in Merton's lingering over the image of Mozart -- the child who does not complain – yet who produces soul-touching music. It is also powerfully evident when seen in the light of Weil's thinking and the genocide wrought against the Cathars. Merton's poems elegiacally refer to the southern French landscape as stamped by deep suffering (Merton 1980: 334-35). We have seen too how he associates his ever and ongoing love of that region with its tormented history. Whilst his first lens on Saint Antonin resurrected a time of companionship, and the second a sense of continuity and rootedness, the third lens places the joyful sense of discovery alongside an unremitting pain. Remembering hence becomes not only a process of encountering a forgotten rootedness and the surprised presence of God in his life, but unearths suffering, which is both his own and that experienced down the ages on the soil of Occitania.

It is significant for Merton's story that the word transubstantiation came into being at the time of the Albigensian crusades, whose siege remains carved onto the walls of Saint Antonin. The Cathars denied that Jesus had a human form, which led to a rejection of Eucharist as the body and blood of Christ. They in fact denied all sacraments due to their view that it was impossible for the divine to be embedded in materiality (Hemsworth 2020). Transubstantiation provides a term within Catholic orthodoxy to describe what the Cathars could not believe in, how the body and blood of Christ can have a material reality.

Weil, although she is buried in the Catholic part of the cemetery in Ashford, England, and some accounts suggest she became a Catholic on her death-bed, is understood to have never received communion. She would see transubstantiation in another form, that of remembering the past. Suddenly the particular geography is highly pertinent. Where Merton enjoins his love to a place of suffering, Weil, in her call to remember in order to breathe a purer air, recalls the character of place marked by genocide, of the kind she and her fellow Jews were experiencing in Europe at the time. The act of remembering a time and place of suffering, and allowing an openness to be indwelt by the memory becomes a form of sacramental participation. Indwelling thereby becomes a transubstantiation of the present.

## Conclusion: 'The Abundance of Place'

The persistent companionable presence of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val in Merton's life illustrates a readiness to be owned by a place. He achieved this porousness by his manner of dwelling. In spite of the deprivations of Merton's childhood, his orphandom, the cold mothering he describes and the relatively indifferent parenting of his father, he was left a legacy of looking at the world with his parents' painterly eyes. Merton describes how he too would try to capture a landscape as if grafting it onto his retina. Mott refers to an unpublished journal entry where Merton describes how he practised walking and looking silently like First Nation Americans:

> I went back down the slope to look . . . again and take it all into my eyes, so that I would never forget it. That was because I knew that when you had seen a place once, you would never see it exactly like that again; the light would be different and the air and sky and shadows and colours would be different and living things would have grown into different shapes and many old things would have perished and disappeared while new things would have grown into their places. . . That light and that air and that water showed to me a rightness that you recognized often afterwards in strange places: in reading a book, in hearing a song, in seeing a movement in a dance, and not the least of all in churches. (Mott 1993: 58)

Merton's description reflects complete concentration on the change of light as if seeking to adopt the practice of his landscape-painter father in his observation of the landscape. He is fully immersed in the place. The polysyndeton of the repeated 'ands' suggest the plenitude of the place and the desire to grasp it all. He seeks beyond creating a word-painting, however, by his expressed desire to 'take it all into my eyes'. It is as if he seeks to be penetrated by it, so that he and the landscape may symbiotically contain the other. By merging with the landscape, his presence within it is experienced as 'rightness', as a sense of communion is unearthed through this close attention. Like his synaesthetic recall of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val, this description illustrates how seeing and remembering is not a passive activity, but calls upon the body and the senses to unearth the shadowy silhouette of a more-than-material world. He thus provides a model for human interaction with place, where place is elevated to become a companion to dialogue, rather than a mere background and allows for a Heideggerian shining forth of truth and the glimpse of a new horizon.

Ultimately, Merton's experience of yielding to the regular intrusion of Saint Antonin-Noble-Val into his memory unearthed that 'abundance of place' which serves as the 'indwelling light' identified by Berry. From generating childhood wonder in having found a niche, to the mapping of his monastic vocation, and that unearthing of a mutual identity, Saint Antonin-Noble-Val provided a cartography of grace. In this place, material dwelling meets a mystical indwelling inscribed into Merton's very sense of self. It is significant that one non-medieval sign which in fact left the tourist information office mystified as to where I might find it, is a newly signposted road: Chemin Thomas Merton.


Figure 9.

## Notes

[1] Map of France https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aveyron and map of St Antonin-Noble-Val http://tramwaytetg.free.fr/page34.htm [accessed 15 March 2023]

[2] Information from the townhall website: Mairie de St Antonin-Noble-Val*, St Antonin-Noble-Val, sa Légende, son origine*, https://www.saint-antonin-noble-val.fr/la-ville/sa-legende-son-origine/ [accessed 03 March 2023]

[3] The local water was named after the Black Prince, rumoured to have stayed in the town. https://pixels.com/featured/aveyron-river-in-saint-antonin-noble-val-ricardmn-photography.html [accessed 03 March 2023]

[4] Photograph of the Station of St Antonin-Noble-Val in 1895 http://tramwaytetg.free.fr/page36.html [accessed 03 March 2022]

[5] Luke 29:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24.

[6] Matthew: 6: 28-9, See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.

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