

# Thomas Merton's Incarnational Poetics

Lynn Szabo

In his evocative prose-poem, "Day of a Stranger," Merton writes to his friend, the Argentinean poet and editor, Miguel Grinberg, about a "typical day" in his life as the now-famous American hermit-monk. In a variety of voices suffused with mercurial moods and insights, he depicts his way of life as a permanent resident in his hermitage, St. Mary of Carmel, begun in midsummer, 1965. This stimulating essay represents Merton's mature capabilities as a writer and his expansive development as monk with his eyes wide open to the world. As such, it offers readers a veritable catalogue of his poetics in the ethos of a profoundly intimate conversation. In this narrative of wordplay and self-revelation, Merton offers us a microcosm of his incarnational poetics, intimated by the solitary "stranger" who lives in the woods in a world where:

. . . words cease to resound, where all meanings are absorbed in the *consonantia* of heat, fragrant pine, quiet wind, bird song, and one central tonic note that is unheard and unuttered. . . . In the silence of the afternoon all is present and all is inscrutable. One central tonic note to which every other sound ascends or descends, to which every other meaning aspires, in order to find its true fulfillment.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in the enchanting magnetism of the expectant silence of a hermit's life, the ordered privacy of his solitude is overshadowed by the backdrop of the nuclear age, creating the starkness of a silhouette that takes its effect from the darkness surrounding it. He hears the armed Strategic Air Command bomber fly low over him as it aims its way from the nearby military base to its Viet Nam destination, a "scientific egg in its breast," the symbol of all that threatens and diminishes not only the stillness of his forest home, but the entire human story. Then, deftly, he moves his audience back to the equilibrium of the natural world around him where "exactly fifteen pairs of birds" live in his immediate surroundings: with him, they form "an ecological balance" whose "harmony gives the idea of 'place' a new configuration."<sup>2</sup> The result is a profound metonym for modern human life, living out its destiny in alienation and impending doom; Merton, the "stranger"/hermit/monk/poet, avoids succumbing to despair by listening to the sacred language of the universe—the silence of God, Incarnate in Christ, embodied in the totalizing "otherness" of human existence.

Merton had long contemplated the conundrum of human speech and its delimiting inability to inscribe spiritual realities. Dismayed by his profound recognition of the debasement of our mod-

ern use of language, he had noted, in his reading of Karl Jaspers, the claim that "when we misuse language, we generate a myriad of significances that constitute the sound and fury of our lives. But in such, there is no Being. No God. No silence. . . Only dissonance, tropes, and complex systems of irony."<sup>3</sup> But by this time in his life as a contemplative/poet, his writer's consciousness deduces that the "wind in the pine trees" (*neume*: the breath) is a language that says everything better than any word that can ever be uttered. Indeed, he claims that it says all that needs to be said. Like the Spirit of God it "blows where it listeth," bringing, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, the incarnation of a second birth and the presence of eternal life. Merton's poetics are located in the interstices of word/Word when he declares that "up in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it."<sup>4</sup> Merton's intense conflict about language as a means of apprehending spiritual realities resolves itself only as he engages its fundamental paradoxes. Like Augustine, he rejects muteness, embracing language as word of Word, flesh of Flesh, proposing Eucharist. As a poet, he enters the matrix of the Sacred in which silence and sound compose a contrapuntal music of secrets that elicits the Incarnate and the Infinite.

In consequence, Merton's view of language is grounded in the vexed spaces from which he proclaims communion as superior to communication because verbal signifiers are inferior expressers of the "otherness" of spiritual experience. In response, his language of the sacred reflects his bias in favor of the simplicity, solitude, and silence of the rural Cister-

cian life. The settings for so much of his poetry are the Kentucky "knobs" and their fecund life which reflects the integrity of all things: "a hidden wholeness"<sup>5</sup> whose complexities are an expression of Edward Said's claim for the intimations of an "ontology of nothingness—a silence—in which there is infinite regress of the truths permanently hidden behind words."<sup>6</sup> Among the many aspects of Merton's experience of place are the natural flora and fauna of his surroundings,

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the animals, insects, and creatures whose existence intersects with his, the skies and their weather, and even the seemingly inert rocks and soils of his landscape. He borrows Hopkins' term "inscape" in his *New Seeds of Contemplation* when speaking of these inhabitants of the natural world around him: "Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them."<sup>7</sup> His early poem, "Natural History," collected in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947), is a particularly fine illustration of Merton's apprehension of the "suchness" or "whatness" of the natural world and its "hidden fecundity," its incarnate beings:

There is a grey wall, in places overhung  
With the abundant surf of honeysuckle:  
It is a place of shelter, full of sun...

O Savior! How we learn Your mercy and  
Your Providence,  
Seeing these creatures in their tiny and  
tremendous labors:  
Each one diligent and alone  
Furling and arming himself in a grey case,  
the color of the wall...

Walk we and ponder on this miracle  
And on the way Your creatures love Your  
will...

In this tiny microcosm of the integrity and wisdom of the natural world, "[t]he creeping things . . . /Have worked their small momentous wonder,/Prepared their winter's sleep."

Merton learns from their inner wisdom, finding it imbued with the mercy and Providence of the Presence of Christ in the cosmos. He wonders at the Wisdom that has "brought them here together,/With no timetable and no calendar,/On this particular day" and subsequently realizes that they are obeying God's command, His mystery" and thus, they "end their private histories/And lock their days in the[ir] cocoon," sealing themselves "in silences and sleep." In comparison, he laments that we humans are "slow/Hard-hearted in our faithlessness, and stubborn as the coldest stone!"

Although one could wish for a less zealous tone to the poem and more brevity in its craft, these earlier verses from the Merton canon instruct his readers in the meticulous attention with which his senses catalogue the natural world, infuse

it with his spiritual consciousness, and recognize in it the presence of the Divine "transforming Christ". In what would have been better in a poem of its own, he insightfully apprehends those most menacing of threats to human happiness—"two figures, death and contemplation" who "[w]rite themselves out before us in the easy sun/Where everything that moves is full of mystical theology." Although heavy with the rhetoric of religious language, his contemplation is full of existential recognitions: ". . . we still fear the fight that wrests our way/Free from the vesture of our ancient days." The poem concludes with triumphant exclamations that the natural world, the tiny worm spinning his own cocoon, teaches us the "ways to God" and sanctity.<sup>8</sup>

Merton's early successes with sacred poems that are focused on the natural world includes the poem "The Sowing of Meanings," which resonates with the transcendence and power of the silent life of nature, in which "like a grain of fire/Smoldering in the heart of every living essence/God plants His undivided power . . ./Surcharging the religious silence of the spring."<sup>9</sup> Numerous other early liturgical poems mirror these same realizations about the unities of the inner, silent life and the outer, active life of the contemplative and the saint. The cycle of Advent and Nativity poems beautifully suggests the resonance, historical and spiritual, of the seasons of Christ's birth. In a prayerful apostrophe to the Incarnation, the speaker in "Advent" intones the "stainlessness" of the winter night sky where "time falls like manna at the corners of the wintry earth" and "intellects are quieter than the flocks that feed by

starlight." Charmed into meekness by the "darkness and brightness" of the "solemn valleys," the skies "travel like the gentle Virgin/Toward the planets' stately setting" personified in the "white full moon as quiet as Bethlehem" in the nocturnal hours of the Nativity.<sup>10</sup>

The accompanying "Carol," replete with resonances from T. S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi," annotates the Nativity portrayed in "Advent." Full of the "noise of whispers," the drama emerges in which "God's glory now is kindled gentler than low candlelight/Under the rafters of a barn" where "Eternal Peace is sleeping in the hay." The meekness of the Advent is now enjoined by three kings "who [come] through the wintry trees" while "unnumbered children of the wicked centuries/Come after with . . . penances and prayers" in submission to the recognition that "they have seen come this holy time."<sup>11</sup> Merton's poetic voice echoes the foretellings of Scripture as it simultaneously prophesies the coming of Christendom's redemptive imperative.

At the center of Merton's poetic vision is his ongoing acknowledgement of the power of silence and its significance in the cosmos. Its epiphanies track and trace God's searing presence in all living things. The poet engages contemplations from which discourse emerges and in which silence and sound compose together to acknowledge and bring forth the sacred. "O Land Alive with Miracles" reproduces such a moment. Its beauty and delight have been recognized and honored by composers and cinematographers who have attempted to capture its mystical evocations in music and film. Collected in *Figures of an Apocalypse*, considered overall a weaker volume of his poetry,<sup>12</sup>

this poem lusciously paints a landscape that provides a splendid illustration of Merton's early synthesizing of sight and sound imagery. Silent is the stage for this melodious lyric ode to contemplation which releases him from the "dizzy paw of gravity" to "[swim]" in the wind that lies beyond the track/Of thought and genius and of desire," and to "trample the white, appalling stratosphere." In exuberant allusions to Christian symbolism, he credits this transcendent experience to "the terrible Dove,/The huge, unwounding Spirit." He praises contemplation by whose journey he has discovered that "the land [is] alive with miracles . . . clad in streams . . ." and "the kind armor/Of . . . enkindled water-vesture." He petitions this "country wild with talent" to "open . . . momentary windows, here and there,/Into [its] deep and purple galleries" filled with "blue trees," and hills that "burn with . . . blinding art."

In this intense record of mysticism's visions, the poet realizes that in the landscape before his eyes, "Christ and angels walk among us, everywhere"; that "these are their ways, their fiery footsteps,/That flash and vanish, smile and pass" and that "—By those bright passengers our groves are all inspired." In the ecstasy that the mystical temporality brings in its wake, contemplation has in its capture "sailed us half-mile-high into the air/To taste the silences of the inimitable hawk." In this new world, "suddenly", "[the] geography" of the "wounded earth" has been forgotten with its "stations of the mendicants/And the ways of the workaday saints"<sup>13</sup>: "Human life is inescapably incarnate, fleshly, and part of the value of even the most ordinary activities is to keep one rooted in concrete actuality, to

guard against the fatal self-deception that the "religious" person lies on a different plane of reality from everyone else."<sup>14</sup>

Although cloistered as though caged in his first seven years at Gethsemani, Merton's marginal perspective demonstrates the contemplative grounding of his future acclaim as a monk with the voice of a prophet. Shortly, his solitary sanctuary and the site of his most tortuous conflicts would become the best-known abbey in America. With the publishing renown

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brought about by *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton's poetic voice was apparently driven to silence while he puzzled and pondered his seemingly paradoxical vocations of mystic and poet. In a near decade of the self-induced silence as a poet he was transformed from the "stranger" into a "member of the human race"—he authenticated his identity in the face of Christ seen "shining like the sun" in all things everywhere. His solitude became the hermeneutic by which he voiced and interpreted his resplendent pleasure in and deep anguish for the human condition which he was thereby led to see everywhere.

When Merton's poetry reappears in the 1957 collection, *The Strange Islands*, his poetics are correlative to his vocation as writer/mystic and apophatic contempla-

tive. Language as the elucidator of intellectual exercise is clearly subsumed by spiritual experience in Merton's evolving paradigm for human understanding of God. Form and content in the poetry begin to take a sort of shorthand, a rarefaction of intellectual/spiritual experience reflected in Merton's choice of syntactical and rhetorical structures. These characteristics mark profound changes in his development as a poet. By the time *Original Child Bomb* appears in 1962 and *Emblems of a Season of Fury* in 1963, the influence of numerous writers and thinkers to whom Merton had begun to have ready access is especially apparent, as is his increasing exposure to the influences of mass culture, particularly magazines and newspapers. As Merton critiques the contemporary severing of meaning and language, especially in public discourse, words are often the very symbols that he chooses to omit in the subsequent antipoe-try of the 1960s. In responding to such poetry, the reader must depend upon multiple and abstract associations as the lexicon of interpretation; indeed, silence is often the hermeneutic for *Cables to the Ace* and *Geography of Lograire*, the late poetry deriving from an anti-language of Merton's own creation. Seen in this light, Merton is the poet that Sartre defines as:

The [one] who is outside language . . . . Instead of . . . knowing things by their Name, it seems that first he has a silent contact with them, since, by turning toward the other species of things which for him is the word . . . he discovers in them a slight luminosity of their own . . . .<sup>15</sup>

From his relationship of almost three decades with the creatures of the natural world around him, Merton discovers how their sanctity reveals his own. God's wisdom in them reveals His wisdom in Merton; this resonance not only notifies Merton of their shared unity; it recreates it in him, with a power that is both redemptive and incarnational. In brief, this is both the method and the outcome of his contemplative life. Its Cistercian silence heightens and nourishes the perceptions of the border crossings of imminence and transcendence that nature willingly offers her disciples. These themes appear throughout his landscape poetry, reflecting the numerous epiphanies and realizations that the silent Kentucky countryside offers him.

"Song for Nobody," a Zen-lyric, is lovely in its economy of language and the silence with which its short but pithy lines paint the life and color of the sunflower, abundant on the Kentucky hillsides in summer's seasons. The radiant presence of this natural beauty iconizes Merton's mature relationship to its Creator and his ontological experience of spiritual practices now including Zen and other Eastern meditation arts. The imagery focuses on the power of light and emptiness as seen in the simplicity of the brown-eyed Susan. The poem's speaker hears the flower singing by itself—"for Nobody," "without a word" although in its dark eye "Someone" is awake. There is "[no] light, no gold, no name, no color and no thought"<sup>16</sup>; like the heavens, this flower declares the glory of God in the supernal music of the Incarnation, unheard, but in full Annunciation.

As his vocation as a man of deep contemplation evolves, Merton's concern

with human identity and authenticity, and its alignment with the exterior realities of their social and cultural contexts, expands and deepens. Ultimately, Merton's sardonic voice is exchanged for three other modes of statement—light, music and silence—what Steiner calls "the proof of the transcendent presence in the fabric of the world."<sup>17</sup> Merton's poetic vision issues from a deep respect for humanity, tempered by longings for peace and unity—for a world where hate would be mitigated by love, fear, by security, and despair, by hope. His prose writings lay out ways and means by which this could be attempted; his poetry sculpts this vision by which words become the sound of sheer silence radiating the presence of God Incarnate in the cosmos through the agency of Christ and sustained by the power of His Spirit.

#### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger in Dancing in the Water of Life* (ed. Robert E. Daggy). New York: HarperCollins Books, 1997, p. 242.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
3. Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1951, pp. 127-8.
4. Thomas Merton, "Day of a Stranger," in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (ed. Lawrence Cunningham) New York: Paulist Press, 1992, p. 217.
5. Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia" in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions, 1977, pp. 363-371.
6. Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 280-1.

7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1962, p. 30.

8. Thomas Merton, "Natural History," in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-4.

9. Thomas Merton, "The Sowing of Meanings", *ibid.*, pp. 187-8.

10. "Advent", *ibid.*, p. 88.

11. "Carol", *ibid.*, p. 89.

12. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979, p. 120.

13. Thomas Merton, "O Land Alive with Miracles" in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-9.

14. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Day of a Stranger" entry in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, pp. 104-6.

15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (transl. Bernard Freedman) New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988, p. 159.

16. Thomas Merton, "Song for Nobody" in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, *op. cit.*, pp. 337-8.

17. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*. New York: Atheneum, 1967, p. 39.

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