'Sophia the Unknown, the Dark, the Nameless': Questioning the Male-Female Dichotomy through Thomas Merton's Poetry

Sonia Petisco

'The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own. He that is awake lights up from sleeping.'

Herakleitos, 5th century BCE

This reflection focuses on Thomas Merton's prose poem 'Hagia Sophia,' completed during Pentecost in the spring of 1961 and published in the 1963 *Emblems of a Season of Fury*.[1] In this mysterious lyrical fragment – considered by some scholars as 'one of Merton's finest achievements'[2] – the poet offers us an illuminating and insightful meditation on the relationship between logos and the feminine principle, whose action – that of speaking – can question the sexual division found at the heart of human history, that incurable wound that constitutes the male-female dichotomy.

This ceaseless search for the reconciliation of the masculine and feminine poles is not something new in the history of philosophical and religious thought. On the contrary, it is already present in Plato's *Symposium* which includes one of the most celebrated and vibrant discussions on the topic of androgyny. Similar attempts at the marriage of contraries can also be found in the Old Testament, most particularly in Genesis, where we read that Eve was created from Adam's rib in order to be, not his opposite, but his companion, or in Proverbs 8, where the feminine wisdom is considered as the complementary side of God in the act of the world's creation.[3] In Eastern religions, we do not lack examples of confluence between the male and female counterpart, as is illustrated by the Yin/Yang interaction within the Taoist tradition.[4]

We could say that Merton's life and work can be described as a permanent exploration of new paths leading towards this *coincidencia oppositorum*,[5] a new but also very ancient transcendental wisdom which took him beyond language and beyond logic.[6] Although he always travelled in the belly of a paradox, he learned to regard this dialectical impulse within himself as a vital sign, and he always looked for that 'hidden harmony and attunement of opposite tensions'.[7] Indeed, a close reading of 'Hagia Sophia' leads us to think that the poet ended up understanding Sophia as that powerful spiritual locus of personal and communal transformation where the 'sexus' or separation between the male and female sides is transcended, and where true Love and Communion become possible utopias.[8]

The core of our reflection aims at highlighting those moments within Merton's poem when the male-female distinction is overcome, but also at cross-examining those other occasions when his language becomes part of the established discourse dealing with this complex issue. Our methodology will follow the negative path of mystical theology, which tries to dissolve our ill-consciousness about self and world into that 'learned ignorance' the great masters of mysticism spoke about.[9] By getting rid of some of the most ordinary conceptualizations which constitute our modes of perception, we will descend into the most subconscious levels of language in an effort to give voice to the female unknown within us, that 'I' lacking gender who has been oppressed by power since the beginning of history, but who is the only one that can unveil the inner contradictions in which the patriarchal language has been grounded.

Let us provide a little prelude. The poem starts by identifying Sophia with something vague and free from any sexual or even human reference, something which would be closer to the physics of Lucretius and Epicurus, but still more ambiguous and unutterable. Merton describes her as *Natura naturans*, that sacred corporeality which recalls Hopkins's Christian sacramental imagination and also Maximus the Confessor's *theoria physike*:

There is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy.[10]

Paradoxically, Sophia is born out of silence but speaks everywhere. Her silent rumour is heard from the opening section of the poem,[11] incarnate in 'the soft voice' of a nurse who awakens the helpless Merton 'out of languor and darkness' when he 'who has defended himself, fought for himself in sickness, planned for himself, guarded himself, loved himself alone' is 'killed at last by exhaustion'.[12] In the second section, however, the poet complains about the fact that we usually fail to hearken to this 'gentle voice', 'the merciful and feminine',[13] the voice that cries out particularly to the little and to the ignorant, calling them to a new unitary consciousness or *sapientia*, and opening for them new horizons of true brotherhood beyond the collective 'dream of separateness': 'She is the candor of God's light, the expression of his Simplicity'.

The third part of the poem continues emphasising this simple, undivided nature of Hagia Sophia, considered by the poet as the reconciling principle lying in all things:

> She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight … She is the union between them. She is the Love that unites them. She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory … All things praise her by being themselves and by sharing in the Wedding Feast. She is the Bride, and the Feast, and the Wedding.[14]

As we can see, in this penetrating series of anaphoras which highlight the centrality of Love (caritas) in Merton's sophiological vision, there are no direct allusions to gender classifications – although the poet

is using the biblical metaphor of the Bride, which already implies some kind of 'personification' of Hagia Sophia. Indeed, the use of this traditional image proves that Merton was well acquainted with Christian ecclesiological symbolism drawn from both the *Song of Songs* and *Revelation,* where we find the metaphor of the soul – together with Israel and the Church – being the Bride of God, seeking intimate union with Him.[15]

From an initial consideration of Wisdom as 'wordless gentleness', as something unspeakable and ungraspable by knowledge but at the same time a 'source of action and joy', there is a gradual shift towards an understanding of Wisdom as an emanation of the Father, as the loving *kenosis* or self-emptying of God, which again – as in the case of 'the Bride' symbol – can only be understood if we take into account that Merton could not easily escape his Christian educational background and also the fact that he was a monk and a mystical theologian:

> The feminine principle in the world is the inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father's glory. She is His manifestation in radiant splendour! But she remains unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know her at all.[16]

This recreation of Sophia as that in God which longs for incarnation clearly shows the influence on Merton of Russian Orthodox sophiological tradition. In 1957, four years before composing the poem, he was reading Bulgakov's *The Wisdom of God,* where he learnt to understand Sophia not as a fourth person or hypostasis (of one substance), but hypostasized in creation, so that creation itself becomes the 'Glory of God'.[17] For the Russian theologians, and also for Merton, Sophia is God's *Ousia* (essence or ground of being),[18] the matrix of the three hypostases, the Father, Son and Spirit.

We are witness to the human understanding of Wisdom as the creative maternal expression of God, a perception which has previously

led in this section of the poem to the acknowledgment of God as Mother in an oxymoronic coincidence of male and female metaphors which follow the tradition of 14th-century English recluses, most particularly the mystical theology of Julian of Norwich:[19]

> He is at once Father and Mother. As Father He stands in solitary might surrounded by darkness. As Mother His shining is diffused, embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light. The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia.[20]

Wisdom is no longer characterized by negative attributes which remind us of the most pure apophatic tradition such as 'invisible' 'wordless,'[21] or 'the unseen pivot of all nature'. In contrast, we are confronted with a process of deification or *theosis* of Wisdom as the feminine maternal side of God. This gradual process of deification of Sophia is in fact accompanied by a process of humanization, which culminates in the last part of the poem. Here Wisdom-*Natura* is identified with the Blessed Virgin Mary whom the poet describes as 'a personal manifestation of Sophia,' 'the perfect Creature,' 'perfectly Redeemed'. Through her total surrender to God's will, she becomes the Mother of Christ:

> It is she, it is Mary, Sophia, who in sadness and joy, with the full awareness of what she is doing, sets upon the Second Person, the Logos, a crown which is His human Nature. Thus her consent opens the door of created nature, of time, of history, to the Word of God.[22]

The last verses of the poem end up with the transformation of Wisdom into an obedient woman who expresses his 'sweet yielding consent' to God. She is the blessed woman who shares His Power and can crown Christ[23] with 'what is greater than glory: weakness, nothingness, poverty,' a transcendental wisdom which clearly brings

echoes of the Zen Buddhist concept of 'emptiness' (Sunyata).[24] Nonetheless, Mary's power is paradoxically rooted in her impotence, and her infinitely rich and powerful Son is sent forth as 'poor and helpless, in His mission of inexpressible mercy, to die for us on the Cross'. Once more, the *coincidencia oppositorum* finds its highest expression in this sublime line where we are reminded of the 'folly' or 'wisdom of the Cross,' that paschal Mystery of life-through-death thanks to which 'Christ becomes the perfect epiphany of Sophia, embodying and extending to all the redemptive mercy of God.'[25] Although the kenotic end of the poem does address the urgent need for dying to the knowledge of self and world in order to gain life, there are still too many traces of a strong belief in human categories and human speech. In fact, the transformation of logos into a man definitely serves to corroborate – rather than question – the Faith in the human individual, unique and made in the image of God.[26] This belief in God and in Man is vital for the subsistence of any kind of religion, science or philosophy we can think of, but it implies the true crucifixion of the Word, its condemnation to historical time, and to the specifically human notion of future and death.

Several questions immediately arise in our minds after undertaking a close reading of 'Hagia Sophia': 1) Why should we identify Sophia with the abstract concept of 'God', when she was originally invisible, unspoken, non-existent?[27] 2) Why should we understand that the expression 'The Word was made flesh' necessarily means 'The Word was made 'a man' or 'a human being'? 3) If a man or a human being differs from the rest of entities in the fact that he has a consciousness of time and death, why should the Word that came to the world to counter time and death be identified with a human being? 4) Aren't all these interpretations based on pure contradictions? 5) Is there any good reason why we should continue hiding all these paradoxes within our religious, philosophical or scientific discourses, instead of trying to unveil them? We definitely agree with Thomas Merton when in his warm letter to D.T. Suzuki dated 12 March 1959, he writes:

You see, that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom), it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men and stand in the way of God's freedom. But Christ is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him … and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. He is *ourself*. Oh my dear Dr. Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are 'doctors of Israel'.[28]

In the next part of this article, we will try to argue how this misleading conversion of Hagia Sophia first into a God – in his paternal or maternal manifestations – and secondly into the 'historical person' of Jesus Christ is not sustained on any logical or grammatical grounds. We will aim to question the very concept of God as an abstract entity subject to categorization, and we will also attempt to undermine the concept of 'human being' constructed by his knowledge of future death.[29] By deconstructing these concepts of 'divinity' and 'manhood,' we are aiming at the dethronement of man as the owner of *lógos*, in an effort to give reason or *logoi* back to things and to 'I' who am Christ, the ineffable Word that speaks through me once 'I' am liberated from all the clichés of familiar prejudice and all the socially constructed masks or 'personae' that have been imposed on me, including those of 'man' and 'woman'.[30]

To start with, we should acknowledge that the rooted belief in a Superior Being has been going on and on from Herakleitos – who converts *lógos* into a Goddess – until the very early stages of Christianity. Scholastic theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas refer to God as 'Absolute Being,'[31] even though later on he would paradoxically recognise His inscrutable character, describing Him as something similar to Aristotelian *agnostos hýle,* something that remains in a cloud of unknowing or '*in quadam tenebra ignorantiae*'.[32]

Using similar terms as those employed by Aquinas, in 'Hagia Sophia' Merton is describing Sophia as the essence or ground of Being, and yet like St Thomas and all the most well-known Christian mystics he cannot stop recognizing that we do not really know what Sophia is:

> Perhaps in a certain very primitive aspect Sophia is the unknown, the dark, the nameless Ousia. Perhaps she is even the Divine Nature … And perhaps she is infinite light unmanifest, not even waiting to be known as Light. This I do not know. Out of the silence Light is spoken. We do not hear it or see it until it is spoken.[33]

We would dare to say this is one of the most lucid 'lyrical passages of naming and unnaming'[34] where Merton is depicting Sophia as something previous to 'Fiat lux,' and therefore something outside the created world, the world of meanings, the reality or world we speak about.[35] In these striking lines, Sophia becomes 'the unknown, the dark, the nameless' reminding the readers – as Susan McCaslin has suggested – that 'God is not an object of knowledge and that all gender-bound metaphors for ultimate reality are inadequate.'[36] But at the same time Merton seems to be able to recognize that this wisdom or logos – which is unspeakable – paradoxically creates the conceived reality by means of language, of words, of the semantic vocabulary, and that She herself becomes objectivised in gender binaries as soon as she reflects on herself.

In previous research on the mysteries of language, I devoted some time to explaining how the consciousness of the world cannot be something of the world. In other words 'the speaker of the world cannot be spoken about because it would no longer be the subject who speaks, but the object about which something is uttered.'[37] On that occasion it was suggested that this argument should not be considered as a theory of language but as a true discovery, which

was already implicit in the fragments of Herakleitos when he stated that *Logos Sophon* (the intelligent) is separated from all things, and, paradoxically, shaping all of them.[38]

My tenet is that in 'Hagia Sophia' Merton appears to have had this same intuition of the contradictory character of logos, the wise, being 'inside' but also 'outside' its own creations. Nevertheless, he fails to escape from the theological discourse he has inherited, and he ends up inserting Wisdom in too human a paradigm which turns 'I', the speaker, the intelligent, into a God or a human person.

Nevertheless, if we dive into the most subconscious levels of language, we find that 'I', the speaker, is just a deictic element which has no semantic meaning at all, but simply points to the act of speaking, of saying 'I'. 'I' can literally be 'anybody' who is talking, it functions regardless of any sexual or class distinction, and it never dies as it has no future at all, it only depends on the 'now' in which 'I' is being pronounced. Moreover 'You' is not different to 'I' because if 'I' can speak to 'You', it is because, in a certain sense, 'You' is also 'I', and we are interchangeable.

At some point, however, there is a process of 'realization' or 'identification' in which 'I' (who was a pure indicator) turns into a man or a woman by the acquisition of a proper noun and a common noun (for example, John: teacher of maths). Simultaneously, we ('I' and 'You') become defined persons with a specific date of birth/death, and our relationship is determined by our difference: 'I' am 'I' because 'I' am no longer 'You' as we used to be in the subconscious realm of language. In other words, we are two different people and we are not interchangeable anymore. This is how the male-female identities are consolidated, and this is how the war of the sexes has been established since the very beginning of history.[39]

As we have already seen, in Merton's poem there is a similar process of identification of Sophia who was the unknown dark nameless Ousia, first with the feminine side of God (with the subsequent appearance of an opposition between 'God Father' and 'God Mother') and then

with the person of Mary, the human incarnation of Sophia as the mother of God, who gives birth to the second person of the Trinity conforming with the traditional pattern of trinitarian theology. This conceptual journey is illustrated in the accompanying diagram.
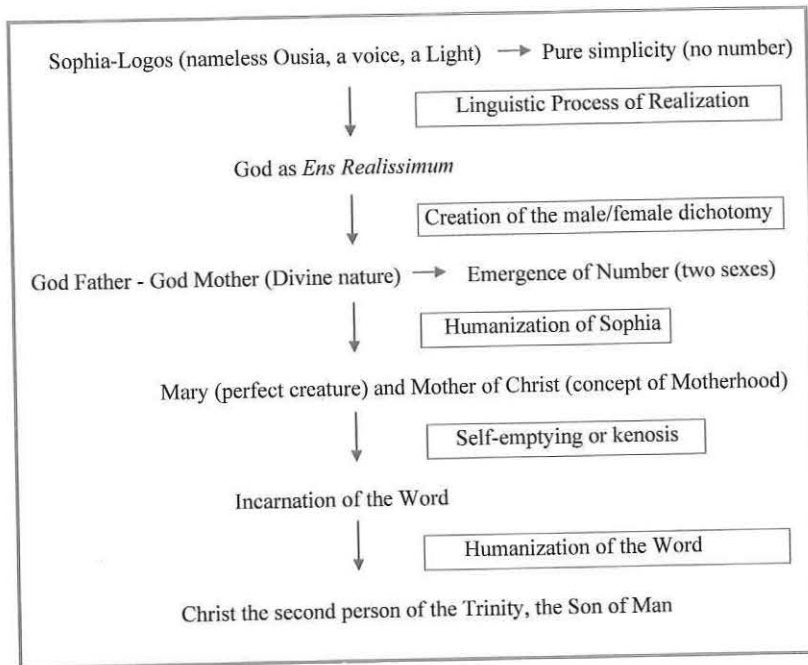
Sophia-Logos (nameless Ousia, a voice, a Light) ⟶ Pure simplicity (no number)

Linguistic Process of Realization

God as *Ens Realissimum*

Creation of the male/female dichotomy

God Father - God Mother (Divine nature) ⟶ Emergence of Number (two sexes)

Humanization of Sophia

Mary (perfect creature) and Mother of Christ (concept of Motherhood)

Self-emptying or kenosis

Incarnation of the Word

Humanization of the Word

Christ the second person of the Trinity, the Son of Man

Diagram illustrating the process of humanizing Sophia

In the centenary year of Merton's birth – and taking into account how much he cared 'for fresh, direct and sincere intuitions of the Living Truth'[40] – we 'dare' to invite him to 'revise and reformulate' his own theology in the poem, and to free himself from the need to sustain such concepts as God, Mother, Father, Son, Man, etc, which are being imposed upon that initial Wisdom that was and is bare of all

names and free from any kind of human division.[41] Logically speaking, this kind of language is not innocent at all. It creates a world vision based on the Father's power and justice, and it builds up a whole hierarchical social structure characterised by the clear opposition between men and women. Moreover, this terminology binds us to remain in the world of the already known, being an obstacle to break out of solipsism and open ourselves to the endless and inexhaustible possibilities of life and experience.

In an effort to fight the already established patterns of thought and action and to struggle 'for that excellence of wisdom which is hard to find,'[42] I am inclined to share with Merton's legacy today some of my explorations into the deep grammar of languages which lead us to understand logos, the wise, as the place where the male-female dichotomy is put into question, being regarded as a mere linguistic construct, as the result of the imposition of specific dis–integrating concepts upon 'I' who was simply 'there' and was unknown.

It is crucial to acknowledge that we are not eternally bound to adopt the already learnt discourses that come from above – we are not condemned to any form of linguistic determinism. A true political revolution, as was initiated by the one Christ, should start by not accepting the language of authority. Instead we should be more responsive to the action of the Holy Spirit, those tongues of fire at Pentecost which enable us to speak a common language, a universal grammar or logos shared by everybody, which come to cast fire on the earth, healing our religious imagination from too long-enduring patriarchal deformations.

In our analysis of 'Hagia Sophia,' we have tried to introduce the reader to listening to the Merton that is not the familiar Merton, mainly focusing on those moments within the poem when he forgets about his role as monk or pious writer, and lets the Word speak by itself. Certainly, there are splendid occasions in the text when the poet clearly invokes the voice of the female unknown, the cry of Eve, the silent rumour of the serpent coming from the abyss and

questioning the law of reality and prohibition, that overwhelming tyranny which attempts to convince us that things are as they are, and they cannot be otherwise. Although her alluring voice has been silenced by the lords of the church due to their fear of women's indefiniteness and freedom, it never dies, it rises up once and again in the hidden 'feminine child,'[43] in those who have not yet become 'a man' or 'a woman' as the God of men wills:

> O blessed, silent one, who speaks everywhere!
> We do not hear mercy, or yielding love, or non-resistance,
>   or non-reprisal.
> In her there are no reasons and no answers. Yet she is the
>   candor of God's light,
> the expression of His simplicity …
> She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot
>   be a prisoner. [44]

Let us keep Sophia's voice echoing in our hearts, which are one with Merton's. Let it be born once and again to overcome the endless battle between men and women, which is the real root of war in the world.[45] Let her disarming memory and presence enlighten us so that we may enter and dwell in the realm of love, that place of exodus from our own self-captivity.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp.61–9. The poem's first printing was in a very limited edition on Victor Hammer's handpress (Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, Kentucky: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962) and it was reprinted in a second edition. It is included in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp.363–71. All the citations included in this article are taken from this volume.

2. Christopher Nugent, 'Pax Heraclitus: Heraclitus, *Hagia Sophia*, and a Hard Night's Peace,' *The Merton Seasonal*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Summer 2010, p.18.

3. 'Then I was at his side each day,/ his darling and delight,/ playing in his presence continually,/ playing on the earth, when he had finished it, while my delight was in mankind' (Proverbs 8:30–1). As we shall study, in 'Hagia Sophia' Merton is inspired by this biblical image of Proverbs and he also emphasises her child-like character, her playfulness, describing her as 'a feminine child playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing all the times before the Creator' (*The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.368). Thanks mostly to his close study of Russian Orthodox sophiology, Merton became very interested in the wisdom-figure of the Hebrew Scriptures as his journal entries from 1957 through 1961 clearly show. In February 1958, he had a strange dream about a young Jewish girl who 'clings to me and will not let go.' He is fascinated by her 'lovely spontaneity,' 'her simplicity,' and 'the generosity of her love,' awakening in him an innocence that he thought he had entirely lost and a new capacity to perceive the *point vierge* or divine spark blazing in every person (see Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life*. Vol. 3, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.176).

4. This theme of the coincidence of opposites was no doubt one of the main reasons why Merton felt so much attracted by Eastern wisdom. In his book on Chuang Tzu he writes: 'Tao is obscured when men understand only one of a pair of opposites, or concentrate only on a part of being.' Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p.70.

5. See Christopher Nugent, 'Merton, the Coincidence of Opposites and the Archeology of Catholicity,' *Cistercian Studies*, 21, 1991, pp.257–70.

6. As Christopher Pramuk has suggested, Sophia becomes 'Merton's most vivid symbol for expressing 'a living experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations.' Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Minnesota, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), p.132.

7. Thomas Merton, 'Herakleitos the Obscure,' in *The Behaviour of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.104.

8. Here we are using the term 'utopia' in its most pure etymological sense: a place which is 'no-place,' a place which does not belong to the semantic world, the world of cultural meanings. As it is stated in the 68th chapter of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 'when you are "nowhere" physically, you are "everywhere" spiritually.'

9. *Nicholas of Cusa On Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De docta ignorantia*, trans Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990). Merton was very interested in Nicholas de Cusa. He would refer to him as 'a comfort,' and he even translated one of his ecumenical dialogues published as *Dialogue about the Hidden God* (New York: Dim Gray Bar Press, 1989).

10. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.363. These first lines echo G.M. Hopkins's concept of 'inscape' as reflected in his poem 'God's Grandeur': 'There lives the dearest freshness deep down things' (Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p.128)). They also remind us of Maximus the Confessor's *theoria physike*, which considers the natural world as an epiphany of divine presence. Merton explains how this *theoria* grasps the logos or divine fire not only in nature but in human beings, paving the way for any integral spirituality of reconciliation and peace (Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian, 2008), p.125). In addition, Russian Orthodox mystical theology focuses on the sanctity of the natural world, 'the living unity (of nature) which may be called the created Sophia' (Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 1994, p.66).

11. The poem is divided into four parts, and each section corresponds to one of the canonical hours of monastic prayer: dawn or *Lauds,* early morning or *Prime,* high morning or *Tierce*, and sunset or *Compline*, when the *Salve Regina* was sung at Gethsemani.

12. Merton describes this experience of 'awakening' by the soft voice of a nurse in a hospital, which took place on 2 July 1960, the feast of the Visitation: 'Who is more little than the helpless man, asleep in bed, having entrusted himself gladly to sleep and to night? Him the gentle voice will awake, all that is sweet in woman will awaken him. Not for conquest and pleasure, but for the far deeper wisdom of love and joy and communion.' Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years,* Vol. 4, edited by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp.17–18.

13. In the preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader* Merton writes about the hidden mercy and compassion which reconciles the opposites: 'All tends to grow like this, in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on divine mercy. Without the grace of God, there would be no unity, no complicity in our lives: only contradiction.' *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Doubleday Image, 1974), p.17.

14. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.369.

15. For a thorough study of Merton's biblical and mystical sources for 'Hagia Sophia,' see Susan McCaslin, 'Merton and "Hagia Sophia,"' in *Merton and Hesychasm: Prayer of the Heart: The Eastern Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2003).

16. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.369.

17. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life.* Vol. 3, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.107.

18. What in German mysticism is called 'Grund' (ground), 'Geburt' (birth), 'Wessen' (essence), is a concept that refers to the positive unity that characterizes the life and nature of God. In Eastern mystical thought we find the Sanskrit term 'dharmakaya' which alludes to 'the cosmical body of the Buddha, the essence of all beings'. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.372, citing Murti.

19. Julian of Norwich develops the image of Jesus as mother in *Her Revelations of Divine Love*, see *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, ed. by Paul De Jaegher (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers), pp.50–3.

20. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.367. We are confronted with an ancient conception of God as light, or as Thomas Aquinas explained, not that 'which we see,' but rather 'that through which' we see.

21. In his sophianic essay on Prometheus, the feminine is also described as 'the wordless, the timelessly moving elements', Thomas Merton, *The Behaviour of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.14.

22. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.370. Once again, this part of the poem seems to draw inspiration from Proverbs where it is written: 'the first thing is to acquire wisdom,/ gain understanding though it cost you all you have./ Do not forsake her, and she will keep you safe; love her, and she will guard you;/ cherish her and she will lift you high; if only you embrace her, she will bring you honour./ She will set a garland of grace on your head/ and bestow on you a crown of glory.' (Proverbs 4:7–9).

23. The poem we are analysing was initially inspired by a triptych that Merton's friend Victor Hammer had painted. Its central panel depicted Christ being crowned by a dark-haired woman. This image can be seen in Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Minnesota, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), p.300, and is an act of 'power' subverting traditional depictions of 'the Coronation of the Virgin' by Christ.

24. Merton's study of the Sophia tradition of Russian Orthodoxy paralleled his engagement with Zen Buddhism in the late 1950s and his dialogue with D.T. Suzuki, which began in 1959 and continued until Suzuki's death in 1965. Merton was very interested in Suzuki's discussion of 'Emptiness' (Sunyata), and the first and sixth Paramita virtues of Mahayana Buddhism: *Dana* or 'giving' and *Prajna*, 'an intuition of the highest order' into 'the truth of Emptiness'. According to the Zen scholar, the metaphysical concept of Emptiness is comparable to the biblical concept of poverty ('Blessed are those who are poor in spirit'), which Meister

Eckhart thoroughly explains and develops in one of his most well-known German sermons. In fact, Eckhart was regarded by Suzuki as the Christian mystic who draws closest to Zen emptiness and enlightment (Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York: New Directions, 1968, pp.108–9). This Buddhist 'emptiness' also evokes the Christian narrative of *kenosis* or self-emptying of God's love, the central category in Bulgakov's dogmatics (see Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000).

25. Patrick O'Connell, 'Hagia Sophia' in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 2003, p.193.

26. We cannot forget that the abstract concept of God as *Ens Realissimum* was created by the medieval theological schools to sustain and justify the concept or existence of Man.

27. Here we would like to clarify what we mean by 'non-existent'. In order to do that, we need to explain the distinction between 'existing' and 'being there' (Dasein). 'Existence' is related to the world of meanings, of things being what they are through the acquisition of names or concepts. In contrast, 'being there' refers to something or somebody who 'is there' but who has not yet acquired a name, a definition, and therefore does not exist, is only 'there'. It is obvious that before the naming of things, there is always something there on which the name is imposed. For example, a 'rose' is not only its name, but under the name there is always something (a colour, a texture, an aroma) something undefined which was there before the rose was labelled and defined as 'a rose'. Logically speaking, the same argument can be applied to 'Sophia'.

28. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p.564. In *Thoughts in Solitude* he again emphasises the unity between 'I' and 'God': God – he writes – is 'the undefinable "am" that is myself in its deepest roots.' Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Boston: Shambhala Pocket Classics, 1993), p.70.

29. As it is written in Aristotle's axiom: 'All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Socrates is mortal'. This statement is grounded on the firm belief that Socrates is a man, unique but also equal to the rest of individuals (only then, can he be counted as an element of a close set: 'all men'). This marriage between singularity and generality is based on a contradiction but it is on this contradiction that the concept of the individual is built up.

30. As it is stated in the Bible, 'in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female' (Gal 3.38).

31. '*Alia nomina dicunt esse secundum aliam rationem determinatam. Sicut sapiens dicit aliquid esse. Qui est dicit esse absolutum*', Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol.1, translated by the English Dominican Province (Christian Classics, Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, Inc, 1981), p.32.

32. The medieval mysticism of Meister Eckhart and his disciples (Tauler, Suso, Ruysbroeck) underlines that we do not know what God is, we can only know what God is not. Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M.O'C. Walshe (Dorset: Element Books Ltd, 1979), p.31.

33. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.367.

34. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, p.203.

35. The term 'Reality' derives from the Latin word *Res-Rei* which refers to the topic or theme about which something is said. These topics were usually related to commercial or law issues.

36. Susan McCaslin, 'Merton and "Hagia Sophia,"' in *Merton and Hesychasm: Prayer of the Heart: The Eastern Church*, p.249.

37. Sonia Petisco, 'What is a Grammatical Subject? Reflections on the Mysteries of Language,' *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 1, No. 16, November 2011, p.204.

38. 'Thinking is shared by all' reads Fragment XXXI. However, in Fragment XXVII he says: 'Of all those accounts I have heard, none has gone so far as this: to recognize what is wise, set apart from all', from Charles H. Khan, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979).

39. The sexes are always two, and the etymological sense of the Latin word *sexus* is that of 'division,' 'separation,' even 'war,' implying acknowledgment of this fundamental social distinction between men and woman. Questioning this notion of the sexes as opposites and trying to find visible/invisible alliances between them has been one of the main objectives of modern feminist attitudes towards this complex issue dealing with the male-female dichotomy. Nevertheless, this search for 'alliance' has proved fruitless: an honest exercise in logic such as the one we have presented here along these lines should help us to understand that there is no possible reconciliation between the sexes, because the identity of sexes is precisely constituted by their difference or opposition, and without this difference (created by the meaning we give to the terms) they would not even exist as 'man' or 'woman'. We wonder whether an authentic rebellious feminist movement should address its efforts to question the very concepts of 'man' and 'woman' instead of taking them for granted as something natural, and fighting for an illusory equality which may enable them to reach masculine power positions

but by no means paves the way for true communication or communion.

40. *The Hidden Ground of Love,* p.564.

41. Merton himself seems to have been open to reviewing his own theology as it is expressed and developed within the poem. When he received a finished copy of the poem from Victor Hammer, he makes this remark: 'It is pretty, but my theology is strange in it. It needs revision and reformulation' (Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World,* p.230.)

42. Thomas Merton, 'Herakleitos the Obscure,' in the *The Behaviour of Titans,* p.85.

43. In 'Hagia Sophia,' the poet clearly identifies Wisdom with the child who has not learnt his social role as a man or a woman, that child who is not aware of the *sexus,* the separation or 'cut' that will stigmatise him once he acquires the language of his parents and once he accepts his gender.

44. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton,* pp.365–6.

45. In a journal entry from January 1961, Merton sees in Sophia 'the great stabilizer today for peace' (Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World,* p.91). Curiously enough, 'Hagia Sophia' is included in a collection of poems which are the expression of a time characterized by racism, genocide and political oppression such as 'And the Children of Birmingham,' 'Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces' or 'A Picture of Lee Ying,' among others.

Sonia Petisco has a PhD in English Studies from the University Complutense of Madrid (Spain) and an MSc in Applied Linguistics from Edinburgh University (Scotland). Since 2008 she has been Assistant Lecturer at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting in Granada, being currently concerned with a bilingual edition of Merton's poetry. Her main research interests focus on language, mysticism, and the discourse of identity, having spent international research periods at Harvard Divinity School and the Institute for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue at Tübingen University (Germany).