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*MIDSUMMER DIARY AND MERTON'S  
EXPERIENCE OF LOVE*<sup>\* 1</sup>

*I will never really understand on earth what  
relation this love has to my solitude.  
I cannot help placing it at the very heart  
of my aloneness, and not just  
on the periphery somewhere*<sup>2</sup>. (June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1966)  
*I have got to dare to love and to bear  
the anxiety of self-questioning  
that love arouses in me, until perfect love  
casts out fear*<sup>3</sup>. (April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1966)

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<sup>\*</sup> Transl. by A. Muranty.

<sup>1</sup> The most complete account of events in Merton's life in the years 1966-1967, including the meeting with M., is given by John Howard Griffin in his work *Follow the Ecstasy: The Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993; cf. also Mott's comments in Merton's official biography: *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, London: Sheldon Press, 1986 (first American edition: Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 435-464.

<sup>2</sup> Th. Merton, *Learning to love. Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997, p. 327.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

I have had a unique privilege of reading all the papers prior to the conference. I have also been fortunate in having an opportunity to speak about Merton with all kinds of people for whom he became important at some point in their lives, for some reason. Nevertheless, there are a number of those who clearly cannot deal with certain aspects of Merton's life and writings, while at the same time being unable to deny he is right, influential or significant in other areas. As a rule they follow the instructions of St. Basil, who in the 4th century advised young men to gather only nectar from every flower, i.e. only the best. For some the problem consists in Merton's deep involvement in inter-religious dialogue and the fact that he seemed to attach too great an importance to his journey to the East – both the factual in 1968 and the spiritual one, begun many years before. Others are annoyed by his insubordination, specific understanding of monastic *conversatio*, or the fact that he criticized Church institutions or directives too baldly. Yet others are embarrassed by a vague consciousness of a love relationship that Merton – the famous, mature spiritual master got involved in. As for the first, thanks to the incessant development of ecumenical reflection instances of hearing the opinion that his death in Bangkok was a result of the intervention of Divine Providence, apparently unsettled by his doings, threatening with eradicating Catholic identity become increasingly rare. As for the second, reform of monastic life, which he was promoting, more or less open discussion on a number of aspects concerning the functioning of Church institutions, as well as the increasing pluralism of Church life of the modern Diaspora throw new light on everything. Still, each of these subjects may be a problem on its own, and may become the subject of reflection at many Merton conferences to be, inspiring also for us. As for the last one, this matter appears to be the most difficult one, and is most often passed over in embarrassed silence.

The aim of this short paper is simple – to give justice to an important event in Merton's life, an event which influenced his understanding of the world, man and God, which had its dynamics, its effects, and which should be taken seriously while reading and interpreting his works. It should be read according to the author's intention. Various factors that influenced his thinking and his theology should be taken into consideration. It is equally wrong to overestimate some facts, as to overlook others. Just as thinking too highly of something is bound to lead to creating an incorrect picture, so passing over something else impoverishes it. Merton was a professional

diarist, according to Patrick Hart, he was his own archivist, as Paul Pearson says. What is more, according to the well-known entry from his journals Merton had a deep, one can say, almost immodest conviction that his writings will be read and researched "I will last... I will be a person studied and commented on"<sup>4</sup>, he wrote. It reminds one of the Horacean *non omnis moriar* as well as the famous *dicar* – "they will talk about me" – from the same ode.

It is not my intention to apologise for Merton to his critics, or, even less, to himself. To a certain extent this is what Basil Bennington is trying to do in his biography – it seems to me that this is ineffective just as it is unnecessary. Merton didn't write *Midsummer Diary* in order to explain himself, he wrote it to understand himself. It is comparatively easy to explain oneself or calm down, while understanding oneself presents a far more difficult challenge, and its effects are never as spectacular. It resembles the opening of Russian "babushkas", in each following smiling doll there hides another one.

Last but not least, one may be tempted to read Merton's *Midsummer Diary* in the context of contemporary, important reflections on the place and meaning of interpersonal relations, on the maturing of feelings and personalities in the up-bringing performed in closed mono-sexual communities – a discussion often vulgarised and ridiculed. He presents us with the world of experiences, feelings, yearnings that is undoubtedly common to many people who have chosen the same road of life as Merton did. He presents it with complete openness, which very few can master, he also points to the consequences and effects, to some – more or less perfect – solutions, which cannot be repeated in individual experiences in any case, yet which might inspire our struggles of living. However, none of the above is my intention. I do not share this way of life and have no ready answers that could be given to Merton or anyone else who is struggling in the web of his own difficult experiences, which give in neither to reason nor any of the meticulously studied branches of theology. I merely wish to express my admiration for a man who didn't give up his openness or his striving for truth about himself and God; a man who lived through this experience of inner dilemma with his face persistently turned towards God, convinced that it is the greatest sin of sins to turn away from God.

In my contacts with Merton's friends and followers, I have always been touched by the deep discretion they showed in relation to his

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 264.

experience of love of a woman as well as to herself, hidden under the initial M. (or, in Mott's authorized biography, S.). This silence was full of true respect. On the other hand however, I have often had an impression that this silence was tinted with a touch of embarrassment, shame, that Merton's readers and friends stand before this experience as if in front of a mysterious black hole.

I am faced with a difficult task: I would like to preserve this touching discretion and leave this experience such as it is – owned by Thomas Merton himself, a part of his spiritual journey, as well as, perhaps even more so, belonging to the black-haired, blue-eyed muse from a Louisville hospital. On the other hand I would like to put this experience in its proper place, bring it out of the shameful shadow and appeal to recognize that what we see as a shadow on his life, was *de facto* for him a ray of that very same light which day after day was leading him to integrity.

Another problem consists in the lack of any information or interpretation of this event, except for those written by Merton himself. We have no access to the point of view of "the other party", who irreversibly remains for us only the mysterious "M" from Merton's published writings (of course, in his manuscript he gives the full name). This is why nobody has a right to aspire to gaining any "objective view" of events. This is also the basic reason for concern among Merton's publishers and interpreters – not to violate her rights in the least degree.

The problem, however, is that over-interpretations are being made, and Merton is subjected to judgment, and that, it should be stressed, with complete disrespect of his own point of view. Recently, during preparations for the conference, I happened to hear the statement that Merton was indeed a great writer and a theologian, "if only he hadn't got involved in this unfortunate affair". As if this fact was in fact nullifying everything else, what he did and who he was, as if it were not true what Jim Forest said in his reminiscences: "he changed people's lives". It is disputable whether this kind of moral fundamentalism is at all justified, nevertheless, here we should ask first of all how Merton perceived this event, and also, how he wanted it perceived.

*Midsummer Diary* is a story of a meeting, written from a certain perspective—it comprises only June 1966 (first entry dated 16 June and last 24 June). At times it is a letter addressed to M., at times a diary. "The ordinary diary", in a separate notebook, is a commentary of sorts to accompany *Midsummer Diary*.

Let me remind reader of some basic facts to both the prejudiced and the unprejudiced. Merton met M. in March 1966, during his stay at the hospital after his operation. The intensification of contacts, usually performed with neglecting or the outright breaking of monastic rules, went on until the end of June. Merton's struggles varied from his decision to get married ("pure" marriage at first, later – ordinary, without adjectives), to terse statements that he has to end it. Usually after making up his mind about it and putting it in a letter to M. he would run to phone her and take everything back, and he despaired equally when he succeeded and when he didn't. This period was: "a time of joy and happiness, but also one of anxiety, fear, and depression"<sup>5</sup>. It isn't surprising that it is precisely at this time when Merton wrote his interpretation of Lara's love for Yuri in *Doctor Zhivago*. It isn't surprising that he writes: "The sense that love makes, and I think the only sense it makes, is the beloved"<sup>6</sup>. Many a time Merton's language of that period comes close to paradoxes, although at a closer look they prove to be only seemingly such: "Her love is not just 'another question' and 'another problem' – it is right at the center of all my questions and problems and right at the center of my hermit life"<sup>7</sup> (10 June 1966). Pages of *Midsummer Diary* might very well be counted among the classics of love literature, next to poems written for M.<sup>8</sup> Merton wrote in those days:

[...] so good to be with her, and more than ever I saw how much and how instantly and how delicately we respond to each other on every level<sup>9</sup>.

I have honestly tried to see her truly as she is and love her exactly as she is [...]. And I know that the result has been a deep, clear, strong, indubitable resonance between us<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> W.H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp. The Thomas Merton Story*, New York: Crossroad, 1996, p. 200.

<sup>6</sup> *Learning to Love*, p. 307.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Those poems were published in 1986, without agreement from Merton Legacy Trust or the Abbot of Gethsemani, as *Eighteen Poems* by New Directions, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Entry dated April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1966. *Learning to Love*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Entry dated April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1966. *Ibidem*.

Or finally:

I have been in the Truth, not through any virtue of my own, nor through any superior intuition, but because I have let love take hold of me in spite of all my fear and I have obeyed love<sup>11</sup>.

These beautiful confessions are underpinned with dramatic tension:

It is just that M. is terribly inflammable, and beautiful, and is no nun, and so tragically full of passion and so wide open. My response has been too total and too forthright<sup>12</sup>. I am not as smart or as stable as I imagined<sup>13</sup>.

And even:

I can see why she is scared. I am too<sup>14</sup>.

In the end, on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1966 two months later, after many doubts, a number of meetings, interventions of superiors, brothers and friends, Merton took the vow by which he committed himself to hermit life. He lived through yet another turn, and such turns change everything in life, leaving nothing as it used to be. Such event may be called positive disintegration, Kazimierz Dąbrowski did (10 years ago in Bydgoszcz a master thesis was written interpreting Merton's life in terms of Kazimierz Dąbrowski's positive disintegration<sup>15</sup>).

In Oakham brother Patrick Hart told me that on a number of occasions it was suggested to Merton that he should gloss over his "affair", treat the records from that period in a slightly different way, censor them in a way, for the good of his reader, of course. Merton is supposed to have replied: "I can't agree to that, this is also me". The same attitude I found expressed by Merton himself in his *Journals*:

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> B. Bauman, "*Siedmiopiętrowa góra* Thomasa Mertona – studium psychobiograficzne w świetle teorii dezintegracji pozytywnej Kazimierza Dąbrowskiego [Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* – a Psycho-biographical Study in the Light of Kazimierz Dąbrowski's Positive Disintegration Theory], Pedagogical College in Bydgoszcz, master thesis written in Educational Psychology Department under the supervision of Andrzej Klimontowski, Ph.D., Bydgoszcz 1994 (typescript).

I have no intention of keeping the M. business entirely out of sight. I have always wanted to be completely open, both about my mistakes and about my effort to make sense out of my life. The affair with M. is an important part of it – and shows my limitations as well as a side of me that is – well, it needs to be known too, for it is a part of me<sup>16</sup>.

And further:

My need for love, my loneliness, my inner division, the struggle in which solitude is at once a problem and a "solution". And perhaps not a perfect solution<sup>17</sup>.

"Openness" is one of the key words in Merton's thought. Openness towards God and people, openness understood in the etymological sense of Greek truth *aletheia* – "unhidden". In defining true contemplation as opposed to false, or in constructing a vision of "a plastic saint" (title of a chapter in *Life and Holiness*) as opposed to real holiness it was this category that played a key role. God can only change in us what is uncovered before him, open. Openness is difficult and what is more, it is dangerous, because the heart only has one door. One can close it in fear of the evil of this world and its influences, but then the light will not penetrate it either. One can leave it open in conviction that God transforms everything that is left uncovered before him and there is really nothing to be afraid of. Fear closes up. In his journal he wrote:

[...] nothing counts except love and solitude that is not simply the wide-openness of love and freedom is nothing. [...] True solitude embraces everything, for it is the fullness of love that rejects nothing and no one, is open to All in All<sup>18</sup>. (April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1966).

A range of variations of the word "open", "openness", appears most frequently in *Midsummer Diary*. In his ordinary journal of that time Merton recalled words from The First Letter of John: "love in its fullness drives all death away" (4,18).

Difficult as it may be to comprehend, it was precisely the experience of love, or, to be precise, love of a woman, that allowed Merton to deepen and

<sup>16</sup> *Learning to Love*, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.



purify his own understanding of solitude that he passionately desired. It enabled him to realize his vocation in full. On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1966 he wrote:

Their idea of solitude is fundamentally this: the hermit is a man who out of spite has made himself completely unavailable. He can do this with complete assurance and deadly complacency because he has on his side an unavailable God who is in fact secretly and magically available only to him. The solitary is then in a position of unsailable spiritual comfort. He lives for and with God alone. He is totally consoled, by a consolation that he wills to accept by a blind leap into the decision to be consoled. To be able to achieve this autistic feat is the sign of a hermit vocation. Or, I might add, of paranoia<sup>19</sup>.

In *Midsummer Diary* he wrote:

I am here for one thing: to be open<sup>20</sup>.

For Merton his experience of love for Margie was an inner, theological one. It became a part of a long inner journey begun with the dream of the Proverb, and studies on Julian of Norwich, discovery of the feminine element of the universe, and the feminine aspect of God. The journey that was visibly, even spectacularly, confirmed during the famous "revelation" on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, which was recalled in this conference a number of times, and whose essence was a feeling of deep unity with everyone, and love – tender, feminine one. It has to be remembered that this revelation had its personal content – it was a "she". The Proverb Merton wrote letters to, preserved in his journals: "I shall never forget our meeting yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person"<sup>21</sup>. Passages with the same sense and expressed with the same rhetoric may be found in *Midsummer Journal*, only directed to Margie. The following stage of his journey is the poem *Hagia Sophia*, incidentally written in 1960, six years prior to meeting M., the text which not only praises gentleness, tenderness, Unity, fullness and fecundity of Wisdom, the Mother of all, but also presents an

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 311.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 345.

<sup>21</sup> Entry dated March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1958 in *The Search for Solitude*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, New York: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 182.

image of Merton himself awakened in a hospital by "the voice of a nurse"<sup>22</sup>. It is difficult to ascertain whether Merton recognized in M. the Proverb from his dreams, or whether his dreams were in fact prophetic visions, or merely a projection of his unfulfilled desires. Whatever the case might be, his meeting with M. became for him a turning point on the way to getting to know himself, to fulfilment.

A superficial, not to say malicious, interpretation of shameful minds craves to persuade us that Merton's further journey, two years of intensive work, prayer and writing, were a fruit of his turning away from the sinful temptation. I daresay it is not the case. Merton, or perhaps he and Margie together, made a choice to give up fulfilment. Nevertheless, he wasn't weakened by this experience, one does not have an impression that, after parting with M., he merely realizes a program of expiation and forgetting, that he has difficulty recovering after a painful crisis. As Jim Forest, his bosom friend, wrote: "his love for Margie hasn't ended".

Focusing attention on Merton's thought, theology or mysticism on one hand stresses the weight of his personal experiences, of his ascetic, inner *praxis*, while on the other seems to divert attention from, or even cover up the experience the meaning of which he was striving to fathom, and which he was unable to deny. It was precisely this experience that made him realize, according to Shannon, that "what that experience showed him was that he could love and be loved"<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps this experience is a fundamental one in the process of growing up to meet God and full integration. Perhaps we often lead our inner lives from the position of hurt and lack of love experience, building an illusion of spiritual life in religious terms. His experience with M. confirmed the intuition he incessantly stressed, that one has to be "more and more oneself" and that "being human" isn't the road to perdition, but a task in striving for holiness. A number of aspects of Merton's "being yourself" must have been unbearable for his companions and superiors – he lost his temper easily (he would slam the door in front of his Abbot, or, what is more, invite him to be a godfather at the christening of his own hypothetical child), at times he was malicious, particularly merciless in regard to preten-

<sup>22</sup> Th. Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 364.

<sup>23</sup> *Silent Lamp*, p. 200.

ce of serious piety (cf. giving a list of pranajams performed during a boring spiritual conference in the abbey), jovial sense of humour (cf. the description of his first meeting with Jim Forest – Merton in his robe, lying on the floor, legs up, bursting with laughter – would anyone of those present here put their reputation at such a risk?), or at last, Margie herself. Yet it was this effort to save what is “own”, what is human, that allowed him to stay open to the transforming light and whatever we might say about his spiritual mastery, it is precisely his exposed weaknesses that make us safely trust him. I dare say that God sees it similarly.