Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

M. Basil Pennington

Thomas Merton and Centering Prayer

It may seem like a strange thing to say about a man who published an autobiography and numerous journals, but the fact is, Thomas Merton was essentially a very private person. His autobiography and journals were finely sifted not only by the notorious censers of Merton's Order, the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, but also by Merton himself. On his last journey we find him actually keeping three "journals": one in view of publication, another more of a notebook and a third, his most personal, whose codification to this day defies the would-be reader.

I have always felt the place to hear the most authentic Merton is in his letters. He was a superb letter writer. When Evelyn Waugh was named the redactor for the British edition of the *Seven Story Mountain*, he entered into a correspondence with the author. After exchanging a few letters Waugh advised the young writer: Give up all other writing and just write letters. Unfortunately, it was only in 1962 that Merton began to systematically make carbons of his letters. And, sad to say, many less wise correspondents like myself did not have the wisdom to save his earlier missives.

Merton could turn out a dozen shorter letters in a day and a half-dozen longer ones. The thoughts went speedily from his heart, through his fingers and the keys of a battered old typewriter, out to the recipient, typos and all. There was no editing here. There is also this phenomenon which I have

perceived: the more the recipient was a person of deep spirituality and the further away he or she was – both elements were operative – the more open Merton was. Thus the inside story of Merton's profound experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut is found only in a letter to Boris Pasternak, a correspondence that had to pass through the Russian underground and could take up to six months for delivery.

So it is that we find Merton's most intimate account of his own prayer in a letter to a Sufi in faraway Persia, Ch. Abdul Aziz:

> Now you ask about my method of meditation. Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on *faith* by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the prophet as "being before God as if you saw Him." Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all. My prayer tends very much to what you call *fana*. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothingness and Silence. If am still present "myself" this I recognize as an obstacle. If He wills He can then make the Nothingness into a total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness actually seems itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation. It is not "thinking about" anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible. Which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible.

Anyone who is familiar with Centering Prayer will immediately recognize this as a description of this traditional form of entering into contemplative prayer: "centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on f a i t h by which alone we can know the presence of God." The essence of Centering Prayer is in its first point: To be in faith and love to God in the center of our being. As Abbot Thomas Keating, the great spiritual master teaching Centering Prayer, puts it: "the intention to consent to God's presence and action within."

In his published writings Merton rarely spoke in the first person singular about his intimate prayer experience. Nor did he often speak about going "to the center". In a booklet, "The Contemplative Life," he would speak of it:

> The fact is, however, that if you descend into the depths of your own spirit – and arrive somewhere near the center of what you are, you are confronted with the inescapable truth, at the very root of your existence, you are in constant and immediate and inescapable contact with the infinite power of God.

The idea of God at the center was something bred into Merton almost subliminally during the days of his boyhood. When he was ten yeas old, his father took him to live in St. Antonin. This was a medieval shrine town in the Midi that still preserved much of its medieval character when the Mertons moved there in 1925. As a shrine, the church stood prominently at the middle of the town. All streets led to it, or away from it, depending on one's perspective. The impression was unmistakable that the church and the One who dwelt therein were at the center of things. Twenty years later Merton recorded this impression, which daily impinged on the young adolescent.

> ...The center of it all was the church... Here, in this amazing, ancient town, the very pattern of the place, of the houses and streets and of nature itself, the cliffs and trees, all focused my attention upon the one, important central fact of the church and what it contained. Here, everywhere I went, I was forced by the disposition of everything around me, to be always at least virtually conscious of the church. Every street pointed more or less inward to the center of the town, to the church. Every view of the town, from the exterior hills, centered upon the long gray building with its high spire.

A Prayer of Faith and Love

As Merton brings out in his letter to Abdul, faith is a basic pre-requisite for this prayer: "... it is centered on *faith* by which alone we can know the presence of God." The journey toward the center is a journey of faith, which comes forth from and is guided by the two sources, Scripture and Tradition. In a rare instance where Merton shares one of his dreams, he speaks about this:

> I dreamt I was lost in a great city and was walking 'toward the center' without quite knowing where I was going. Suddenly I came to a dead end, but on a height, looking at a great bay, an arm of the harbor. I saw a whole section of the city spread out before me on hills covered with light snow, and realized that, though I had far to go, I knew where I was. Because in this city there are two arms of the harbor and they help you to find your way, as you are always encountering them.

The two arms of the harbor are Scripture and Tradition. With them there to guide us, we cannot get lost on our walk "toward the center." We turn to them daily to find our way.

The way to the center, to the experience of God, is love. From love comes our ability to sense God present. Merton goes on to speak of the first movements of this, as it might be experienced in Centering Prayer:

> There is a kind of pre-experiential contemplation in which the soul simply plunges into the darkness without knowing why, and tends blindly toward something it knows not. Only later is there a strong, subjective verification of the truth that this "something" toward which the soul is groping is really God Himself and not just an idea of God or a velleity for union with Him.
>
> Such a plunging takes courage; it is a thing of grace. But it is only in experiencing it that we can discover that this is so.

Merton gives encouraging advice to the beginner:

> Be content, be content. We are the Body of Christ. We have found him because he has sought us. God has come to take up his abode in us, in sinners. There is nothing further to look for except to turn to him completely, where he is already present. Be quiet and see that he is God.
>
> If you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, and seek the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through and with you, then you will truly receive the light and capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanation because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and he are in truth One Spirit.

The first movement of Centering Prayer and indeed the essence of the prayer is to be in faith and love to God dwelling in the depths of our being, at the center of our being. Merton explains this movement in faith with a clear and important distinction:

> If we enter into ourselves, finding our true self, and then passing "beyond" the inner "I," we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the "I am" of the Almighty.... Our inmost "I" exists in God and God dwells in it. But it is nevertheless necessary to distinguish the experience of one's own inmost being and the awareness that God has revealed himself to us in and through our inner self. We must know that the mirror is distinct from the image reflected. The difference rests on theological faith. Our awareness of our inner self can at least theoretically be the fruit of a purely natural and psychological purification. Our awareness of God is a supernatural participation in the light by which he reveals himself interiorly as dwelling in our inmost self. Hence the Christian mystical experience is not only an awareness of the inner self, but also, by a supernatural intensification of faith, it is an experiential grasp of God as present within our inner self.

It is faith that tells us most surely that

> Christ is really present in us, more present than if he were standing before us visible to our bodily eyes.... By the gift of the gospel . . . we are able to see our inner selves not as a vacuum but as an infinite depth, not as emptiness but as fullness. This change of perspective is impossible as long as we are afraid of our own nothingness, as long as we are afraid of fear, afraid of poverty, afraid of boredom – as long as we run away from ourselves. . . . Hence the sacred attitude is one which does not recoil from our own inner emptiness, but rather penetrates into it with awe and reverence and with the awareness of mystery.

This is the whole of the prayer, this moving in faith and love to God within. Then we simply abide there, rest there in the Reality:

> In silence, hope, expectation, and unknowing, the man of faith abandons himself to the divine will not as to an arbitrary and magic power whose decrees must be spelt out from

> cryptic ciphers but as to the stream of reality and of life itself. The sacred attitude is then one of deep and fundamental respect for the real in whatever form it may present itself.

There is real abandonment and acceptance of whatever God allows to happen during the time of our prayer, and yet there is not a deadly passivity. There is a lively presence in faith and hope:

> What happens, happens. One accepts it, in humility, and sees it without inferring anything, or instituting any comparison with other experiences. And one walks on in the presence of God... Would-be contemplatives must be on their guard against a kind of heavy, inert stupor in which the mind becomes swallowed up in itself. To remain immersed in one's own darkness is not contemplation, and no one should attempt to "stop" the functioning of his mind and remain fixed in his own nothingness. Rather we must go out in hope and faith from our own nothingness and seek liberation in God.

It is faith which is at the very heart of this prayer: It is faith which guides our surrender in love, our mode of transcendence. Merton insists on this again and again:

> One must let himself be guided to reality not by visible and tangible things, not by the evidence of sense or the understanding of reason, not by concepts charged with natural hope, or joy, or fear, or desire, or grief but by "dark faith" that transcends all desire and seeks no human, earthly satisfaction, except what is willed by God and connected with his will.
>
> This act of total surrender is not simply a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble, it is something much more serious: It is an act of love for this unseen Person, who in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to his reality, also makes himself present to us. The union of our mind, spirit and life with the Word present within us is effected by the Holy Spirit.
>
> It is a contact with God in charity, yes, but also and above all in the darkness of unknowing. This follows necessarily from the fact that it goes beyond the symbols and intentions of the intellect, and attains God directly without the medium of any created image or species of the mind, but a disposition of our whole being brought about by that Love which so likens and conforms us to God that we become able to

> experience him mystically in and through our inmost selves as if he were our very selves. The inner self... now knows God not so much through the medium of an objective image as through its own divinized subjectivity.

There seems to be a bit of ambivalence as Merton speaks about this experience. He sees it as something very special indeed. And it does call for a very high level of courage and fidelity. And yet it is meant for all. It is the common heritage of every child of God, every son and daughter of the Father:

> Just remaining quietly in the presence of God, listening to him, being attentive to him, requires a lot of courage and know-how. This discipline of listening and of attention is a very high form of ascetic discipline, a rather difficult one to maintain... In this listening, in the tranquil attention to God, God acts directly upon the one who prays, doing it by himself, communicating himself to the soul, without other means, without passing through angels, men, images or forms... God and the beloved are together in great intimacy.
>
> Yet at the end of this journey of faith and love, which brings us into the depths of our own being and releases us that we may voyage beyond ourselves to God, the mystical life culminates in an experience of the presence of God that is beyond all description, and which is only possible because the soul had been completely "transformed in God" so as to become, so to speak, "one spirit" with him. Yet it is nothing else but the message of Christ calling us to awaken us from sleep, to return from exile, and find our true selves within ourselves, in the inner sanctuary which is his temple and his heaven and (at the end of the prodigal's homecoming journey) his "Father's house."

It is not surprising, then, to find Merton insisting that the contemplative experience – contemplative prayer – is meant for all and not just for a chosen few:

> I have not only repeated the affirmation that contemplation is real, but I have insisted on its simplicity, sobriety, humility, and its integration in n o r m a l C h r i s t i a n l i f e. This is what needs to be stressed. . . . It is surely legitimate for anyone to desire and to seek this fulfillment, this experience of reality, this entrance into truth.

The Context

As much as Merton admired, with curiosity, methods of meditation from the Hindu and Buddhist traditions and was eager to have some experience of them, he was profoundly convinced no practice would be fruitfully employed outside of a full living of the tradition. A Christian contemplative practice such as Centering Prayer of the monologion meditation of the early Fathers presupposed a sincere effort to live a full Christian life. There must be a certain willingness to deny oneself at the more superficial levels and to live by faith, even a dark faith:

> According to the Christian mystical tradition, one cannot find one's inner center and know God there as long as one is involved in the preoccupations and desires of the outward self. Freedom to enter the inner sanctuary of our being is denied to those who are held back by dependence on self-gratification and sense satisfaction, whether it be a matter of pleasure-seeking, love of comfort, a proneness to anger, self-assertion, pride, vanity, greed, and all the rest. Faith... simultaneously a turning to God and a turning away from God's creatures – a blocking out of the visible in order to see the invisible. The two ideas are inseparable. But it is important to remember that the mere blocking out of sensible things is not faith, and will not serve as a means to bring faith into existence. It is the other way around. Faith is a light of such supreme brilliance that it dazzles the mind and darkens all its vision of other realities. But in the end when we become used to the new light, we gain a new view of all reality transfigured and elevated in the light itself.

As I noted above in sharing Merton's dream, this faith needs to be nurtured by contact with the sources of Scripture and Tradition. It is the traditional way of lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio – sacred reading, meditation and prayer, leading to contemplation. Merton explains this progression:

> Reading becomes contemplation when, instead of reason, we abandon the sequence of the author's thoughts in order not only to follow our own thoughts (meditation) but simply to rise above thought and penetrate into the mystery of truth which is expressed intuitively as present and actual. We meditate

> with our mind, which is "part of" our being. But we contemplate with our whole being and not just with one of its parts.

This points to one of the obstacles we can encounter as we move into Centering Prayer. We need to nourish our faith, the source of our prayer, by faith reading. At the same time, however, we cannot cling to the concepts of faith that have nourished us, but must let them go in order to enter into the experience of the object of our faith through love. Faith leads us into the cloud of unknowing, and it is there, and there alone, that in this life we can immediately encounter the living God.

> In fact, the spirit sees God precisely by understanding that he is utterly invisible to it. In this sudden, deep and total acceptance of his invisibility, it casts far from it every last trace of conceptual meditation, and in so doing, rids itself of the spiritual obstacles which stand between it and God. Thoughts, natural light and spiritual images are, so to speak, veils or coverings that impede the direct, naked sensitivity by which the spirit touches the Divine Being. When the veils are removed, then I can touch, or rather be touched by God in the mystical darkness. Intuition reaches him by one final leap beyond itself, and ecstasy by which it sacrifices itself and yields itself to his transcendent presence. In this last ecstatic act of "unknowing," the gap between our spirit as subject and God as object is finally closed, and in the embrace of mystical love we know that we and he are one.

To Truly Seek God

Another possible obstacle to this union with God is that we begin to seek the experience of God rather than the God of experience or the God to be experienced:

> The problem is that of taking one's subjective experience so seriously that it becomes more important than the soul, more important than God. Our spiritual experience becomes objectified, it turns into an idol. It becomes a "thing," a "reality" which we serve. We are not created for the service of any "thing," but for the service of God alone, who is not and cannot be a "thing." To serve him who is no "object" is freedom. To live for spiritual experience is slavery, and such slavery makes the contemplative life just as secular (though

in a more subtle way) as the service of any other "thing," no matter how base: money, pleasures, success.

When we start to seek an experience for ourselves, we are no longer seeking God, we are no longer centered on God but on self.

> If we remain in our ego, clenched upon ourselves, trying to draw down to ourselves gifts which we then incorporate in our own limited selfish life, then prayer does remain servile. Servility has its roots in self-serving. Servility, in a strange way, really consists in trying to make God serve our own needs. We have to try to say to modern man something about the fact that authentic prayer enables us to emerge from our servility into freedom in God, because it no longer strives to manipulate him by superstitious "deals."

We find here a very subtle balance between the seeking of self and a due expectation, since love by its very nature does want union with the beloved. The key lies here: The seeking is really a response, the response of love, the desire that love is.

> One of the basic rules is that it is always a gift of God. It is always something for which we must learn how to wait. But it is also something which we must learn to expect actively. The secret of the contemplative life is in this ability for active awareness, an active and expectant awareness where the activity is a deep personal response on a level which is, so to speak, beyond the faculties of the soul.

Self, then, selfishness, self-centeredness is the obstacle to centering, to being centered in God. It is the very antithesis to being to God in love, to God and therefore necessarily to others, for they are in him.

> No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light of contemplation, because his way has turned aside from truth, from compassion, and therefore from God. The obstacle is in our "self," that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will.

In what Merton himself thought to be one of his very best books, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he tells us in italics:

> A man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through the center into God unless he is able to

> pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of selfless love.

In his writings, Merton speaks of the sad effects of not living out of the center, out of the reality that is:

> We are so obsessed with doing that we have no time and no imagination left for being. As a result, men are valued not for what they are but for what they do or what they have – for their usefulness. When man is reduced to his function he is placed in a servile, alienated condition. He exists for someone else or even worse for some thing else.
>
> Those who relinquish God as the center of their moral orbit lose all direction and by that very fact lose and betray their manhood.

The Effects of Centering Proper

The effect of contemplation, of Centering Prayer, is just the opposite:

> Rightly accepted, contemplative experience has its own proper effect: It increases the intensity and simplicity of a man's love for God and for his fellow men.

This contemplative love leads to freedom and creativity:

> The nothingness within us – which is at the same time the place where our freedom springs into being – is secretly filled with the presence and light of God as long as our eyes are not on ourselves and then our freedom is united with the freedom of God himself. Nothing can impede the joy and creativity of our acts of love.

Contemplative insight does not only reveal to us the absorbing beauty of God and our own intrinsic beauty in him. It also reveals to us the beauty of every other person, each of whom is one with us in God. Merton speaks of his own experience here:

> It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.

In a word, the fruits of the Holy Spirit are very present in our lives when we live out of our contemplative experience. This is surely the way we can judge the authenticity of our experience. Our contemplation overflows into the whole of our lives, creatively bringing a certain sacredness to our environment because our eyes have been opened to the sacred that is already there, and we live and act accordingly.

> All around this centered solitude radiates a universe which meditates and prays, a universe outside the universe. It creates a radiation, a sacred universe created by the presence of a man in this particular kind of relation with God. And this is very important.

Contemplation becomes then a constant stance. It is

> spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source ... above all, awareness of the reality of the Source ... the awareness and realization, even in some sense the experience, of what each Christian obscurely believes: "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me"

From these few quotes we can readily see what a rich source we have in the writings of Thomas Merton to support our practice of Centering Prayer and to understand the prayer better.

I would like to conclude this with one of Thomas Merton's own prayers:

> To be here with the silence of Sonship in my heart is to be a center in which all things converge upon you. That is surely enough for the time being. Therefore, Father, I beg you to keep me in this silence so that I may learn from it the word of your peace and the word of your mercy and the word of your gentleness to the world. And that through me perhaps your word of peace may make itself heard where it has not been possible for anyone to hear it for a long time.

+ M. Basil Pennington, ocso
Abbey of Blessed Mary of Saint Joseph
Spencer MA 01562

was only eleven, "were all furiously writing novels" and that he was "engaged in a great adventure story." Although that particular story "was never finished" he recalls that he "finished at least one other, and probably two, besides one which I wrote at St. Antonin before coming to the Lycee." These novels "scribbled in exercise books, profusely illustrated in pen and ink"[2] may sound like the poetic license of the budding author writing in later years but, recently discovered manuscripts dating back to December 1929 confirm his description. One manuscript, *The Haunted Castle*,[3] obviously imitating the recently published Winnie the Pooh stories is "profusely illustrated in pen and ink" and another, *Ravenswell*, is an adventure story filling an exercise book of one hundred and fifty-eight pages, and was written in just twelve days.[4] Another story in this collection, *The Black Sheep*, is about life at Oakham, the public school in England that Merton attended from 1929 to 1933, and has a distinctly autobiographical flavor to it making it difficult to believe that the boy Merton is describing in the story is none other than himself, certainly the story contains detailed descriptions of Oakham and life at the school based on Merton's own experience. The discovery of these manuscripts verify Merton's own description of his early attempts at writing in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and, the autobiographical nature of *The Black Sheep*, takes Merton's use of autobiography as his major and preferred method of writing back earlier than would have previously been acknowledged, right back to his early teenage years.[5]

[2] Th. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, London: Sheldon Press, 1975, p. 52. (Abbreviated to *SSM.*)

[3] Th. Merton, *The Haunted Castle*, in: *The Merton Seasonal* 19 (Winter 1994): 7-10, is the earliest of these manuscripts and dates back to Christmas 1929.

[4] These manuscripts were discovered in December 1993 by the present writer and Robert E. Daggy in the possession of Frank Merton Trier, a first cousin, with whom Merton spent some school holidays until the summer of 1930.

The style of the author's handwriting, the content of the stories, and Mr. Trier's testimony, verified their authenticity. The manuscripts remain in Mr. Trier's possession with photocopies held on file at the Merton Center.

[5] In a 1939 entry in his personal journal Merton records a memory of keeping a diary during the Christmas holidays in 1929 and also of re-reading a diary from 1931 which he had kept. See Th. Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. by Patrick Hart, San Francisco: Harper, 1995, pp. 86 and 103. (Abbreviated to *RM.*)

The most extraordinary thing about these stories is that they have been preserved at all. Admittedly, not by Merton himself, but by his closest living relatives with whom he was staying at this time. I can imagine a parent keeping a child's school books, but a more distant relative would be less likely to do so, especially through that intervening period after Owen's death when Thomas Merton completely disappeared from their lives – avoiding, as instructed by his maternal grandparents, Owen's relatives in England and staying with his godfather Tom Bennett up until his decisive move to the United States in 1933. It was then at least a further fifteen years, including the second world war, before they may possibly have heard news of him with the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[6] My conjecture is they may have sensed something of Merton's gift for writing and held on to them. Whatever the reason, they have been preserved and form the earliest surviving part of the Merton corpus written by his own hand.

The next period I want to turn to are the years 1939 to 1941, the period immediately prior to Merton's entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani. The summer of 1939 and part of the summer of 1940 Merton spent at Olean with his friends Bob Lax and Ed Rice. The three friends spent their time writing novels and Merton tells us his novel "grew longer and longer and longer and eventually it was about five hundred pages long, and was called first *Straits of Dover* then *The Night Before the Battle*, and finally *The Labyrinth*."[7] The following year Merton wrote *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* and in 1941, whilst at St. Bonaventures, *My Argument with the Gestapo*. He attempted to get *The Labyrinth*, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* and *My Argument* published at the time but without success.

Before his departure from St. Bonaventures to the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 9th 1941, Merton gave to Fr. Irenaeus Herscher, O.F.M., his friend and the librarian at St. Bonaventures, a variety of materials including teaching notes, poems, journals and other materials, which formed the nucleus of the Merton collection still housed at St. Bonaventures' Friedsam Memorial Library. This collection has been developed over the years through acquisitions, further donations from Merton himself and from his literary agent, Naomi Burton Stone.

[6] *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in England in 1949 with the title *Elected Silence.*

[7] *SSM.*, 240.

Merton's memory of this time vary in terms of his recollections of the materials he destroyed and those he saved. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, before departing for Gethsemani, Merton records

> I took manuscripts of three finished novels and one half-finished novel and ripped them up and threw them in the incinerator. I gave away some notes to people who might be able to use them, and I packed up all the poems I have written, and the carbon copy of the *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, and another *Journal* I had kept...and sent it all to Mark Van Doren. Everything else I had written I put in a binder and sent to Lax and Rice.[8]

However, in Merton's personal journal of this time his account differs somewhat as he writes "today I threw the worst novel into the incinerator – both copies" before adding "only kept out a few pages, and I don't know why!"[9] In recent years a fragment of both "The Straits of Dover" and "The Man in the Sycamore Tree" have come to light along with the greater part of "The Labyrinth."[10] Merton demonstrates here an in-born instinct to preserve his work, an instinct which overrides his avowed vocation at this point of turning his back on the world, to disappear into the monastery and to never write again.

Merton continued to write, encouraged, he would have his reader believe, by a sympathetic Abbot, Frederick Dunne. However Chrysogonus Waddell, a fellow monk at Gethsemani, suggests otherwise. Waddell quotes a memorandum Merton gave Dom Frederic in 1946 outlining various books he, Merton, was hoping to write, including a biography of a Gethsemani monk, obviously Merton himself. Merton suggests a "biography or rather history of the conversion and the Cistercian vocation of a monk of Gethsemani. Born in Europe the son of an artist, this monk passed through the abyss of Communism in the university life of our times before being led to

[8] *SSM*, 368.

[9] *RM*, 469.

[10] A near-complete copy of "The Labyrinth" was found in a folder with the erroneous title "Journal of My Escape from the Nazis." A comparison of this copy with a description of "The Labyrinth" by Merton in *Run to the Mountain* confirms this. Pages from "The Straits of Dover" and "The Man in the Sycamore Tree" were found among papers Merton gave to Richard Fitzgerald at St. Bonaventure's before leaving for Gethsemani. (See Mott, pp. 126-7, and *RM*, p. 260.)

the cloister."[11] This is a different picture than the one Merton gives of writing under obedience to his abbot. Here Merton is in the driving seat and calling the shots, if I can mix my metaphors to emphasize this point.

The biography Merton suggests to Dom Frederick was eventually published as *The Seven Storey Mountain* and marked the beginning of the Merton industry. Soon after its publication in 1948, Merton received the first of many requests from academic libraries for materials for their special collections. In responding positively to these requests, Merton facilitates, by the early 1950's, the creation of a number of collections still in existence at Boston College, the University of Buffalo, the University of Kentucky along with the previously mentioned collection at St. Bonaventures.

As Merton had been careful to preserve most of his pre-Gethsemani writings, so he continued in the monastery, keeping the majority of his manuscripts, his reading and lecture notes and other materials. However, he was not so rigorous at preserving correspondence he sent and received until the early sixties. As the collection at Bellarmine was being established, it was suggested he keep carbon copies of the letters he was writing, as well as preserving the letters he received. According to Dom Flavian Burns, the abbot of Gethsemani at the time of Merton's death, Merton was careful to keep everything relating to his own life.[12] From these materials Merton responded to the requests he received from academic libraries readily, generously, cheerfully and erratically, and rarely keeping track of where he sent things.

Boston College's collection developed from Merton's friendship with a Jesuit there, Francis Sweeney. After the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Sweeney wrote to Merton asking for a copy of the manuscript. He gave a carbon copy to Terence Connolly, the director of libraries at Boston College, who made the manuscript the centerpiece of a special exhibit. Subsequently he sent all the Merton books he had to Gethsemani to be signed by Merton and begged for additional materials for the collection. The collection was formally opened in February 1949 with a lecture by Merton's friend and mentor, Dan Walsh. Merton continued over the years to correspond with Connolly and other library staff at Boston College, who

[11] Ch. Waddell, *Merton and the Tiger Lily*, in: *Merton Annual* 2 (1989), pp. 59-84.

[12] Mott, p. 393.

supplied him with books and information he requested, in return for further donations to their collection.[13]

The collection at the University of Buffalo was started at approximately the same time and most of the materials were donated by Merton in the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties. In a letter to Lawrence Thompson at the University of Kentucky in 1951 Merton referred to the collection at Buffalo asking Thompson

> Do you go in for 'worksheets' like the lads at the University of Buffalo? I sent them a lot of poetry worksheets a couple of years ago. They are especially delighted with anything that is really messy and illegible. Of this I can always furnish an abundance.[14]

The collection at the University of Buffalo is largely, as Merton suggests, drafts of poems mostly from his early collections of poetry along with a few much later pieces and some correspondence.

The University of Kentucky's collection was started in 1951 when Dr. Lawrence S. Thompson, the Librarian, wrote to Merton offering to preserve the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* or others of his manuscripts. Replying that he had now lived in Kentucky longer than anywhere else, Merton agreed to Thompson's request though noting it was not

> because I want to think of myself as a public figure, planting a sheaf of documents about myself where people can write M.A. theses about me and my masterpieces! But, I do have a feeling about being a Kentucky writer.[15]

Merton corresponded with Thompson for eleven years, sending him a wealth of material for their Merton collection, frequently in return for the loan of books from the library. Merton's links to Lexington and the University of Kentucky were further developed through his friendship with Victor and Carolyn Hammer. The collection includes manuscripts, galley proofs, notes, or other fragments from forty-two of Merton's major works. Significant runs of correspondence include those between Merton and Erich Fromm, D.T. Suzuki, Boris Pasternak and over one hundred and sixty letters, notes and post cards between Merton and the Hammers. When Merton gave his Pasternak materials to the Library in 1963 he wrote: "I am sending you some more items, including my most valued letters from Pasternak. Take good care of them!"[16]

During 1948 Merton became a regular correspondent with Sister Therese Lentfoehr.[17] His letters to her were often accompanied by gifts of materials which would eventually make her collection the largest for many years. Initially Lentfoehr had offered to assist Merton with typing and, over a number of years, prepared various materials for him including drafts of *The Sign of Jonas* and his "Monastic Orientation Notes." As well as keeping carbon copies of things she typed, Merton also frequently sent her manuscripts and other materials he had written, including one of the three original carbons of the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[18] Lentfoehr also sought out material about Merton from other sources, aided by Merton who fed her information about people and places which had items of interest – photographs, notebooks, drawings and other materials.[19]

In 1962 Lentfoehr sent Merton a "catalogue" of her collection. His response to this provides an insight into the extent of her collection and his own feelings towards such collections:

> Your book, for it really is a book, really astonished me. It was quite an "experience" for me, too, and gave me much to reflect on. First of all, the care and perspicacity with which you have handled all that material...I was agreeably surprised to find that long forgotten bits of scraps and poems or even essays I had thought long ago destroyed or lost, all turn up there. It is like the Day of Judgement.[20]

[13] A more detailed analysis of this collection can be found in *The Merton Collection at Boston College* by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O. in: *The Merton Seasonal* 11.1 (Winter 1986), pp. 8-10.

[14] W.J. Marshall, *The Thomas Merton Collection at the University of Kentucky*, *The Kentucky Review* 7.2 (Summer 1987), p. 145.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] Ibidem, p. 149.

[17] According to Sr. Therese she first wrote to Merton in 1939 but they did not begin to correspond regularly until 1948. See Th. Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989 (abbreviated to *RJ*), for a selection of Merton's letters to Lentfoehr.

[18] *RJ*, p. 189.

[19] In a letter of May 1950 to her Merton makes reference to her frequent correspondence with his Columbia friends Bob Lax and Ed Rice.

[20] *RJ*, pp. 240-241.

After the Bellarmine collection was established in 1963, Merton continued to send materials to Lentfoehr. When she was considering what would eventually become of her collection, he suggested that it could be split between Bellarmine and Marquette University so as to help complete the Bellarmine collection with early material he had sent her. In the end, her entire collection was donated to Columbia University to form the core of their collection.

In 1963 Merton was approached by Msgr. Alfred Horrigan and Fr. John Loftus, the president and dean of Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky with a proposal to create a collection at Bellarmine. With the approval of his abbot, Dom James Fox, the proposal was approved and the collection was inaugurated on November 10, 1963. The idea was to have a more formal and organized collection, though Merton stipulated that he wished to continue sending some materials to the other, already existing, collections. The nucleus of the collection was formed from materials donated by Merton along with contributions made by Dan Walsh, James Wygal and John Loftus. Merton was not present at the ceremonies for the inauguration of the collection but a prepared statement was read by Dan Walsh, who had also been involved in the inauguration ceremony for the Boston College collection. Merton concluded the statement by writing:

> Here, then, are some of the reasons why I believe that a Collection like this can have a meaning for us all. For these reasons, whatever may be of interest to you in my work certainly belongs to you by right. I would not feel I was doing you justice in keeping it from you. If, on the other hand, there is much here that is trivial or useless, I trust your indulgence to overlook it and to pray for me. I will pray in a special way for all of you who are here today. May God bless us all, and give all the grace to finish the work that He is asking of us here in the "Church of Louisville."

Shortly after the inauguration Mgr. Horrigan wrote to Merton thanking him for his "memorable gift" and for his statement which, he said, Dan Walsh had "presented with a deep feeling that left none untouched."[21] The following year the first Merton room was dedicated and, after visiting it, Merton wrote to Horrigan that he thought it was "very well done indeed"

[21] Mgr. Alfred Horrigan to Thomas Merton. November 15th, 1963.

adding "I thought it a very sober and attractive place, and am ready to take up residence at any time the Father Abbot permits."[22]

In 1967 Merton made Bellarmine the official repository for all his work instructing his Trustees to "deposit all my manuscripts, tapes, drawings, photographs and kindred items with Bellarmine College, or its successor in interest, to be kept in The Merton Room at said institution."[23] But, having made that agreement, Merton continued to send materials to other, already existing collections, and to some new ones. In 1967 Syracuse University wrote to Merton requesting materials to start a collection there and Merton responded, generously as ever, by sending them a variety of material including ten of his working notebooks, correspondence, essays and other material.[24]

As well as the collections already mentioned a number of other collections have developed in the years since Merton's death. The largest of these is at the Houghton Library at Harvard University and resulted from James Laughlin, Merton's friend and publisher, donating his personal papers along with his business papers for New Directions Publishing Corporation to Harvard. Other smaller collections have developed as friends and correspondents of Merton have bequeathed their papers to various institutions – for example, Ed Rice to Georgetown, Dorothy Day to Marquette, Jaques Maritain to Notre Dame and "Ping" Ferry to Dartmouth.[25]

Bibliography

Besides the development of archival collections, Merton was also involved in research into, and preservation of his materials on a variety of different levels.

Merton cooperated with Frank Dell'Isola in his work of compiling a bibliography of Merton's published work and encouraged Therese Lentfoehr to do likewise. When the bibliography was published in 1956 Merton described it as "on the whole a fine job, fine enough to be embarrassing to me: because it makes it quite evident that with me writing is less a talent than an

[22] Thomas Merton to Mgr. Alfred Horrigan. February 25th, 1965.

[23] Merton Legacy Trust Agreement. November 14th, 1967.

[24] T. Keenan, *Standing Where Roads Converge: The Thomas Merton Papers at Syracuse University*, in: *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*, 30 (1995), pp. 157-162.

[25] A full listing of such collections can be found at: http://www.merton.org/research/othercollections.htm.

addiction."[26] His friend, and initially his official biographer, John Howard Griffin once remarked that Merton could not pick his nose without writing about it. This may seem like a facetious comment but it contains an element of truth which Merton himself recognized writing in his journal that "perhaps I shall continue writing on my deathbed, and even take some asbestos paper with me in order to go on writing in purgatory."[27]

Merton continued to cooperate with Frank Dell'Isola and to send him new materials as they were published. As Dell'Isola worked on revising and updating his bibliography in 1965 Merton wrote to him

> It is a good idea to get it up to date but is now the time for publishing, especially for the publication of a definitive bibliography? I have several unpublished books moving up slowly in the works, and the usual projects for articles poems and so on. There will be some publication going on quite actively for two or three more years whether I am alive or dead. It is true that I am moving toward a kind of semi retirement into a more complete solitude, and when I settle down in this, the flow of publications will gradually dry up, and any writings I will do will be on a much smaller scale, more personal and perhaps more creative, but in any case a lot less of it. It is possible that one might reasonably plan on a somewhat definitive bibliography for 1970 at the earliest, even if I should have a coronary after mailing this letter.[28]

Dell'Isola's revised and expanded bibliography was eventually published in 1975 by Kent State University Press.[29]

Dissertations and Research

Although *The Seven Storey Mountain* was not published until 1948, Merton's fame was already beginning to grow with the first book review, a review of *Thirty Poems* appearing in 1944,[30] a poem dedicated to him appearing in 1947,[31] and the first article, "Toast of the Avant-Garde: A Trappist Poet," appearing in February 1948.[32]

In a letter of September 1952 to Sister Therese Lentfoehr Merton responds to a comment she made about preserving materials for future scholars saying it worries him a little and asking "Who says there will be any future scholars, anyway? Forget about preserving these things Sister – it is a vain hope." However by the time Merton is writing this those "future scholars" were already a present reality. The first masters thesis, a "Critical Appreciation of the Poetry of Thomas Merton" had been completed at Boston College in 1950,[33] with three more completed in 1951 and the first doctoral thesis "Thomas Merton: Social Critic of the Times" completed in 1952 at the University of Ottawa.[34] By the time of Merton's death there were nineteen theses completed – 15 masters and four doctoral – a small, yet significant, number compared to the hundreds completed since.[35]

One of the doctoral theses completed in 1968 was by James T Baker.[36] Baker had met Merton in 1962 when he was among a group of students at the Baptist Seminary in Louisville who visited with Merton at Gethsemani. Subsequently he went on to study for a Ph.D. at Florida State University and chose Merton for the subject of his dissertation. Baker contacted Merton in September 1967 asking if he could visit him at Gethsemani in the spring of 1968 to discuss his first draft of the thesis. Their correspondence and Merton's comments about Baker in his personal journals are interesting, as they give an insight into Merton's reaction to academic study of his work and the reality of those "future scholars" he had pooh-poohed in his 1952 letter to Lentfoehr.

[26] *RJ*, p. 225.

[27] Th. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, London: Hollis & Carter, 1953, p. 227. (Abbreviated to *SJ*).

[28] Thomas Merton to Frank Dell'Isola. June 9th, 1965.

[29] F. Dell'Isola, *Thomas Merton: A Bibliography*, Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1975.

[30] J.F. Nims, *Two Catholic Poets*. Review of *Thirty Poems* by Thomas Merton and *Land of Unlikeness* by Robert Lowell, in: *Poetry* 65 (October 1944).

[31] F. Sweeney, *Letter to Lancelot (for Thomas Merton)*, in: *Commonweal* 46 (May 9th, 1947).

[32] W. Lissner, *Toast of the Avant-Garde: A Trappist Poet*, in: *Catholic World* 166 (February 1948).

[33] M.I. Kelly, "Critical Appreciation of the Poetry of Thomas Merton", master's (Boston College, Boston, Mass., 1950).

[34] S. Saint Elizabeth of the Cross, "Thomas Merton, Social Critic of the Times", doctoral (University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada, 1952).

[35] A full list of the theses and dissertations so far completed by Thomas Merton is available on the internet at: http://pages.britishlibrary.net/thomasmerton/theses.htm – this list is regularly updated as new materials appear.

[36] J. Th. Baker, "Thomas Merton: the Spiritual and Social Philosophy of Union" doctoral (Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, 1968).

Although Merton calls Baker's topic "torturous" – Baker had described it in his letter as "a dissertation on the life and thought of Thomas Merton"[37] – Merton responded enthusiastically to Baker's initial request by agreeing to meet with him, sending him what he described as "a hotch potch of material...picked out more or less at random, covering all sorts of territory"[38] and even offering to make the arrangements for Baker to stay at the monastery guesthouse for his visit. Merton also suggests that Baker visit the Bellarmine collection when he is in Kentucky describing it as a "large collection of mss, mimeographs and general junk." He tells Baker that his problem will "not be lack of material, but finding some kind of sense in all of it."[39] Prior to Baker's visit which took place at the end of February 1968, further correspondence was exchanged between them and Merton sent Baker further materials which he thought would be of interest.

In writing to Merton after his visit, Baker expresses his appreciation for Merton's advice and hospitality. He wrote that "our conversation cleared up a number of problems which I had encountered, causing me to change my entire thesis in a couple of chapters but making the work stronger."[40] Baker completed his thesis in the late spring of 1968 and writes to Merton promising to send him a copy once it is bound, writing "I'm a bit anxious over your response to it. Maybe this is natural" adding "I do hope, however, that you will be able to criticize it so as to make it more accurate than it probably is now."[41]

Merton responds in length to Baker upon receiving a copy of his dissertation and his comments are worth quoting in full. Merton wrote:

> You have really done courageous work! I never take a census of how much I have written, and always think in terms of much less than is actually there. Your "fifty books" is a figure which does, admittedly, embrace pamphlets, but even then it is a shock to me. You have really had to struggle through a mass of stuff, and I think you have done a very good job of organizing it and tracing lines of development: where I find myself wondering about the material it is almost always because I am disagreeing with some of my own ideas. The only "corrections" I would suggest would be matters of insignificant detail...In the main, I am astonished that you were able to make sense out of such a variety of materials.
>
> Naturally I want to thank you for the care you have taken with the work, but also for the insights which it can provide for me. It is very useful to me to see an evaluation of my work as a whole. It gives me some perspective on it, and I suppose the thing that strikes me most is that I have said so much that was premature, provisional, and in many ways inadequate. I am surprised that people have received those ideas, on the whole, with more respect than they deserved. I have certainly had unfriendly critics, but on the whole my work has been accepted with sympathy. And of course I do feel it to be significant that much of the sympathetic understanding has come from Protestants – and that the first dissertation is by a Baptist.[42]

A couple of days after writing to Baker Merton comments on Baker's study in his personal journal in a more introspective tone saying he was depressed by it as it "showed me clearly so many limitations in my work. So much that has been provisional, inconclusive, half-baked. I have always said too much, too soon."[43]

"I Will Last...I Will be a Person Studied and Commented On"

In 1967, as Merton prepared to set up his Literary Trust, he began more formally gathering together materials to be deposited at Bellarmine describing the process as both "a comedy" and "a problem" adding:

[37] James Th. Baker to Thomas Merton. September 13th, 1967.

[38] Thomas Merton to James Th. Baker. September 29th, 1967.

[39] In a letter of March 28th, 1968 Merton refers to a local controversy about his support for a conscientious objector who refused the draft adding "one good man said he was about to burn my books. That is one way of disposing of them."

[40] James Th. Baker to Thomas Merton. March 4th, 1968.

[41] James Th. Baker to Thomas Merton. [Undated].

[42] Thomas Merton to James Th. Baker. June 11th, 1968. Merton's final comment that "the first dissertation is by a Baptist" is incorrect and suggests that he was not aware of the other academic research that had already been completed on him. This quotation, from a previously unpublished letter, is used by permission of the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust.

[43] Th. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998, p. 129. (Abbreviated to *OSM.*)

> I like it and cooperate whole-heartedly because I imagine it is for real. That I will last. That I will be a person, studied and commented on.[44]

Both Merton's Literary Trust and the collection at Bellarmine, along with other collections around the country, point to his concern at preserving his work so his story could be studied and told. Writing in his journal in November 1967, as the Trust was about to be agreed, he again stressed this concern saying:

> What is left over after my death (and there is bound to be plenty!) might as well get published. I have no guarantee of living many more years.[45]

Merton also saw advantages in having his materials stored in different places as he says, it "will not all be destroyed if an accident happens to one of them"[46] – once again stressing from another angle his concern for his work to be preserved.

As Merton prepared to set up his trust, death, which had been prominent in his writings the previous year, continued in the forefront of his mind.[47] In July Victor Hammer died, followed, in September, by Ad Reinhardt and John Slate, Merton's legal advisor as he set up his Legacy Trust. Slate's death gave "a sense of urgency to the slow process of setting up a trust."[48] The idea of setting up a trust must have contributed to keeping the fact of death at the front of Merton's mind and he wrote in his journal after he heard of Slate's death: "I know I too must go soon and must get things in order. Making a will is not enough, and getting manuscripts in order is not enough."[49]

[44] Th. Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997, p. 264. (Abbreviated to *Learning*).

[45] *OSM*, p. 11.

[46] Th. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, ed. by William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994, p. 175. (Abbreviated to *WF*).

[47] Death featured as a refrain in *I Always Obey My Nurse*, it was one of *Seven Words* that Merton wrote for Ned O'Gorman (Th. Merton, *Love and Living*, London: Sheldon Press, 1979, p. 97). It was a prominent theme in *The Geography of Lograire* besides featuring in his spiritual writings and holding a key place in his understanding of the role of the monk in the modern world.

[48] Mott, p. 499.

[49] *Learning*, p. 293.

With the collection at Bellarmine on his mind Merton was reading Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard spoke of *demeures* "places where living takes place" and as Michael Mott points out for "Ruth Merton's son, immediate surroundings had always been of near-obsessive importance." Place and surroundings played an important part in Merton's life and writings over the years and were to be important in *Lograire* which he was writing at this time. Bachelard's book led Merton to question "his own *demeures*,"[50] his own place, concluding that the hermitage was his true place whereas the Merton Room at Bellarmine was false, he called it a "bloody coocoo's nest"; a "*typical* image of my own stupid lifelong homelessness, rootlessness," a "place where I store away endless papers, in which a paper-self builds its nest to be visited by strangers in a strange land of unreal intimacy." He regarded the Merton Room as a cell where his papers lived but not him and he wrote that the Merton Room and the trust were all "futile – a non-survival...A last despairing childish effort at love for some unknown people in some unknown future."[51]

Even though Merton could call the Room and Trust futile and regard them as a way of avoiding death so that a part of him lived on, it was also, I would suggest, a necessary part of him. Before joining Gethsemani he burned many of his papers, giving some to friends to keep and later publishing them. He continued throughout his monastic life to ensure the survival of his work, sending it to Lentfoehr, to other collectors, and also, later on, keeping carbon copies of his letters and allowing his monastic conferences to be recorded. Once again there is a paradox here in Merton; seeing all his written work as futile whilst at the same time seeking to preserve it; burning his papers before joining Gethsemani and yet entrusting some to others. Among the papers he entrusted to others before entering the monastery was *My Argument With the Gestapo* which Merton once again attempts to get published in the very year he sees his endless papers as a form of "non-survival."[52] The same was true of *Lograire*. At the same time as writing in his personal journal about the Merton Room he was "taking greater care than ever that tapes and drafts of the new poem should be preserved in case

[50] Mott, p. 500.

[51] *Learning*, pp. 296-7.

[52] Ibidem. Merton was also suggesting to his agent that it would be a good idea to bring out "all the autobiographical stuff in one fat book." *WF*, p. 150.

he died before the work was complete."[53] He wrote to his friend "Ping" Ferry that "a publishable text, even though imperfect" of *Lograire* could be made from the tapes "if I drop dead or something" before completing it.[54]

Following the journal entry of October 1967, where Merton speaks of his papers living in the Merton Room but not himself, Merton goes on to speak of his writing saying: "When I reveal most I hide most" adding "there is still something I have not said: but what it is I don't know, and maybe I have to say it by not saying."[55] A comment made by John Howard Griffin, Merton's friend and first official biographer, in a letter to Elena Malits supports Merton here. Griffin, commenting on the difference between Merton's private journals and his published journals, said:

> I have come to one overwhelming realization, which is that Thomas Merton kept what was most important hidden except to the pages of his private journals. Even those books...that are based on his journals, are actually edited and not by any means exact transcriptions; and in them he draws that firm line beyond which he will not actually reveal himself.[56]

Merton continually recorded his own story and from that record worked up for publication the parts he wished to share. But, through his Literary Trust, Merton ensured that all his writings would be preserved and also made provision for the eventual publication of his private journals and correspondence, no sooner than twenty-five years after his death.

Merton's decision to set up a Literary Trust shows his understanding of his work within the larger professional literary field. He was a published author, "the one original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western World"[57] as he one mockingly described himself. He was in touch with many other authors, with literary agents and publishers, and he would have been aware of the need both for the monastery and his publishers to

[53] Mott, p. 500.

[54] Th. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. by William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985, p. 235.

[55] *Learning*, p. 297.

[56] E. Malits, "Journey into the Unknown: Thomas Merton's Continuing Conversion", doctoral (Fordham University, 1974), ix.

[57] Th. Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. by Jonathan Montaldo, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 64.

have a Literary Trust of some description to take care of his literary estate after his death.

Initially Merton turned to John Slate, a Columbia classmate who was an aviation lawyer, to assist with the legal side of setting up his Trust. Merton appointed Naomi Burton, his literary agent, James Laughlin, his publisher at New Directions, and Tommie O'Callaghan a Kentucky friend who was local to Bellarmine and the Merton Room, as his literary trustees. After the death of Slate in September 1967 John Ford, a Louisville lawyer, completed the Trust agreement which was signed on November 14th, 1967. The Trust agreement made provision for the eventual publication, at the discretion of the Trustees, of every single thing that Merton ever wrote. The only limitations Merton placed on the Trustees were that they never allow any of Merton's autobiographical materials to be filmed or dramatized and that no contract should be agreed without the consent of a representative of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Conclusion

Immediately prior to leaving for the West Coast and Asia in September 1968, Merton made a final visit to the Merton Room at Bellarmine to give some further guidance and assistance to the staff, then spent his last night in Kentucky in St. Bonaventure Hall, the Franciscan Friary on the campus. It was during this final visit that the apocryphal story arose of Merton making the derogatory remark that the Merton Room was "a good place to cut a fart and run." (Mott, *xxvi*) This remark, if true, highlights his diffidence and, at times almost embarrassment, at the "official" interest in him – collections at academic institutions, and a subject of research and scholarship – an "official" interest he also loved at other times. Gregory Zilboorg was not too far from the truth when he suggested Merton wanted "a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying 'HERMIT.'"[58]

Merton, whatever he may have said, was responsible for the existence of collections of his materials at numerous institutions and also in the setting up of the Merton Room at Bellarmine and the Merton Legacy Trust. As a result of this, hardly a year has gone past since his death 35 years ago without the publication of new primary material by him – poetry, essays, letters and journals, with a growing number of foreign translations of his

[58] Mott, p. 297.

works. The secondary literature of books, theses, articles and other materials about him continues to grow with much work remaining to be done. For example, few studies have been made of his poetry and so far very little use has been made of his recently published letters and complete journals. A thriving Merton Society now exists in the United States with other, smaller societies around the world, many generating their own publications.

When Merton wrote in 1967 that "I will last...I will be a person studied and commented on" it is hard to imagine Merton understood to what extent that would be true. Thirty-five years after his untimely death the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, along with other smaller Merton collections around the United States, continue to be places of discovery, fostering a continuing reinterpretation and representation of Merton's work. Thomas Merton may no longer be the archivist, but the corpus he bequeathed to seekers everywhere continues to speak and find a receptive audience.

Bibliography

Books by Thomas Merton:

The Sign of Jonas. London: Hollis & Carter, 1953.
The Seven Storey Mountain. London: Sheldon Press, 1975.
Love and Living. London: Sheldon Press, 1979.
The Hidden Ground of Love. Edited by William H. Shannon. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985.
The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends. Edited by Robert E. Daggy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.
Witness to Freedom. Edited by William H. Shannon. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994.
Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Edited by Patrick Hart. San Francisco: Harper, 1995.
Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Edited by Jonathan Montaldo. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996.

Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Edited by Christine M. Bochen. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997.
The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey, ed. Patrick Hart. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998.

Articles by Thomas Merton:

"The Haunted Castle," *The Merton Seasonal* 19 (Winter 1994): 7-10.

Unpublished Works by Thomas Merton:

(on file at The Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.)

"The Black Sheep." Unpublished Manuscript. 1930 (?). [photocopy].
"Journal of My Escape from the Nazis." First draft typescript with authors corrections.
"The Labyrinth." Unpublished Manuscript.
"The Man in the Sycamore Tree." Unpublished Manuscript.
"Ravenswell." Unpublished Manuscript. April 1929. [photocopy].
"The Straits of Dover." Unpublished Manuscript.

Secondary Sources:

Baker, James Thomas. "Thomas Merton: the Spiritual and Social Philosophy of Union." Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, 1968.
Dell'Isola, Frank. *Thomas Merton: A Bibliography*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1975.
Keenan, Terrence. "Standing Where Roads Converge: The Thomas Merton Papers at Syracuse University." *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*. 30 (1995): 157-162.
Kelly, Mary Isabelle. "Critical Appreciation of the Poetry of Thomas Merton." MA thesis, Boston College, Boston, Mass., 1950.
Lissner, Will. "Toast of the Avant-Garde: A Trappist Poet." *Catholic World* 166 (February 1948): 424-32.
Elena Malits. "Journey into the Unknown: Thomas Merton's Continuing Conversion" Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1974.

MARSHALL, WILLIAM J. "The Thomas Merton Collection at the University of Kentucky." *The Kentucky Review*. 7.2 (Summer 1987): 145-53.

MOTT, MICHAEL. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

NIMS, JOHN FREDERICK. "Two Catholic Poets." Review of *Thirty Poems* by Thomas Merton and *Land of Unlikeness* by Robert Lowell. *Poetry* 65 (October 1944): 264.

PENNINGTON, M. BASIL. O.C.S.O. "The Merton Collection at Boston College" *The Merton Seasonal*. 11.1 (Winter 1986): 8-10.

SAINT ELIZABETH OF THE CROSS, SISTER. "Thomas Merton, Social Critic of the Times." Ph.D. diss., University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada, 1952.

SWEENEY, FRANCIS. "Letter to Lancelot (for Thomas Merton)." *Commonweal* 46 (9 May 1947): 92.

WADDELL, CHRYSOGONUS. O.C.S.O. "Merton and the Tiger Lily," *Merton Annual* 2 (1989): 59-84.

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

MACIEJ BIELAWSKI

MERTON'S MARGIN*

Shortly before his death Merton delivered an informal talk in Calcutta in which he professed himself a spokesman for a strange kind of people, marginal persons, among whom he listed monks, hippies, displaced persons, prisoners. However, above all he spoke about monks and from a standpoint of a monk. He spoke of himself. I would like to think about Merton himself, and with him, in the light of this statement.

1. Marginality in the socio-historical dimension

In his address Merton stressed that:

> the monk in the modern world is no longer an established person with an established place in society. We realize very keenly in America today that the monk is essentially outside of all establishments. He does not belong to an establishment. He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience[1].

* Transl. by A. Muranty.

[1] *Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism. (Informal talk delivered at Calcutta, October 1968)* in: Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, p. 305.

A margin is a rim of a piece of paper and at the same time a point of contact with what lies beyond it. Still, a margin is a part of the piece of paper, it belongs to it, although it is situated at a certain distance from what one might call its centre. We do not fill a margin with writing, we make notes on it instead, we correct what has been written in the central area. Let's take another example. Each city has its centre, and its outskirts, i.e. its margin. Living in the city centre and taking part in problems discussed in agora gives one a sense of belonging, a certain guarantee of safety and an impression of making history. Outside the city there are unpopulated wastelands with stagnating, dangerous, and unhistorical life. Certainly, when the city is threatened, these unpopulated wastelands become a refuge. Marginality is a space category, situated in relation to a kind of centre.

Merton says that living in the margin "is essentially outside of all establishments". According to him living in the centre, in the constellation of human polis that may also be called civilisation, means living in an establishment of sorts. Here everyone has their place, plays a role, and puts on a sort of mask. Merton questioned the sense and authenticity of such life a number of times. He was also fluent at exposing false appearances of life lived in this perception of centre. He was terrified of emptiness, senselessness, hidden violence, and the hypocrisy of life in the centre of twentieth century polis that has spread nearly all over the globe. Here the establishment labels everything. According to him life in the centre is not really life since here people wander about on the surface, far from what he called "fundamental human experience". For him the centre was a world without God – an anti-temple.

After his conversion Merton set off on his search for God's space, so he left the centre for the margin – a Trappist monastery. The monastery, not only in relation to space, but also its style of life, is situated on the margin of the world, and often also on the margin of the Church. There were certainly times when monasteries took a central place in the human polis – to make decisions concerning politics, economy, and social education. There have been numerous attempts to transform both the Church and the world in various areas. Let's refrain from evaluating such undertakings here. At the end of his life Merton was convinced that this time was irretrievably gone, although in his youth he had succumbed to the utopia of monastification of Christianity and the world.

With time he discovered that monastic life might become a worldly one, which is overly permeated with establishment, delusion and lies. So, he

criticised it, exposing false appearances, and deluded dreams of grandeur. By his very life and writings Merton was exposing the life of his society, Church, and monastery as well as his own. He was constantly moving away, towards the margins of civilisation, Church, monasticism, and himself. However, he never left those dimensions. This is the core of his paradox, so beautiful and so attractive at the same time. Merton was leaving and staying. Still, if he was setting off in the direction of polis, and he did that in writing and thought often enough, he did so while standing in the margin in full awareness of the wilderness stretching out behind his back. Merton was a man standing between the polis and the wilderness. He turned either to one or the other area, always remaining in the margin.

2. Marginality in existential dimension

When speaking on behalf of such people like monks, hippies, poets, displaced persons, or prisoners, he stressed:

> we are deliberately irrelevant. We live with an ingrained irrelevance which is proper to every human being. The marginal man accepts the basic irrelevance of the human condition, an irrelevance which is manifested above all by the fact of death. The marginal person [...] lives in the presence of death, which calls into question the meaning of life. He struggles with the fact of death himself, trying to seek something deeper than death, and the office of the monk or the marginal person or the poet is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life[2].

Marginality results from the sense of non-meaningfulness and lack of sense; it is the consequence of being brushed by death. Being aware of the fact of death is important in that it questions everything we call life. In the face of this experience all meanings and senses offered to someone by the arrangement of living in society, in a human polis, in the centre, seem to be devoid of any solid basis. All meanings imposed by society or created by man sooner or later burst like soap bubbles, and man stands naked, poor, without meaning. Titles, positions, disguises, masks and decorations, speculation, philosophical systems – all these sooner or later lose their me-

[2] Ibidem, p. 306.

aning, and the man who trusted those arrangements experiences profound disappointment, yet at the same time is cleansed of illusion. He does not take part in the worldly theatre of shadows, but passes onto the margin searching for the light capable of lighting up the darkness of death and giving meaning to life.

One may look at Merton's life as at a series of consecutive delusions and disappointments, building the meaning of life and then losing it. Merton created individual phases of his existence. Sooner or later each of them gave in under the pressure of the truth of life and connected with it the fact of death. A worldly person became a monk, a monk became a writer, a writer became a hermit, a hermit became a lover and a traveller, and in the end the whole pathos of his extraordinary life ended trivially by electrocution caused by a fan. Merton was stubbornly and instinctively moving away to the margin of everything that had at first seemed significant to him. He was doing so in the belief that he is searching for an absolute, unquestionable centre. It was precisely this dynamism of constant movement towards the Absolute, this constant passage to the margin from the deluding circles of a false centre, that seems to be what makes us wonder and interests us in him today.

Merton says that living on the margin has to be chosen and devoted to. Such life also has its style, its practices and exercises. He speaks of meditation in the broad sense of this word, since it encompasses poets, monks, and hippies. One of the means of his going to the margin was his writing. A person who writes gains a certain distance to life. To write is to look at life from the distance of words. Life is the centre and writing is moving away to the margin. When life seems to lose its meaning man moves away to the margin of writing. He does not live, he writes. Nevertheless, after that he returns to life on the narrow footbridge of thoughts and words. The tension between living and writing is a typical tension that exists between the centre and the margin. Life is the centre, death is the wilderness, the margin is thinking and writing, which by means of straining to overcome the life – death tension goes "beyond death even in this life", or even "beyond the dichotomy of life and death", in order to "to be a witness to life".

At this point we touch on a certain paradox and ambiguity of marginality. One moves to the margin because one exposed the delusions of the centre. Thanks to this practice one discovers a new centre, and the previous one becomes a meaningless periphery. Yet the relation remains and some-

one who discovered a deeper dimension of truth and existence wants to pass on to the centre, wants to make the ex-centre an element circulating around the new centre which has just been created in the margin. In other words, he goes to the margin in order to deprive the centre of its lethal power, and also, in a sense, to save himself and this centre as well.

The life and writings of Thomas Merton are a perfect example of such behaviour. He used them to move away – the monastery or the hermitage were nothing but visible signs of it. Like every writer and artist, he situated himself in the margin, he gained distance, in order to be able to look at society, Church, monasticism, human existence, and himself from a privileged standpoint. It is the kind of behaviour typical of a writer, an artist, a sage. Merton can be counted among the group of "the great ones" of past centuries, who behaved in a similar manner – they were persons from the margin who spoke of living in the margin showing its tragedy and yet the beauty of its depth. Kafka's protagonists, as well as Kafka himself, Pinocchio, excluded from life, protagonists of Andersen's fables, Prince Myszkin from Dostoyevsky's *Idiot* and Dostoyevsky himself, Kierkegaard, and such Poles as for instance Norwid, or Milosz – the returning émigré. As for older classics of such style of life, wisdom and writing, one can mention Merton's favourite Lao Tsu, as well as Seneka, Mark Aurelius, Michel de Montaigne and a number of monks from many ages. It is good to think of Merton and his written heritage in this perspective and to place him in this specific company.

3. *Marginality in theological perspective*

Going beyond the life-death dualism leads Merton to a religious dimension, in which faith, grace, and God become important. However even here Merton's experience and words are marked with paradox, a stigma of marginality. He says that

> as soon as you say faith in terms of this monastic and marginal existence you run into another problem. Faith means doubt. Faith is not the suppression of doubt. It is the overcoming of doubt, and you overcome doubt by going through it. The man of faith who has never experienced doubt is not a man of faith. Consequently, the monk is one who has to struggle in the depths of his

> being with the presence of doubt, and to go through what some religions call the Great Doubt, to break through beyond doubt into a certitude which is very, very deep because it is not his own personal certitude, it is the certitude of God Himself, in us. The only ultimate reality is God. God lives and dwells in us[3].

The above passage discloses yet another aspect of Merton's marginality – this time it concerns faith on whose margin doubting is situated. Let us have a closer look at this issue. God, being the Absolute centre, calls man to him and grants him the grace of faith. Such a man abandons the world and situates himself on its margin. Faith leads to the margin, from where we can see that the centre is not where it seems to be. In theology this process is called conversion. Sometimes moving away to the margin takes on a from of escape – escape from the world to utopia, and then from utopia to truth, and return to the world, this, however, happens on a different level.

What is the role of doubt in all this? Why does one first go to the margin of the world with faith, and then, as a result of doubts, also to the margin of faith? Well, faith can also become a false centre – it often has and is. Faith puts on theological and ritualistic systems, power, economics, politics. Doubts come when man thinks that he has settled down in a way – he has, knows, decides, rules, and above all guarantees salvation to himself and others. Precisely at this point all sincere God-seekers experience doubts, they loose their certitude and learn true faith, the faith of God, with God and in God. Everything is burned and the other, new things grow. Transfer from the first faith dimension to the second takes place through the Great Doubt. In classical theology this process is called purification.

Yet why does it happen in this manner? Merton doesn't go any deeper in his reflections. Nevertheless, one may be tempted to surmise a few thoughts following from them. To put it shortly: God is in the centre. By creating the world in a way he withdraws from himself, creating space for the world (it is a concept of creation present for instance in Jewish thought, in Blondel, etc.). By these means God decentralises himself in a way and allows the world to exist in the centre. We say: God is beyond this world. God situates himself on the margin of the world, yet He remains in its centre. The world exists in order to discover God's centrality and its own marginality. This understanding of world history is every man's history as well, since

[3] Ibidem.

man, by going to the margin discovers the centrality of a so far marginalized God. Or is it that man, while discovering God, moves to the margin? Discovering the seemingly central marginality of the world and exposing them, receding into the area of naked existence where everyday life is marked with the truth about dying as well as the road of faith which leads through the abyss of doubt – all that, recalled under the name of marginality, constitutes the structure of theological existence. By learning that man becomes real, free, redeemed. I am under the impression that this is one of the main currents of Merton's life, search and thought.

All in all time and history are on the margin of Invisibility – even if we seem to think that the centre is here. What can be seen is on the margin of Invisibility, even if at the beginning it seems that the latter lies on the margin of the visible world. Human systems and ways of understanding lie on the margin of God's wisdom, His Word, and His Silence. God sent his Son to the world, to the margin of the great Empire, to teach the world about the centrality of God. However, God's Son was lead out of the city and killed by crucifixion. By His Resurrection he revealed the centrality of the humble power of God. As such He remains in the power of the Spirit, present until the end of the world. His is a marginal presence, and yet also central. Certainly, the Church has gone astray more than once, and indeed, still is, when it places itself in the centre, reaches for power and easily absolves itself of violence. Monasticism did it as well – yet Merton would go to the margin in relation to such incidents, and expose their falseness.

4. Merton's marginality – paradoxes and symbol of certain existence.

> We are not justified by any action of our own, but we are called by the voice of God, by the voice of that ultimate being, to pierce through the irrelevance of our life, while accepting and admitting that our life is totally irrelevant, in order to find relevance in Him. And this relevance in Him is not something we can grasp or possess. It is something that can only be received as a gift. Consequently, the kind of life that I represent is a life that is openness to gift; gift from God and gift from others.[4]

[4] Ibidem, p. 307.

This is how Merton perceived his own existence and gave witness to it – not only in the talk he delivered in Calcutta, but through all his life. Something inside urged him to it. There were times when he couldn't understand it. There were times when he couldn't catch up with this inner force. Nevertheless, he could never deny or disown it. He called it a gift. Being open for the gift, he himself became one.

And here we stand, faced with the paradox, the mystery of his existence. Here is a famous monk. Here is a mystic talking of silence. An American whose works find readers somewhere on the margin – in the far-away Poland. Or perhaps Merton is on the margin of Polands' central problems? Here is a peculiar Absolute-seeker, who was and still is escaping to the margin of canonical categories of holiness. And yet he continues to speak through *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* with great force, beyond the barrier of his death, to the people from polis of the modern world.

Merton lived on the margin of the world and on the margin of God, he lived in between and on the border. A mysterious gift that he was open to, and which captivated him, caused him to live through it somehow, and expressed it with his writings as well as his life. He had paid the price of witness, which remains on the margin of silence. Out of this margin, which allowed him to live through essential dimensions of human life, Merton still says with peculiar force and full of hope, that "there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk".[5]

[5] Ibidem, p. 308.

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

Stanisław Obirek

Second Round of Merton's Beer or Mysticism Incarnate*

"The true source and ground of unity
is remaining in love with God, the fact that love
of God has been poured out into our hearts through
the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Rm 5, 5).
Accepting this gift maintains religious conversion
and leads to moral, or even intellectual one."

Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in theology*

"There is no doubt that Thomas Merton was
addicted to keeping diaries. He ordered his thoughts
when writing, particularly recording his reflections
on the pages of *The Journal*."

Patrick Hart

"It may well be that true fervour does not separate,
but unites. And does not lead neither to fanaticism
nor fundamentalism. Perhaps one day fervour will
come back to our bookshops, to our minds".

Adam Zagajewski, *Defence of Fervour*

* Transl. by A. Muranty.

I have written about Merton's beer before – in 1995 in a quarterly *Życie duchowe* [*Spiritual Life*]. At that time, while referring to Henry Nouwen, I wanted to say a few words about Merton as a man immersed in life, interested in all its manifestations, fascinated by its prose, finding pleasure also in drinking beer or whiskey. This time beer figures only in the title, since actually it was nothing but a pretext for socializing. There were times when he reproached himself for having drunk or eaten too much, yet in fact he was a man of one passion – God.

One may even say that he was drunk with God, for he longed to see him at all cost, and this wish was granted in his close encounter with a stone image of Buddha.

* * *

I have come across his books late, when I was already a student. I recall that he interested me, although I cannot say that he shocked or shaped me.

At that time we read other books and succumbed to other fascinations. Besides his *Journals* ware then still unavailable. As I found later, Merton himself treated his ascetic books with great reserve, distancing himself from nearly all of them, reproaching himself for his spiritual vanity and even a distinctive sense of superiority, in itself not far from vanity...

And so, unaware of this change in value judgement I read *The Seven Storey Mountain, No Man Is an Island* and *The Sign of Jonas*. These books were 'readable'. Their author did not escape into idle and irritating 'newspeak' or pious commentary. He wrote about the happiness caused by the sense of God's presence, he related to the Bible, monastic tradition and the classics of Christian mysticism. Far from moralising, he shared what he considered important in this tradition.

This first contact with Merton has not passed without a trace, however I would lie if I claimed that it influenced me deeply. At the time I was occupied with books that were less pious, yet deeper, it seemed to me, immersed in home tradition and closer history. Only too painful and too conspicuous consequences of decisions made in Potsdam and Yalta caused me to look for voices depicting what we were absorbed in. And so I greedily devoured forbidden Witold Gombrowicz, listened for subtly present Zbigniew Herbert, brushed by Czeslaw Milosz, found it hard to believe Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, was amused to tears by Sławomir Mrożek, and worried by Franz Kafka, fascinated by Bruno Schulz. Thomas Merton definitely did not fit in with this party. Briefly put, his problems were not mine.

It was only recently that I went back to Thomas Merton, thanks to his *Journals*, poetry and literary essays, and above all his fascination with the East, particularly Buddhism. I must not omit his correspondence with Czeslaw Milosz. I am not sure if this is the same Merton, but whatever the case may be, this one is closer to me. This is a searching Merton, quite lost, in conflict with his superior, with hierarchic Church, not understanding apparently necessary compromises, and yet still persistent in his monastery and in the Church.

Merton's *Journals* are too rich and consists of too many themes, which is why I was forced to choose a selection. Trusting that they will present threads complimentary to other presentations, I have chosen two: his thirst for God and tension in his relations with the institution of the Church. This dramatic process of searching for truth about himself and God inside the Church was abruptly stopped by his premature death. By following the struggles of Thomas Merton, especially in his last years, we are witnesses not only of his search – we too are beginning to ask ourselves questions about who we are, who is God for us and what role the Church plays in our lives.

1. To Touch Reality

Patrick Hart is undoubtedly right to think that the search for solitude "is something of a leitmotif in all the writings of Thomas Merton – especially his journals"[1], although Merton was actually after was not solitude, but God. It can be clearly seen especially in the last years of his tragically interrupted life. Let me start from the end, from the illumination Merton experienced only six days before his death. While visiting Polonnaruwa, contemplating the statues of Buddha he is surprised by an experience, which changed his view of surrounding reality. He writes:

> Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as in exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. [...] I don't know

[1] Cf. his *Preface* to Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, p. xxviii.

> when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete. It says everything, it needs nothing".[2]

Let's say that once more: "I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise". Will it be too much to say that at that moment Merton achieved the goal of his life? It seems to me that he actually did. It reminds me of another mystical experience, described by Ignatius Loyola in his autobiography:

> Going along thus in his devotions, he sat down for a little with his face towards the river, which was running deep below. And as he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened: not that he saw some vision, but understanding and knowing many things, spiritual things just as much as matters of faith and learning, and this with an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him. One cannot set out the particular things he understood then, though they were many.

Here St. Ignatius adds a very characteristic comment on his vision, which was not, (like in Merton's case) in actual fact a vision at all:

> he received a great clarity in his understanding, such that in the whole course of his life, right up to the sixty-two years he has completed, he does not think, gathering together all the helps he has had from God and all the things he has come to know (even if he joins them all in to one), that he has ever attained so much as on that single occasion.[3]

[2] Th. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 7, 1967-1968, ed. by Patrick Hart, San Francisco, pp. 323-4.

[3] *Reminiscences or Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola*, in: *Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Personal Writings*, translated with introductions and notes by J. A. Munitiz and Ph. Endean, Penguin Books, 1996.

In both cases we are dealing with a new outlook on the life they have lived so far. We know what were its effects on Ignatius Loyola, the future founder of Jesuit order, as far as Merton's lot is concerned, we are reduced to conjecture. Whatever the case may be, both of them covered a long way leading to that experience.

In his *Zamyślenia* sketched in the Plus Minus column in *Rzeczpospolita* (5-6 October 2002 issue) His Grace Archbishop Józef Życiński, the host of this session, has written not without satisfaction: "At the end of October the Lublin Catholic University will hold an international session devoted to the spiritual heritage of Thomas Merton. When I was looking for available data on the Internet, I conducted a web search on alltheweb.com, my query was to collect all available texts including the phrase 'Thomas Merton'. After some time I obtained information that the total exceeds 154 000 items". Then he asks a question which is not in the least rhetorical: "What makes our generation so vividly interested in the message of an artist who, having converted to Catholicism, embraced austere rules of living in a Trappist abbey in Kentucky?"

I think that it is not about curiosity about the exotic life of a hermit, so different from modern ideas of successful life, but more about authentic peace of heart emanating from all his writings, including the fascinating *Journal*. It is not only the number of Internet entries, but also the multitude of pages written by Merton himself that is astonishing.

"Józio questioned all his guests about what they had heard, read, seen. He was voraciously curious about everything. He was an embodiment of curiosity, a perfect incarnation of curiosity" – this is how Adam Zagajewski wrote about Józef Czapski. Those words may be also applied to Thomas Merton. This is how I picture him – in his monastic cell, devouring magazines, raining letters full of questions on writers he is attracted to; he wants to know, to understand as much as he possibly can; he cannot rest easy; he is writing, commenting, getting irritated and impatient, taking photos, drawing, painting. One glance at the index in his *Journals* says it all. Who is not there! And then he reproaches himself for being a bad monk, no hermit: "All of which brings up the problem of real solitude: I don't have it here. I am not really living as a hermit. I see too many people, have too much active work to do, the place is too noisy, too accessible. People are always coming up here, and I have been too slack about granting visits, interviews, etc., going to town too often, socializing, drinking, and all that" as he wrote on 18 April 1968.

Before setting out on his journey to the East, which he considered so promising, he noted under the date of 9 September:

> I go with a completely open mind, I hope without special illusions. My hope is simply to enjoy the long journey, profit by it, learn, change, and perhaps find something or someone who will help me advance in my own spiritual quest.

I am convinced that it was this sense of insufficiency and want that made Merton such an enjoyable and looked-for partner in conversation. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki did not consider him one of the few people best comprehending eastern spirituality for nothing. This is how Merton describes his long talks with Suzuki:

> Two good long talks with Suzuki. He is now ninety-four, bent, slow, deaf, but lively and very responsive. [...] These talks were very pleasant, and profoundly important to me – to see and experience the fact that there really is a deep understanding between myself and this extraordinary and simple man whom I have been reading for about ten years with great attention (June 20th, 1964).

Similarly profound were Merton's relations with Czeslaw Milosz, whose *Captive Mind* he greatly admired. He writes to him: "First of all I would like to say that I found your book to be one of the most intelligent and stimulating it has been my good fortune to read for a long time." And adds: "It is an important book, which makes most other books on the present state of man look abjectly foolish"[4] This is what Merton wrote in his first letter to Milosz on December 6th, 1958. A history of ten years of this friendship constitutes a subject of another paper in this session. In one of his last letters written on March 15th, 1968 Merton wrote to Milosz:

> You can say absolutely nothing about the Church that can shock me. If I stay with the Church it is out of a disillusioned love, and with a realization that I myself could not be happy outside though I have no guarantee of being happy outside, though I have no guarantee of being happy inside either. In effect my 'happiness' does not depend on any institution or any establishment. As for you, you are part of my 'Church' of friends who are in many ways more important to me than the institution.

[4] *Striving Towards Being. The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czesław Miłosz*, ed. by Robert Faggen, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 3.

Further development of this friendship might have been interesting for both friends. Unfortunately enough, it was also tragically terminated. Nevertheless, it is characteristic that one of his last postcards (November 21st, 1968) Merton ever sent was addressed to none other than Milosz ("Wrote the card to Milosz this morning").

Patrick Hart is undoubtedly right to claim that Merton never though of leaving the monastery, nevertheless his lose relations with Buddhist monks are unquestionable. He felt that spiritual experience goes beyond the boundaries set down by religious divisions. Perhaps this is precisely the last will that Thomas Merton left for us, readers of his writings. This is how he sums up the time spent in India:

> The days here [in Dharamsala] have been good ones. Plenty of time for reading and meditation, and some extraordinary encounters [with Dalai Lama – S.O.'s note]. So far my talks with Buddhists have been open and frank and there has been full communication on a really deep level. We seem to recognize in one another a certain depth of spiritual experience, and it is unquestionable. On this level I find in the Buddhists a deeper attainment and certitude than in Catholic contemplatives (November 6th, 1968).

One can perhaps speak of touching Reality, of starting a chapter, which he did not have a chance to finish. One thing is certain. Since some point in time impulses emerging from surrounding reality became more important to him than those emanating from books and the tradition of the Church. His approach to the Vietnam War and connected with it pacifist movement, to theology of liberation and Third World poetry, to writers working creatively behind the iron curtain, and his authentic admiration for them, and at long last for other religious traditions, became significant stimuli establishing his view of his own monastic vocation and the Church itself. When he let 'the world' enter his monastic cell Merton already saw it as a world mysteriously transformed and saved.

Amazingly, in a way worthy of further penetrating, by doing this he was ahead of the most recent theological institutions which are successful in their attempts to reconcile universality and uniqueness of the saving deed completed in Jesus Christ with the multitude of religions, and hence also

multitude of legitimate ways to God. It is sufficient to mention such names as Jacques Dupuis or Wacław Hryniewicz. As the latter one writes:

> Those who profess other religions save themselves by means of religious traditions they profess. Saving power of their own ways does not constitute competition for the saving power of Christ. Various religions lead to the same God. Although their ways are different, final goal is common for everyone. It is union with God as He manifested Himself in Jesus Christ".[5]

And to conclude, an important, it seems to me, excerpt from Dupuis's book *Christianity and Religions*, which deals with the benefits of dialogue:

> Christians may benefit from dialogue. They will benefit in two ways. On one hand they will enrich their own faith. Thanks to experience and witness of others they will be able to discover deeper aspects and certain dimensions of God's mystery, which they previously realized only dimly in Christian tradition. At the same time they will purify their own faith. Clash caused by the meeting will often rise questions, will make Christians review their stance and overcome deeply seated prejudices, or change concepts and visions which are too narrow, exclusive, and negative in relation to other traditions. Benefits of the dialogue constitute at the same time a challenge for partners of Christians.[6]

In my opinion the above words are the most thorough summary of the life and work of Thomas Merton.

2. *'Monachi plangentis non docentis est officium'*

Merton mockingly quotes the above adage in a difficult period for him, when he was afflicted with a ban of publication during the Vietnam War. It is interesting that it was precisely the pacifist activities of the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* that became one of the sources of his popularity in the United States. In communist Europe they aroused mixed feelings. His pacifistic zeal wasn't completely shared by Czeslaw Milosz, who was only too familiar with the peace policy of the Soviet empire.

[5] W. Hryniewicz, *Chrześcijaństwo nadziei*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002, p. 327.

[6] J. Dupuis, *Il cristianesimo e le religioni*, p. 431.

For me it is an example of a considerably greater tension accompanying Merton's relations with the institution, his monastic superiors, and the hierarchical Church. Far from usurping the right to full presentation of this extremely complex problem, I would like to at least point out several factors of this tension, which, it seems to me, the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* has creatively overcome.

It is perhaps worthwhile to summon a somewhat longer passage from *The Journal*, dated March 3rd, 1964, which constitutes a case in point of the difficulties and his response to them:

> I had been hoping to republish the few articles on nuclear war which had been permitted by Dom Gabriel – thinking that it was enough that he had permitted them once. The new General, Dom Ignace, dug into the files, held a meeting of definitors, and declared that there was to be no republication. Thus I am still not permitted to say what Pope John said in *Pacem in Terris*. Reason: 'That is not the job of a monk, it is for the Bishops.' Certainly, it has a basis in monastic tradition. '*Monachi plangentis non docentis est officium*' ['The job of the monk is to weep, not to teach.']. But – with things here: our cheese business and all the other 'plangent' functions we have undertaken, it seems strange that a monk should be forbidden to stand up for the truth, particularly when the truth (in this case) is disastrously neglected.
>
> A grim insight into the stupor of the Church, in spite of all that has been attempted, all efforts to wake her up! It all falls into place. Pope Pius XII and the Jews, the Church in South America, the treatment of Negroes in the U.S., the Catholics on the French right in the Algerian affair, the German Catholics under Hitler. All this fits into one big picture and our contemplative recollection is not very impressive when it is seen only as another little piece fitted into the puzzle. The whole thing is too sad and too serious for bitterness. I have the impression that my education is beginning – only just beginning and that I have a lot more terrible things to learn before I can know the real meaning of hope.
>
> There is no consolation, only futility, in the idea that one is a kind of martyr for the cause. I am not a martyr for anything, I am afraid. I wanted to act like a reasonable, civilised, responsible Christian of my time. I am not allowed to do this, and I am told I have renounced this – fine. In favor of what?

> In favor of silence, which is deeply and completely in complicity with all the forces that carry out oppression, injustice, aggression, exploitation, war. In other words silent complicity is presented as a 'greater good' than honest, conscientious protest – it is supposed to be part of my vowed life, is for the 'glory of God'. Certainly I refuse complicity. My silence itself is a protest and those who know me are aware of this fact. I have at last been able to write enough to make that clear. Also I cannot leave here in order to protest since the meaning of any protest depends on my staying here. Anyway I am definitely *silenced* on the subject of nuclear war.

The situation is, of course, unusual, not to say on the verge. It might have lead to abandoning monastic walls. It had not turned out that way, although it is worth remembering that the period of Vatican Council II and after was the time of greatest the crisis in the monastic life since the reformation. Merton persevered being fully aware that he was making the right choice. He knew that by remaining a monk he becomes a trustworthy witness to the values he was fighting for, which he wished to realize more than anything else in his own life.

It is clearly visible in ruminations recorded on the day of his fiftieth birthday on January 25th, 1965:

> My intention is, in fact, simply to 'die' to the past somehow. To take my fiftieth birthday as a turning point, and to live more abandoned to God's will, less concerned with projects and initiatives (which have, however, perhaps also been His will). More detached from work and events, more solitary. To be one of those who entirely practice contemplation simply in order to follow Christ. And who am I anyway?

Now, this is the only thing Merton really cared about – the truth about himself, which is the most important thing in life. He could not find an answer outside the monastery and community. Although there were things he did not like in monastic life, he would record all weaknesses and vices of his superiors with great perspicacity, he could not imagine life outside it. He was deeply convinced that Gethsemani was his place. Patrick Hart, his secretary, confirms it:

> In fact, he was quite sensitive on this point of remaining a monk of Gethsemani, since a number of irresponsible rumours were circulating about his abandonment of the monastic commitment. In one of the earlier letters I received from him after his departure, he referred to some rumors which had already reached him: "Give my regards to all the gang and I hope there are not too many crazy rumors. Keep telling everyone that I am a monk of Gethsemani and intend to remain one all my days...".[7]

Later, in a letter from New Delhi of November 9th, 1968, only a month before his death, Thomas Merton wrote among others: "I hope I can bring back to my monastery something of the Asian wisdom with which I am fortunate to be in contact".[8]

It wasn't a mere attachment to the monastery or monastic community as such. For Thomas Merton both the monastery and the community were a place and a way to union with God. He writes about it in a moving way in his entry of December 7th, 1965:

> What is primary? God's revelation of Himself to me *in Christ* and my response of faith. In the concrete, this means, for me, my present life in solitude, acceptance of its true perspectives and demands, and the work of slow reorientation that goes on. Each day, a little, I realize that my old life is breaking loose and will eventually fall off, in pieces, gradually. What then? My solitude is not like Rilke's ordered to a poetic explosion. Nor is it a mere deepening of religious consciousness. What is it then? What has been so far only a theological conception, or an image, has to be sought and loved. 'Union with God!' So mysterious that in the end man would perhaps do anything to evade it, once he realizes it means the *end* of his own Ego-self-realization, once and for all. Am I ready? Of course not. Yet the course of my life is set in this direction."

It seems to me that we have here instances of mysticism in its pure form. Merton is a child of his times. He has read Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, he is not only an assiduous reader of 20th century literature, in a way he participates in its creation. His longing for union with God is accompanied by numerous question and quotation marks. Yet perhaps this is why it appeals to us, why we look to it for confirmation also for our timid intuitions.

[7] *The Asian Journal*, p. xxviii.

[8] Ibidem.

One more entry, made four years later, on March 26th, 1968:

> I obey Church authority because I trust God to bring good out of their errors as well as out of their good will. Because we are all sinners anyway, all subject to error, and because if we deal charitably and humbly with one another, the Spirit will take care of the rest. But there is such a thing as an idolatry of office, and I don't yet believe the Pope is another incarnation!

* * *

It is difficult to comment on those exceedingly expressive texts. They came out, according to their author's wish, 25 years after his death. Had he been alive today, we might not have known them, perhaps Merton, like St. Ignatius Loyola, would have found a way to incorporate the truth about the Church into the creative tissue of its post-council reality. God wished differently. It seems to me that they constitute an integral part of the spiritual legacy of the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and must not be omitted, even if we have to force our way through hundreds of thousands of Internet entries.

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

KRZYSZTOF BIELAWSKI

MIDSUMMER DIARY AND MERTON'S EXPERIENCE OF LOVE* [1]

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[2]. (June 21st, 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[3]. (April 25th, 1966)

* Transl. by A. Muranty.

[1] 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.

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

[3] 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"[4], 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

[4] 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"[5]. 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"[6]. 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"[7] (10 June 1966). Pages of *Midsummer Diary* might very well be counted among the classics of love literature, next to poems written for M[8]. 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[9].
>
> 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[10].

[5] W.H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp. The Thomas Merton Story*, New York: Crossroad, 1996, p. 200.

[6] *Learning to Love*, p. 307.

[7] Ibidem, p. 81.

[8] 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.

[9] Entry dated April 27th, 1966. *Learning to Love*, p. 45.

[10] Entry dated April 25th, 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[11].

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[12].
> I am not as smart or as stable as I imagined[13].

And even:

> I can see why she is scared. I am too[14].

In the end, on August 8th, 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 interpretating Merton's life in terms of Kazimierz Dąbrowski's positive disintegration[15]).

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*:

[11] Ibidem.

[12] Ibidem, p. 46.

[13] Ibidem.

[14] Ibidem, p. 45.

[15] 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 Klimentowski, 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[16].

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[17].

"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[18]. (April 14th, 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

[16] *Learning to Love*, p. 234.

[17] Ibidem.

[18] Ibidem, p. 40.

purify his own understanding of solitude that he passionately desired. It enabled him to realize his vocation in full. On June 18th, 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 unassailable 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[19].

In *Midsummer Diary* he wrote:

> I am here for one thing: to be open[20].

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"[21]. 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

[19] Ibidem, p. 311.

[20] Ibidem, p. 345.

[21] Entry dated March 19th, 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"[22]. 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"[23]. 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-

[22] Th. Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 364.

[23] *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.

WACŁAW HRYNIEWICZ

THOMAS MERTON AND JULIAN OF NORWICH: MYSTICISM AND UNIVERSALISM OF SALVATION*

Great culture of the spirit is shaped by people who are open, capable of understanding and compassionate for others. Mystics belong to this category. They can cross over any religious and confessional divisions. A mystic is far from being a bitter recluse, devoid of the sense of human solidarity. Quite the opposite, his spiritual experience allows him to find the deepest bonds between people. He is able to discover that beauty, which is a herald of their ultimate rescue and transformation. Those who read the mystics' witness thoroughly will find in it a rejection of all fundamentalisms or narrowness of spirit. They will discover mercy and compassion encompassing all people and all creatures.

In this witness there is great wisdom of the view of the world and the human lot, wisdom releasing from exclusivism and overconfidence in oneself. This wisdom is born out of a deep experience of community and solidarity among people. Thus the mystic's witness is enormously edifying. Thomas Merton and Julian of Norwich have helped me to reach deeper into the wisdom of hope for the salvation of all.

* Transl. by A. Muranty.

1. Eschatological sophiology of Thomas Merton

A few years ago it came to me as a surprise to discover that there had been a point in Thomas Merton's life when he derived his eschatological intuitions from reflections on the Catholic feast of the Visitation of Our Lady, "Day of Wisdom" (2 July). This truth relating to the cult of the Virgin Mary became for him a starting point for reflections whose depth I had had no inkling of. In his spiritual experience this American mystic finds the flawless primal beginning of every human being. For him it constitutes a mysterious *le point vierge* – virginal point of all creation's roots in God, free of sin or fall. However, it is not only a starting point, but also a target, something like a house made of light, where every human being is to return after their pilgrimage. What the mystic discovers to his astonishment and gratitude, is that the beginning finds its counterpart in the final fulfilment. At the end of the pilgrimage everything will be pure, innocent, and unblemished again. This is the basic intuition of Merton's hope for universal salvation.

What is this "virginal point" of all being? In the very centre of humanity the American Trappist discovers the miracle of pure truth, primeval receptivity of created being, the divine spark that belongs to God entirely. It is not our property. We are not free to dispose of it as we wish. The pure and unblemished glory of the Creator is reflected in the very centre of humanity. We are utterly poor on our own. God enters our lives where, despite many falls, there still shines the pure truth of creativity and receptivity.

In this respect Merton's vision reminds me of the sophiology of Russian philosophers and theologians (W. Soloviov, S. Bulgakov). He too, develops a distinctive sophiology of creation. Every human being is, to his eyes, a reflection of divine wisdom – *Hagia Sophia*, which radiates incredible inner beauty. It is not the showy wisdom of the world, but the unblemished, quiet, inner truth of every creation that had been made by the hand of God. Divine wisdom penetrates the whole creation from its beginning to the end. Therefore it is not surprising that, following the great prophets of Israel – Isaiah and Hosea, Merton discovers maternal features in God, the primal source of all purity and innocence of creation. In his reflections appears a biblical image of Wisdom "playing on the surface of his earth" (Prv 8, 31) before the face of Creator. What is Divine Wisdom? The answer, included in the poem devoted to "The Holy Wisdom" (*Hagia Sophia*), is as follows:

> Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. She is the inexhaustible fountain of kindness, and would almost seem to be, in herself, all mercy. So she does in us a greater work than that of Creation: the work of new being in grace, the work of pardon, the work of transformation from brightness to brightness *tamquam a Domini Spiritu*[1].

This transformation of darkness into light is in itself a paschal event; *pascha* – i.e. a passage of creation into another dimension of being. This act of transformation from "brightness to brightness", "from glory to glory", worked by "the Lord who is the Spirit" is a clear reference to the Apostle Paul's writings (2 Cor 3,18). Merton's vision of transformation allows one to see that everything is suffused with glory, brightness, tender goodness and the mercy of God. The very first words of the poem confirm this:

> There is in all visible 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*[2].

It is Wisdom which can be compared to sunlight: "The Sun burns in the sky like the Face of God [...] His light is diffused in the air and the light of God is diffused by Hagia Sophia"[3]. Wisdom is for everyone, without exception. There is no passivity in it whatsoever. We recognise it by its actions. It is "the candor of God's light"[4], a sign of His simplicity, mercy and forgiveness.

> Thus Wisdom cries out to all who will hear (*Sapientia clamitat in plateis*) and she cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and the helpless[5].

The heart of the matter is that "we do not hear mercy", "we do not hear the uncomplaining pardon"[6]. We do not comprehend God who "is at once Father and Mother":

[1] Th. Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 369.

[2] Ibidem, p. 363.

[3] Ibidem, p. 366.

[4] Ibidem, p. 365.

[5] Ibidem, p. 364.

[6] Ibidem, p. 365.

> 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. We call her His "glory". In Sophia His power is experienced only as mercy and as love.[7]

At this point Merton calls on the tradition of "the recluses of fourteenth--century England", mainly Julian of Norwich, who called Jesus "our Mother"[8]. He adds: "It was Sophia that had awakened in their childlike hearts". He attempts to describe it in insufficient human terms:

> Perhaps in a certain very primitive aspect Sophia is the unknown, the dark, the nameless Ousia. Perhaps she is even the Divine Nature, One in Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And perhaps she is in 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.[9]

An awareness of the boundaries of human consciousness is clearly discernible here. In Eastern tradition this attitude is known as apophatism. How else can one speak of "the Nameless Beginning, without Beginning", which we haven't seen? We know only the manifestations of God's deeds. We multiply words without reaching the inner depths of the Unspeakable Reality. A mystic is no exception in this respect. He struggles with the words, too. *Hagia Sophia* is a Gift, God's Life shared with the creatures, self-sharing Love and Brightness, which transform and unify all.

> Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, *Donum Dei*. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift. God is all and God reduced to Nothing: inexhaustible nothingness. *Exinanivit semetipsum*.[10]

[7] Ibidem, p. 367.

[8] In middle ages it can bee seen particularly in Cistercian abbots (St. Bernard, Guerric d'Igny, Isaac de Stella), who in this manner understood their duty towards the monastic community entrusted them. Cf. C. Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1982. More on this subject in: W. Hryniewicz, *Chrześcijaństwo nadziei. Przyszłość wiary i duchowości chrześcijańskiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002, pp. 299-303.

[9] *Hagia Sophia*, p. 367.

[10] Ibidem, p. 368.

The last words express kenotic wisdom showing through Christ's mystery: "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself (lit. ἑαυτὸν ἐκένοσεν), taking the form of the slave..." (Phil 2, 6-7). Expressed in the language of emptiness, Paul's brilliant intuition about God who in Christ gave up His divinity, found unique expression in Merton's mystical reflections. The language of completeness suggests power, glory and richness. The language of emptiness expresses the mystery of God's coming to man through the reversed motion, not by completeness, but by emptying and self-restriction. It is the language of love and invitation to take part in the celebration of unity with God. This is why the motif of the Wedding Feast plays such an important role in Merton's poem.

For him Christ's Mother is the created being which reveals all that is hidden within Divine Sophia – which is why she can be said to be "a personal manifestation of Sophia, Who in God is *Ousia* rather than Person"; "perfect Creature, perfectly Redeemed, the Fruit of all God's great power, the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy"[11]. It is she who gives The Divine Logos "the crown" of His human nature.

> She crowns him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty. She sends the infinitely Rich and Powerful One forth as poor and helpless, in His mission of inexpressible mercy, to die for us on the Cross[12].

Thus once more do we turn to a kenotic vision of God's Wisdom. This is the greatest appeal to human freedom. Through reflection on the mystery of God's Wisdom as revealed in the person of Mary a mystic achieves deeper insight into the mystery of humanity and interpersonal solidarity. The figure of the sinless Mother of Christ, herself a part of the immemorial plan of Divine Wisdom, make this view even deeper. A conviction that w e

[11] Ibidem, p. 370.

[12] Ibidem, p. 370. See also S. McCaslin, *Merton and „Hagia Sophia" (Holy Wisdom)* in: *Merton and Hesychasm. The Prayer of the Heart*, ed. by B. Dieker and J. Montaldo, Louisville, Kentucky: Fons vitae, 2004, pp. 235-254.

are all one[13] deepens. Soloviov spoke of a mysterious "all-unity' (*vseedinstvo*) of the world. Merton is more specific. He experiences this unity "suddenly", even in the crowd of people, in the very centre of a busy district in Louisville. He recognizes that all people are a sign of Divine Wisdom. He perceives the incredible beauty and shy dignity that shine through them, even though they cannot know who they really are:

> . . . I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation. . . .
>
> Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*.[14]

Now let us go back to the basic intuition – there is something divine, pure and unblemished in human beings. Traditional Christian anthropology speaks of the image of God present in man. For a mystic man is a real and touchable icon of God, which cannot be lost. Experiencing this truth is a gift, difficult to put into words – "pure truth", "a point or spark which belongs entirely to God", a centre "which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will", "pure glory of God in us". It is precisely this centre of humanity that, according to Merton, is out of reach of sin (" untouched by sin"), not at our disposal, but instead remaining independent and indestructible in a truly Divine way.

> But this cannot be seen, only believed and "understood" by a peculiar gift. [...] It is, so to speak, His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our

[13] This conviction is also visible in reflections of a contemporary theologian, Leonardo Boff (*Welche Hoffnung haben wir?*, in: *Kirche In* 16: 2002 no. 9, p. 48) about hope: "Alles hängt mit allem zusammen und wir alle sind unter- und voneinander abhängig". Since we are connected with everyone and everything, even a small gesture may cause a great process of change in human history.

[14] Th. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, New York: Image Books, 1968, pp. 156, 158.

> sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of the sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.[15]

In these reflections one may find three phrases very typical of all mystics. Untouched and "virginal point" of humanity becomes a "point of nothingness" and a symbol of extreme poverty in comparison to the Creator of all. One mustn't lose heart because of such paradoxical terminology. Our human "nothingness" is capable of receiving the whole mystery of heaven, which is present everywhere, in man and in the whole nature. The divine primal beginning of creation reveals the miracle of His Wisdom. To come into being – is to go from nothingness to being. Divine beginning connotes the constant fact of originating from Creator. That is where the beginning is unblemished, pure and free of sin. Man is a creation conceived by God in His image. It applies to every human being with no exception. Everyone carries this divine beginning in the innermost depths of being, even though he may not realize it. It resembles an Orthodox theologian – Sergius Bulgakov's, category of "certain saint anamnesis", the concept of "ontological remembering", ontological memory inscribed in the depths of being by the fact of originating from God.[16]

For Merton the truth about the beginning is at the same time the truth about the end of human history. It is connected with hope that the end of human existence will be in accordance with the divine beginning, not defiled by the erring of created freedom. Such a beginning is a herald and a promise of good end. Merton refers to words of Julian of Norwich: *Sin must needs be. But all shall be well*, to which we will return shortly.

A certain inevitability of sin results from freedom. Sin does not thwart hope. Quite the opposite, it encourages hope that God knew what he was doing when he bestowed this dramatic gift of free decision on man. This is His "secret", which we will know only at the end of human history, when God's mercy will unreservedly shine with the ultimate coming of Christ. Hope is a "key that opens our lives" towards the good fulfilment of human history. Christ is the key and hope. Merton speaks of "a wise heart that

[15] Ibidem, p. 158.

[16] S. Bulgakov, *Nevesta Agnca. O bogočelovečtve*, čast' III, Paríž 1945, 574: *"ontologičeskoe vospominanie", "nekij svaščennyj anamnezis"*.

persists in hope among contradiction". From this modern mystic's mouth we find out about wisdom that comes from the heart and wholehearted cognition. Thanks to hope and wisdom of heart Christianity recovers its universal nature. It is a religion of encouragement, trust, and overwhelming compassion.

2. *Universality of compassion*

The mystic's faith has liberating powers. He does not disrespect the question of truth. Yet he speaks of it in a way that emanates the spirit of tolerance, sympathy and understanding.

> Ghandi once asked: "How can he who thinks he possesses absolute truth be fraternal?"
>
> Let us be frank about it: the history of Christianity raises this question again and again.
>
> . . . God has revealed himself to men in Christ, but he has revealed Himself first of all as love. Absolute truth is then grasped as love. . . . Only he who loves can be sure that he is still in contact with the truth, which is in fact too absolute to be grasped by his mind. Hence, he who holds to the gospel truth is afraid that he may lose the truth by a failure of love, not by a failure of knowledge. In that case he is humble, and therefore he is wise[17].

Those words are a meaningful indication of the indissoluble bond between truth and love. Christ's figure appears in them as an impersonation of truth and love. True wisdom goes together with humility and consideration. Truth is too great for us to comprehend it with our minds. In his further words this modern mystic formulates a warning of the temptation of imposing own limited truth on others.

> Knowledge expands a man like a balloon, and gives him a precarious wholeness in which he thinks that he holds himself all the dimensions of a truth the totality of which is denied to others. . . . How can he "love" others, he thinks, except by imposing on them the truth which they would otherwise insult and neglect? This is temptation[18].

[17] *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 44.

[18] Ibidem.

Merton returned to the same subject once more in *The Asian Journal*. He reminded us that the cultivation of inner awareness involves a danger of self-deception. Our inner, subjective sense may easily turn out to be degeneration. One must not make it an ultimate criterion of judgment.

> In other words, the standard temptation of religious . . . people is to cultivate an inner sense of rightness . . . and make this subjective feeling the final test of everything. As long as this feeling of rightness remains with them, they will do anything under the sun. But this inner feeling (as Auschwitz and the Eichmann case have shown) can coexist with the ultimate in human corruption[19].

In the name of propagated watchwords one may perform actions that are inhuman to the highest degree. It follows that subjective process of getting to know oneself has to be continually confronted not only with judgment of one's own conscience, but also with experience and judgement of others. Truth and love are inseparable. We need others so that we are not deceived by our sense of being in the right.

While discovering unity and solidarity with all people, mystics opt for the side of compassion and mercy. Capacity for compassion for others is a crucial quality in the ethos of universal kindness and positively understood tolerance. Mystics are able to learn compassion. They are not ashamed of this lesson. It is particularly evident in Merton's case. For two years preceding his death he had kept a lively correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether, a writer and a professor of theology.[20] In his letter of July 17th, 1967 he wrote her about poverty as "the eschatological lot" and the illusory promises of eliminating poverty in the world that are being made. Since this poverty cannot be overcome, he perceives yet another eschatological perspective: "to destroy the wicked society that is so full of contradictions"[21]. In the same letter Merton goes on to write:

> But the thing is, I think, to realize that this country is under judgment (it is Assyria, no?), and no matter where we go or what we do, we remain Assyrians who are under judgment.

[19] Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, p. 352.

[20] Cf. *At Home in the World. The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. by Mary Tardiff, OP, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1995.

[21] Ibidem, p. 83.

> I think we have to start from there. Do you agree? And if so, what is it? What does it mean? The Nineties fixed it by putting hairshirts on everyone including the cats and dogs. Is this practical? (Purely rhetorical question).[22]

Three days later, in her letter of July 20th, 1967 Rosemary reacts to this startling directive: "Destroy the evil society? or redeem the evil society? I am one of those mad Origenists who believe that when God is all in all, even the last enemy Satan will be redeemed. I believe in giving everyone, even the dogs, not hair shirts (which they already have), but flower power, baby".[23]

In further correspondence Merton did not refer to these words of Rosemary. They were consistent with his own spiritual sensitivity. "Great compassion" he mentions at the beginning of *The Asian Journal*[24] did not became his share until his journey to Asia, when he was standing in front of the Buddha statues carved in rock. One of them presented a seated Buddha in lotus position – one hand pointing to the ground and holding a begging bowl in the other.

> Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as in exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . Everything is compassion. . . . I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for.[25]

In the talk he delivered in Bangkok on December 10th, 1968, the day of his unexpected death, Merton explained this discovery as follows:

> The begging bowl of the Buddha represents . . . the ultimate theological root of the belief not just in a right to beg, but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all beings . . . which are all involved in one another.[26]

[22] Ibidem, pp. 84-85.

[23] Ibidem, p. 86.

[24] *The Asian Journal*, p. 4: "And found also the great compassion, mahakaruna".

[25] Th. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999, p. 323.

[26] *The Asian Journal*, pp. 341-2.

Christian teaching about salvation can be experienced and passed on in spirit of dialogue with other religions. However, first of all we have to acknowledge the universality of God's saving power and respect it in other people's distinctiveness. Every religion is a way to salvation. All together, they are, each in its way, mediators in attaining God and salvation. In such an approach Christian identity is not harmed in the least. What is more, it becomes open, tolerant and capable of dialogue. For Christians Christ is the most distinct sign of God's universal saving will, acting through all creation, in all places and at all times. He achieves it by means of the inspiriting and transforming power of the Holy Spirit, which incessantly prompts people to search for goodness, beauty, and truth. Christians bear witness to their faith and at the same time ought to stay open to the witness of others. In this way it is possible to discover new, more complete, features of the invisible face of God.

Doesn't such dialogue serve a deeper experiencing of one's own religious life? The Second Vatican Council instructs "by His incarnation the Son of God united himself with every man to a certain extent" and that "the Holy Spirit offers an opportunity to attain participation in paschal mystery to everyone, in a way known to God."[27]

None of us can appropriate the gift of the salvation to himself, his own Church, or his own religion. It is a truly sovereign and divine gift. Although the teachings of the Second Vatican Council concerning various spheres of being a part of God's People do not suggest that all ways to salvation are equal, they present an opportunity to view this question in a manner that is free of confessional narrowing and exclusiveness. In comparison with the past it is a great breakthrough in thinking, which we must not overlook. In conclusion to the lecture he gave on the day of his death Merton said:

> And I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions, because they have gone, from the natural point of view, so much deeper into this than we have. The combination of the natural techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals – and mere this or that.[28]

[27] *Gaudium et spes*, p. 22.

[28] *The Asian Journal*, p. 343.

3. Universality of hope in the writings of an English mystic.

Reflection on the mystic's language proves extremely instructive. Set against Merton's writings, those of Julian of Norwich (14th c.) deserve special attention[29]. The American mystic must have been well acquainted with them. Their language is dramatic, particularly when it is dealing with difficult matters connected with human guilt, suffering, evil and sin.

Sin in human history

The English mystic wrote in an astonishingly courageous way, using the kind of language, which not only proved a deep intuition of her faith-enlightened intellect, but also showed heart and feeling. Such language was used to write the following apostrophe to sin, which is full of poetic expression. It expresses anxiety and yet hopes that God will prove to be more powerful than the terrifying power of evil.

Ah, wretched sin! What art thou?
Thou art naught.
For I saw that God is all thing;
I saw not thee.
And when I saw that God has made all thing
I saw thee not.
And when I saw that God is in all thing
I saw thee not,
And when I saw that God does all thing that is done, small and great,
I saw thee not.
And when I saw our Lord sit in our soul
so worshipfully,
and love and like, rule, and care for all that He has made,
I saw not thee.
Thus I am sure that thou art naught,
and all those who love thee and like thee and follow thee
and wilfully end in thee,

[29] Julian of Norwich, *Showings*. Translated from the critical text with an introduction by E. Colledge, OSA and James Walsh SJ, Mahwah, New Jersey 1987, pp. 123-70 (The Short Text), pp. 173-343 (The Long Text). The short version consists of 25 chapters, the long one of 86. Numbers of particular chapters of either version quoted will be given in brackets.

I am sure they shall be brought to naught with thee and endlessly
confounded.
God shield us all from thee!
So be it, for God's love (XXIII).[30]

This apostrophe to sin, which survived only in the short version of *The Showings* is an appeal addressed not so much to reason, but above all to heart and feeling. It might have been written during an intensive spiritual experience. The reader's attention is riveted by its opening words. Each of the five parallel statements ends with the chorus: "I saw thee not" or "I saw not thee". The latter verbal form, of long cadence, appears at the beginning and the end of the whole series of parallel statements, which proves a remarkable mastery of language. The piling of accumulated sentences strengthens the intensity of experience, and in the end gives rise to the feeling of contempt for the nothingness of sin. The final, somewhat longer choral cadence leads to the quieter rhythm of the second part of the apostrophe. Yet in that part too, the part expressing human state of being embroiled in evil and sin, there is visible a similar gradual increase of content; it ends in being "brought to naught" and "endlessly confounded". After such an outburst of emotion the final invocation to God is an expression of hope for the rescuing power of His goodness and love.

Julian does not say that sin doesn't exist. On the basis of her inner experience she merely claims that it is "nought". It doesn't have its own, independent being, but is like a parasite on good. It cannot be the final and perpetual state of the world that God would be helpless against. These thoughts bear a vivid resemblance to what in 4th century St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote about evil.[31]

Seeing everything in God, the mystic doesn't perceive sin in the ultimate shape of the world (XXVII). Its existence is temporary and passing. Although it does deform God's image in man, it doesn't destroy it or replace it with a new and self-contained image of evil. We still remain beings created

[30] *A Shewing of God's Love: The Shorter Version of Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. by A. M. Reynolds, CP, London, 1958.

[31] Cf. Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford, Oxford Univeristz Press, 2000, pp. 86-89; W. Hryniewicz. *Gehenna i nadzieja...* in: *Nadzieja uczy inaczej*, Warszawa, Verbinum, 2003, pp. 142-154.

in God's image, which is always a reality both good and beautiful. By his suffering and death Christ defeated the greatest incorporation of evil (the longer version, XIII). Sin is neither the first nor the last characteristic of a human being, because it will cease in the end, just like Jesus' suffering ended in the joy of the Resurrection (LXXV).

This is a truly paschal attitude of Julian's profound optimism, and at the same time a source of her hope that sin and evil can be overcome in creation, and all goodness salvaged. Sin is the cause of suffering, but ultimately "all will be well" (XXVII). In *The Showings* one can find a number of other traces of a composed view on evil and sin, present both in the history of salvation and in every person's life. A conviction of unlimited goodness of God, of necessity for human erring and its place in the plans of Divine Providence is continually finding expression in them. The reality of sin is inseparable from freedom of creation. However, God's goodness does not remain helpless and idle.

> For wickedness has been suffered to rise in opposition to that goodness; and the goodness of mercy and grace opposed that wickedness, and turned everything to goodness and honour for all who will be saved. For this is that property in God which opposes good to evil. (LIX)

In Julian's words one can sense the wisdom that is sympathetic to man, cheerful and profound. They make one think of the way St. Isaac the Syrian spoke about sin in the 7th century: "As a handful of sand thrown into the great sea, so are the sins of all flesh in comparison with the mind of God. And just as a strongly flowing spring is not obstructed by a handful of dust, so the mercy of the Creator is not stemmed by the vices of His creatures."[32]

Julian's understanding of sin stems from her overall view of the history of salvation. It is a consequence of God's vision and His attitude to the world. To a certain extent it resembles some of the thoughts expressed by St. Ireneus of Lyon centuries ago. And so, sin – although in itself certainly worthy of contempt – is perceived by the English mystic as a sign of unfulfilment and immaturity in the process of the moulding of humanity. This is why she doesn't speak of damnation, since damnation alone doesn't lead to healing and rescuing. Jesus Christ, our Saviour, cares about the healing of

[32] "Homily 51", *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Trans. The Holy Transfiguration Monastery. Boston, Mass., 1984, 244.

his children like a mother. Being hurt by sin only strengthens the caring love of God. It is a truly maternal love, no situation or predicament or suffering can leave it indifferent. If God condemned, He would leave man to his own devices. It would mean that he gives up the possibility to heal his wounds, which he had sustained as a result of his own failings. God's ways indicate something quite contrary – He heals the wounds of sin with his own love, most completely revealed in Christ. Acquaintance with the writings of the hermit from Norwich teaches this kind of calm perception of God and of the history of His mercy in people's lot.

"All will be well"

Intuitions of the English mystic are too important to pass them by indifferently, without deeper understanding. Julian does not exaggerate human sin. She knows that Christ is like a mother full of compassion, mercy and patience, that he can bear human sins and unfaithfulness. Let no man think that everything is lost and ruined! The author of *Showings* does not hesitate to write about the certain necessity of human falls. Indeed, she encourages understanding this necessity:

> And when we fall, quickly he raises us up with his loving embrace and his gracious touch. And when we are strengthened by his sweet working, then we willingly chose him by his grace, that we shall be his servants and his lovers, constantly and forever. (LXI)

Full comprehension will be possible only in the next life. Despite the presence of sin in our lives we will then see that it wasn't successful in its attempts to deprive us of God's love, or lessen our worth in His eyes. Experience of the fall will become the source of incessant comprehension of the inconceivable goodness of God. People's failings will not lessen His love. We are learning humility on our own, by seeing our falls and our smallness. However man must see and recognize his own fault. Without it the fall could not be a reason for humility and gratitude. God's mercy also means the fall does not become an irrevocable situation. As she writes in the shorter version of *The Showings*: "God showed me that sin is no shame, but honour to man"(XVII). In these words we hear a distant echo of the astonishing message of the Church on the paschal night: "Adam's sin was indeed necessary! Oh, the happy guilt!" We are faced with great paradox: "wretched sin" she wrote about in the apostrophe can become "blessed guilt".

Neither the fall nor sin are the centre of human history, it is the person of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected, who is the very core of paschal Christian faith. In the face of the greatness of Redemption the Easter *Exultet* praises Adam's "happy guilt": *"O felix culpa!"* One cannot think about sin while forgetting the patient and forgiving love of God for sinful people. The power of grace is stronger than sin. "Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more".[33] A Christian must not think about human guilt, even the greatest, as if God stopped loving a sinful man.

The theological vision of the Norwich hermit, close to the liturgical joyful call *O felix culpa*, demonstrates her spiritual effort to penetrate into the Christian mystery. Her bold thinking was one of the reasons why *Showings* haven't been widely recognised for the past centuries. Julian confesses that she had been reflecting on the sense of the existence of sin. She asked herself the question why God, in His far-sighted wisdom, didn't prevent the possibility of sinning. It seemed to her that if he did, all would be well. Yet in one of the revelations Christ answered as follows:

> Sin must needs be. [...]
> But all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.
> (XIII, shorter version)[34]

We have also been assured that Christ "very tenderly" spoke these words, with no reproaches addressed to sinful people: "So I saw that Christ has compassion on us because of sin". Every act of human compassion is a part of His compassion for all. Feminine sensitivity, previously centred on compassionate brooding on His suffering, is now transferred onto all "fellow Christians". In her experience sin emerges as nothingness, negation of being, self-annihilation of a kind. Mysterious words of Christ's promising that "All shall be well" brighten her view of the enormity of evil and sin in the world. Her thought is directed towards the work of salvation, whose power is incomparably greater than that of sin. Man isn't capable of seeing through the mystery of God's inconceivable intent. He is preparing a surprise for us on the other side of life, which for now remains unknown to us. Christ assures Julian:

[33] Rom 5, 20.

[34] XIII. The phrase "All shall be well" appears also in other chapters (XIV, XV, XVI) of the shorter version.

> I will make all things well.
> I shall make all things well.
> I may make all things well,
> and I can make all things well.
> And thou shalt see thyself that all things shall be well.
> (XV, shorter version)

The last sentence Julian refers not to herself, but to the whole of mankind, which will be saved by the power of the Holy Trinity. God has mercy on us and manifests His compassion. He wants us to live in peace of mind. He doesn't want human distress. One day everyone will be saved by the joy of Christ and the fullness of His happiness. This happiness isn't full yet, as long as we are not with Him, as the long as history of this world is still happening (this thought was very dear to Origen). For many years Julian was pondering on Christ's promise that He will "make all things well". She rejoices in the promise and waiting for this mysterious and glorious deed of God on the last day. Her revelations did not show what that deed will be or how it will be accomplished. Human inquisitiveness is good for nothing!

At this point Julian's spiritual experience clashes with traditional Church teaching about damnation and hell. What does she mean by "All things shall be well"? How is it possible? How to reconcile the teachings about hell with the spiritual experience of God's mercy and compassion for human flaws?

> And to this I had no other answer as a revelation from our Lord except this: What is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall preserve my word in everything, and I shall make everything well. (XXXII)

This is why one must trust the promise. Julian wants to be faithful both to Christ's word and Church teachings. She is perpetually in the state of inner dilemma, or rather tension, suspension and waiting. Some interpreters have wondered if she can be rated among supporters of the universality of salvation. Not surprisingly, opinions differ.[35] She couldn't have declared a

[35] R. Llewelyn, *With Pity not with Blame. The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich and the Cloud of Unknowing for Today*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982; *Love Bade me Welcome*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1984; Grace M. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, London: Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 178-9.

different view if she wanted to be faithful to the Church teachings. She remained in the sphere of hope that the appealing force of God's love and mercy, which reaches even into the depths of hell will triumph in the end; that all people will turn to Him of their own free will.

One shouldn't attribute a Julian the d o c t r i n e of universal salvation. However, one cannot help noticing her h o p e for the eventual victory of good in the whole of creation. She repeatedly stresses that in God there is no anger or will to punish – those are against His nature. He only wishes to help us and heal our will:

> I saw truly that our Lord was never angry, and never will be. Because he is God, he is good, he is truth, he is love, he is peace; and his power, his wisdom, his charity and his unity do not allow him to be angry. [...] God is goodness, which cannot be angry, for God is nothing but goodness. (XLVI).

Anger as an opposite of love, goodness, peace and wisdom is not only on our human side. God perceives us as united with Christ. If he had been angry but for one instant His anger would have annihilated our life (LXIX). In fact His "sweet eye of pity is never turned away from us, and the operation of mercy does not cease" (XLVIII). It is this mercy that will accomplish the great deed of universal healing, although we don't know how this will happen.

We can only hope, together with Julian, that the promise conveyed by the words "all things shall be well" will be one day fulfilled, to the great astonishment of the whole world. She admits that those words, revealed to her by Christ, became her great consolation. There is a great power of inner experience concealed in this unique witness. Its main features are spiritual sobriety, economy of words, moderation and humility. No trace of pointless curiosity! "It is God's will that you should know in general that all will be well, but it is not God's will that we should know it now except as it applies to us for the present..." (XV shorter version). The foundation of this exceptional hope is all God's creation already completed, which at the same time is a herald of what God will yet do to the sheer astonishment of all. "For just as the blessed Trinity created everything from nothing, just so the same blessed Trinity will make well all things that are not well"(XV).

The singularity of standpoint of this 14th century hermit stands out against a background of folk piety of her times. It was a piety inspired by the

fear of God, punishment, death and hell, not by the view of God who loves all people and all creatures. Whereas Julian often stresses the great goodness and tenderness of Christ in the process of man's development. Reference to mind and heart help her to understand the inner content of this development in a more profound way. It is Christ himself who stimulates intellect and enlightens heart. It is He who opens the path to cognition of God, which is always partial on this earth. The goal of this cognition is to awaken the capacity of love for everything that God loves and what He does in order to save people.

The hermit of Norwich was astonished to discover God's presence in all that exists. Analogy with maternity made her connect this presence with His goodness, tenderness and subtlety. Julian's God wishes to be trusted by man, particularly when he experiences his sinfulness. "And though our earthly mother may suffer her child to perish, our heavenly mother Jesus may never suffer us who are his children to perish, for he is almighty, all wisdom and all love, and so is none but he, blessed may he be" (LXI).

These words seem to be an echo of what, centuries ago, prophet Isaiah had said: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you".[36] In another place this same prophet says: "My burden since your birth, whom I have carried from your infancy. Even to your old age I am the same, even when your hair is grey I will bear you; it is I who have done this, I who will continue, and who will carry you to safety".[37]

Julian realizes very well that the immensity of human guilt may frighten and arouse a feeling of shame. Nevertheless escape from God does not lead to anywhere. This is when a child-like attitude is most needed – a child who trusts its mother and turns to her for help regardless of how big its fault may be. It is precisely in this context that the contemplative of Norwich uses the phrase that seems to be a paraphrase of the liturgical *Kyrie eleison*. The innovation of the new version consists, among others, in that it had been formulated under the influence of sensitivity for motherly care and love of Christ: "My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my beloved Mother, have mercy on me"(LXI). In Julian's mouth this prayer is a call for help. The sense of fall and loss of likeness to God induces her to even greater trust in Him,

[36] Is 49,15.

[37] Is 46, 3-4.

who, in His compassion and mercy, cares for the lost like a loving mother. It is Him who purifies and heals. "It is his office to save us, it is his glory to do it, and it is his will that we know it; for he wants us to love him sweetly and trust him meekly and greatly"(LXI).

4. Universality of salvation – liberation for open identity

An exclusiveness in understanding salvation and the authenticity of one's own religion is one of the motives leading to most obstinate persistence in narrow and closed religious identity. It is also one of the main sources of the historical phenomenon of intolerance and modern fundamentalism.

We live in times when many people, perhaps weary of conflicts, uncertainty and multiplicity of discrepant views start turning towards fundamentalism, integrism and sectarianism. It applies not only to Christian Churches, but also to other religions. Each of the above-mentioned phenomena has its own hue of meaning, which expresses a certain mentality in the field of faith and convictions. A common feature of attitudes described by these terms is, in the field of religion, a tendency to think of one's viewpoint as absolute, which goes together with a trend towards disqualification of the faith and convictions of other people. At the root of this mentality is a suspicion that another man is completely in the wrong, that he is unfaithful and all he deserves is damnation.

The concept of damnation itself ("non-salvation") takes on a tangible usefulness. All those who do not share my faith, do not belong to my Church or my religious community are sent to hell. God loves only the righteous people of my community. We are the chosen ones, we are faithful to God. He will save us and damn all the others. We do not need dialogue, tolerance, and a common search for truth. The truth is ours. There are no important and less important things, major and minor. There is no alternative to the truth we pronounce. We are forced to accept it under threat of damnation...

Those are only a few features characteristic of a closed mentality, inspired by the sense of exclusivity, self-efficiency and fear of others. It has often happened in the course of history that hell was filled with innumerable sinners, infidels, pagans, Jews, atheists and all other kinds of enemies. In the past also Christian Churches have judged one another in this way, governed by a conviction that salvation is only in one of them – only in my Church.

A soteriological universality of hope for everyone frees us of that kind of attitude, inspired by hidden exclusivist thinking. Universal salvation carries great therapeutic potential. It is the cure for temptation to appropriate the gift of salvation to one's own religious community. Such hope becomes an uncommon ally of identity that is open, tolerant and accepts dissimilarity. A duty to expect salvation for all may then become an eschatological motive for loving people and caring about their ultimate lot.

Such hope demands an open, tolerant identity, full of understanding for others. Open identity serves best inter-personal communication. The deepest form of communication does not take place on a verbal level. It goes beyond the area of words and concepts. It is a communion of persons, a community where there is plenty of place for otherness and diversity. Authentic communication is communicating on the deepest level of awareness, both human and religious. It requires spiritual maturity without which understanding of identity will remain superfluous and will not influence the shaping of relations between people in any significant way.

5. Is it worth it to read mystics today?

Mystics' faith is a liberating one. They are capable of descending into the depths of human misery and destitution. That is why they speak about nothingness. At the same time they detect in man a fragment of a great wholeness. They discover unity and solidarity with all people. They understand that human tragedy is the tragedy of God. That is where they learn compassion and mercy. In Merton's case this lesson of compassion is particularly important. In a way he married it, just like St. Francis married poverty.

Nevertheless, going back to the great, and often forgotten, witnesses of the past is certainly worthwhile. Julian of Norwich, a woman blessed with extraordinary religious intuition and subtlety of feeling was able to fathom the greatest truths of Christian religion intuitively. She remained the child of her times, and country, solemn and practical, not without a sense of humour, great of heart and mind. While perusing pages of her writings I had an impression that today we all need such witness and such wisdom of a loving, intelligent, and sensitive heart. Religious faith

is a matter concerning the whole man. It cannot be reduced to the area of reason alone, just as on the other hand, it cannot involve only feelings and emotions. A healthy religiousness requires a challenging synthesis of mind and heart. Julian's witness helps us to understand what that harmonious synthesis of man's greatest spiritual endowments consists in. It is true that at present both religion of the heart and religion of the mind are equally threatened by modern scepticism, indifferentism and secularism. Many people suppose that neither the heart nor the mind have anything to say in matters of faith. One must not remain indifferent to this phenomenon. Nowadays Christianity demands an effort at deepening and expressing anew what is most bold and puzzling in it. It mustn't happen only on the level of discursive reasoning. A Christian appreciates mind as God's gift, but he doesn't worship it.

Mystics are a good case in point to illustrate that the powers of the human intellect aren't based only on the logic of reasoning. Rather it is a spiritual capability to penetrate into the mysteries of faith. It is not by chance that in Julian's writings there often appears a phrase that she had found an answer to her question "in her understanding", thanks to the "eyes of spirit", in spiritual contemplation, inseparable from the wisdom of heart. This wisdom requires an ability to listen, sensitivity to goodness and beauty.

Other things we can learn from the mystics today are the sense of fraternity and solidarity with all people, as well as compassion for their misery and bringing them help. Their faith has become a "wisdom of heart". At the same time it is hope, which teaches cheerful optimism in accepting life and reaching out to meet the Invisible.

Is it worth it to read the mystics? A careful reading of the writings of Julian of Norwich and Merton makes it clear that hope for salvation was a familiar theme for them. Merton found it in his own unique way, by means of a sophiological view of the history of creation. A good beginning heralds a good end – not only in the Mother of Christ, but also in all people. It is hope that in the mystery, which is hidden from us, there will shine "an eternally new beginning that has no end". He, who is the God of Beginning, is also the God of hope and mercy, more powerful than fragile human hope.

Deep intuition of faith coupled with her feminine sensitivity allowed Julian of Norwich to distinguish motherly features in the love of Christ,

the Saviour of all. It is from this motherly love God has for people, that arises hope that all the lost will be rescued. God isn't governed by the logic of male justice, which demands infinite satisfaction, but above all by the logic of love, mercy and caring. Based on earthly experiences we comprehend this divine logic by means of analogy with the love a mother bestows on her own child. Thus it is easier to perceive that human falls only serve to make God's motherly care and love even grater. This message is particularly distinct in the writings of the medieval English writer.

One of Jesus' eight blessings in the Sermon on the Mount seems to be particularly important in our reflections: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Mt 5,7). Blessing is bestowed on those who are merciful to others. To scandalized Pharisees, who don't understand how the Teacher can eat together with tax collectors and sinners, He says: "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Mt 9,13). Those very words were repeated in the answer He gave to reproaching Pharisees, indignant at the sight of hungry disciples who began to pick grain and eat on the Sabbath (cf. Mt 12,7). The unforgiving debtor from Jesus' parable is punished: "Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?" (Mt 18,33). Mercy appears in the Gospel as a pedagogical rule of universal use. As Luke notes Jesus' words: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6,36). A human merciful attitude is an emulation of God's conduct. This thought had been uniquely expressed already in the 7th century, in the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian.[38]

Mystics are on the side of mercy. They aren't frightened by the abyss of the fall. Their religion is a religion of forgiveness and reconciliation. They are alien to the hellish scenes of Dante's other world, and his appeal to give up all hope (*Lasciate ogni speranza*). They would not agree with the doctrine of eternal hell. They become advocates of hope, which opens the road to noble illumination and the

[38] Cf. W. Hryniewicz, *Dramat nadziei zbawienia*, Warszawa: Verbinum, 1996, pp. 155-60; idem, *Nadzieja uczy inaczej*, Verbinum, Warszawa, 2003, pp. 154-166; idem, *Universalism of Salvation: St. Isaac the Syrian,* in: *Die Wurzel aller Theologie: Sentire cum Ecclesia. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Urs von Arx.* Bern 2003, pp. 139-150.

most precious human initiation possible on this earth. Perhaps this is why mysticism can construct bridges of understanding and harmonious co-existence between religions. It is ecumenical and mystagogical by nature. This is why Julian of Norwich and Thomas Merton are so dear and close to me.

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

THERESA H. SANDOK

THOMAS MERTON'S CONTEMPLATIVE VISION

There is in all visible things an invisible
fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness,
a hidden wholeness.

Thus begins one of Merton's most beautiful and mystical poems, a poem that captures the essence of his contemplative vision. Merton's intuition of the "hidden wholeness" that grounds and connects all things is his deepest spiritual insight and the wellspring of his many and varied works, spiritual and religious, poetic and political. It is also the lens through which he experienced people and events around him, allowing him at times to see through to the truth of things with astonishing clarity.

I wish here to explore Merton's contemplative vision – the what and the how and the why of it – in the hope that this inquiry will throw some light on Merton's spiritual journey and on our own. Merton's insights in this regard flowed out of his living, and they reflect the same dynamic development that we see in his person.

Robert Giroux, Merton's friend and the editor of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), once remarked: "I have known many gifted writers, but none

who developed and grew as fast and as deeply as Merton did."[1] Merton recognized this growth in himself. In a 1966 letter to Robert Menchen, he wrote: "There has been a great deal of change in me, during the course of my monastic life. I would say that my interests have deepened and broadened as time went on. I have become more and more interested in all different forms of religious and monastic experiences... I have also become more deeply concerned with basic issues in the world situation."[2] In the same letter, in response to the question of what advice he would give to someone contemplating a career change, Merton wrote:

> I would say that there is one basic idea that should be kept in mind in all the changes we make in life, whether of career or anything else. We should decide not in view of better pay, higher rank, "getting ahead," but in view of becoming *more real*, entering more authentically into direct contact with life, living more as a free and mature human person, able to give myself more to others, able to understand myself and the world better.[3]

Anyone wishing to explore a particular aspect of Merton's thought is faced with the challenge of dealing with a Merton whose views are continually evolving, never reaching a final and definitive formulation. His views on contemplation are no exception in this regard. At the same time, we can detect certain constants in Merton's approach to contemplation, certain themes that run through his writings and that reappear in ever fresh formulations, in keeping with his own deepening understanding. This paper will focus on a few of the central aspects that characterized Merton's contemplative vision.[4]

Merton's ontological awakening

Merton's insight into the fundamental nature of reality emerged gradually over the course of his life, sparked in 1938 by a chance encounter with

[1] Robert Giroux, *"Seven Storey Mountain" Still Going Strong After Fifty Years*, *Merton Seasonal* 23.1 (1998), p. 6.

[2] Thomas Merton, *To Robert Menchin*, 15 Jan. 1966, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1995, p. 255.

[3] Ibidem.

[4] For another treatment of this topic, see Patrick Hart's introduction to *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981, pp. 1-13.

Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. Merton was a graduate student at Columbia University at the time. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he described how he came upon the book and the revolutionary effect it had on his life.[5]

Gilson's text introduced Merton to the Catholic concept of God's Being as *aseitas*. "In this one word," wrote Merton, "which can be applied to God alone, and which expresses His most characteristic attribute, I discovered an entirely new concept of God....Here was a notion of God that was at the same time deep, precise, simple and accurate and, what is more, charged with implications which I could not even begin to appreciate."[6]

Father George Kilcourse, commenting on this pivotal experience in Merton's life, writes:

> The implications of the discovery that God's very nature was simply "to exist" would lead Merton to a new horizon from which to appreciate God's love for creation, and especially human nature's capacity to participate in a free, loving response to God. From this point on, Merton would be an incurable ontologist, hungering to share the life of this God whose nature it is to exist, to create, and to summon humanity to love. A year before his baptism, ontology was already in the marrow of Merton's Catholic bones.[7]

Merton's ontological awakening played a crucial role in his spiritual development. His whole spiritual life from that point forward was infused with the awareness of God as pure Being. This awareness gave his life and thought a foothold in reality and imbued his writings with a depth that is so often lacking in popular works on spirituality. It also helped him avoid saying foolish things about God and the spiritual life, because he understood that no finite word or concept can adequately capture the infinite mystery of God or our encounter with that profound reality.

The distinguished philosopher Father Mieczysław Krąpiec, OP, whose name is familiar to many in this audience at KUL, makes a very interesting point concerning the value of philosophy to theology and religion when it

[5] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1976, pp. 171-75, 204.

[6] Ibidem 172.

[7] George Kilcourse, *The Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993, p. 50.

comes to talking about God – a point that Merton also grasped. Krąpiec says that philosophy, by means of metaphysical analogy, can disclose for us the necessity of the existence of God as pure Being, but cannot give us access to the inner life of God.[8]

We are able, however, to speak meaningfully of God by means of metaphorical analogy, and revelation is couched primarily in such language. When, for example, we say God is the "Good Shepherd," we transfer to God the normal earthly meaning of this term, but divested of all imperfection and as equivalent to pure Being. The primary value of such religious metaphors, says Krąpiec, lies not in their cognitive content, but in their ability to evoke in us appropriate attitudes and actions in relation to God.[9]

Philosophy, because it reveals the limits of our knowledge of God and shows us the metaphorical nature of our positive assertions about God, prevents us from falling into crass anthropomorphism. Philosophy also helps us avoid embracing notions of God that are inconsistent with God's Being, whose very nature it is to exist.[10]

Merton was aware of these distinctions and observed them in his thinking and writing. Moreover, he appealed to them to help him explain the Christian understanding of God to people of other religious traditions. On one occasion, for example, Merton recommended to his Buddhist friend Daisetz Suzuki that he use the word "analogical" rather than "mythical" when referring to the Christian concept of God. To many readers, said Merton, "mythical" might connote "a kind of conscious and deliberate deception," whereas when we use analogy "we describe something that we do not and cannot know directly, by a reference to something that we do know."[11]

Merton then went on to explain to Suzuki the use of analogy in reference to God: "The terms 'being,' 'power,' 'love,' 'wisdom,' etc., applied to God are all *analogies*. We know what being, power, etc., are in the world of experience, but the things that we thus know are so infinitely far from the

[8] Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, *Metaphysics*, trans. Theresa Sandok, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, p. 477.

[9] Ibidem, p. 484.

[10] See ibidem, pp. 478, 483-485.

[11] Th. Merton, *To Daisetz T. Suzuki*, 24 Oct. 1959, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1993, p. 568.

'being,' etc., of God that it is just as true to say that God is 'no-being' as to say that He is 'being.'"[12] Concluding this brief lesson on analogy, Merton quipped: "I would heartily recommend the use of the words 'analogy' and 'analogical,' as thoroughly acceptable to Christian theologians, while 'mythical' will give them all a fit of apoplexy.[13]

Merton's interest in ontology was stimulated by thoroughly practical concerns, having to do with how to live as an authentic human being, how to enter into dialogue and communion with other human beings, and, how to relate to the ultimate ground of our Being. Anne Carr points out that all of Merton's "many books, essays and poems register the immediacy and concreteness of personal engagement,"[14] and the same can be said of his approach to metaphysical thought.

Merton valued ontology as means for illuminating what he called "metaphysical experience." He was not interested, he said, in "abstract metaphysical systems."[15] The sort of experience Merton has in mind here is captured in a passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: "One who has experienced the baffling, humbling, and liberating clarity of this immediate sense of what it means to *be* has in that very act experienced something of the presence of God. For God is present to me in the act of my own being, an act which proceeds directly from His will and is His gift. My act of being is a direct participation in the Being of God."[16]

Among the many benefits Merton saw to adopting an ontological perspective was its value in facilitating interreligious dialogue, for on the ontological level we all find common ground. In a letter to Zen scholar Masao Abe, Merton specifically recommended including the ontological perspective in the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism:

> I think that one ought also to consider the level of *ontology* (though some would hold there is no such thing). I think the dialogue...will be most fruitful on the plane not of abstract metaphysical systems but on the plane of what I

[12] Ibidem.

[13] Ibidem, p. 568.

[14] Anne E. Carr, Preface, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, New York: Paulist, 1992, p. 6.

[15] Th. Merton, *To Maseo [sic] Abe*, May 12th, 1967, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 332.

[16] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, New York: Doubleday, 1966, p. 201.

> would call metaphysical experience – that is to say, the basic intuition of being, the direct grasp of the ground of reality, which is essential to a true and lived metaphysics.[17]

Merton then expressed his conviction that "the basic metaphysical intuition is close to the kind of religious intuition which opens out into mysticism. On this level I think we come very close to what Buddhism is saying... In Christian metaphysical-and-mystical experience there is something very close to Zen."[18]

Contemplation cannot be taught

> *There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.*
>
> Rumi

One valuable lesson Merton teaches us about contemplation is that it cannot be taught. There is no "how to" manual that will show us how to bring about a contemplative experience of God. Merton says that it is as impossible for one person to teach another how to be a contemplative as it is to teach another how to be an angel.[19]

Why can contemplation not be taught? Because it occurs in a realm that is ultimately beyond our control, the realm of mystery.

Contemplative experience, as the lived experience of God's own self-revelation to us, is a gift. We cannot cause it to occur. "We must realize to the very depths of our being," writes Merton, "that this is a pure gift of God which no desire, no effort and no heroism of ours can do anything to deserve or obtain. There is nothing we can do directly either to procure it or to preserve it or to increase it....At best we can dispose ourselves for the reception of this great gift."[20]

In this regard, the experience of God has something in common with the experience of love between human persons. Human love also occurs in the realm of mystery; we cannot control its emergence. Love between persons

[17] *To Maseo Abe*, p. 332.

[18] Ibidem.

[19] Th. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York: New Directions, 1972.

[20] Ibidem, p. 230.

is a process of mutual self-revelation, a reciprocal giving and receiving of the gift of self. As philosopher Bernard Boelen points out, we do not choose to love; we surrender before it. "Authentic love always comes as a mutual surprise," and strikes us "with a sudden feeling of wonder at the unexpected and overwhelming gift of Self."[21]

"True contemplation," says Merton, "is not a psychological trick but a theological grace. It can come to us *only* as a gift, and not as a result of our own clever use of spiritual techniques."[22] "In the spiritual life there are no tricks and no short cuts."[23] If the experience of God is a gift, and "not something that one can turn on like a light,"[24] then we should be suspicious of all formulas that claim to be able to produce this experience in us. Merton advises us not to look for a method or system, but to "cultivate an 'attitude,' an 'outlook': faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy."[25]

Just as we are unable to control or predict the gift of God's self-revelation to us, we are also unable to dictate the content of that gift. Merton says that we must accept God as God comes to us, in God's own obscurity and silence.[26] We must, as Eckhart says, "let God be God." When we are in the presence of the inexhaustible mystery of Being, we are "beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self."[27] And there, beyond all beings and things, we encounter the ground of our Being, which is itself No-thing!

One of Merton's starkest descriptions of this encounter with the no-thingnesss of Being occurs in *Cables to the Ace*, where he writes:

> *Gelassenheit*: Desert and void. The Uncreated is waste and emptiness to the creature. Not even sand. Not even stone. Not even darkness and night. A burning wilderness would at least be "something." It burns and is wild. But the

[21] Bernard J. Boelen, *Personal Maturity: The Existential Dimension*, New York: Continuum-Seabury, 1978, p. 164.

[22] Th. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, New York: Doubleday, 1996, p. 92.

[23] Ibidem, p. 37.

[24] Th. Merton, *To Mr. Omloo*, 12 Oct. 1965, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 323.

[25] Th. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 34.

[26] Th. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 230.

[27] Ibidem, p. 2.

> Uncreated is no something. Waste. Emptiness. Total poverty of the Creator: yet from this poverty springs everything. The waste is inexhaustible. Infinite Zero. Everything comes from this desert Nothing. Everything wants to return to it and cannot. For who can return "nowhere?" But for each of us there is a point of nowhereness in the middle of movement, a point of nothingness in the midst of being: the incomparable point, not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there. But you must not turn to it. Once you become aware of yourself as seeker, you are lost. But if you are content to be lost you will be found without knowing it, precisely because you are lost, for you are, at last, nowhere.[28]

It is significant, I think, that Merton introduces this passage with the German word *Gelassenheit*, a word reminiscent of the Martin Heidegger's thought, with which Merton was familiar. For Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, or releasement, is the disposition that enables us to receive the gift of Being. Bernard Boelen, elaborating on this theme, says that *Gelassenheit* is the hallmark of the mature personality. All that we have and do in life, says Boelen, will ultimately remain meaningless unless we transcend it all "in a courageous resolve to open up to Being in a creative act of Self-surrender as 'releasement' unto Being."[29] This creative act of Self-surrender is a response to a call that arises from the very depths of our being, where we open up to meaning and Being beyond ourselves. "Here," writes Boelen, "man achieves authentic Self-identity by his courageous resolve to open up to the whole of Being and to allow himself to be led by its cosmic luminosity in which he begins to participate."[30]

In *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Merton appeals to the simple image of a window to describe the letting go and self-emptying necessary to dispose ourselves to receive the gift of Being. A window "is nothing but a hole in the wall, but because of it the whole room is full of light."[31] This, then, is how we dispose ourselves to receive the gift that comes to us in contemplative experience. Merton frequently returns to this theme of the need to let

[28] Th. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, New York: New Directions, 1968, p. 58.

[29] Boelen, p. 125.

[30] Boelen, p. 132.

[31] Th. Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, New York: New Directions, 1969, p. 53.

go of everything, to empty ourselves, to lose ourselves in order to find God and to find ourselves and all things in God.

We have been examining why contemplation cannot be taught from the point of view of the nature of contemplative experience as a gift that is beyond our control to produce at will. There is, however, another significant reason why contemplation cannot be taught, a reason having to do with the nature of the person who is the recipient of this ineffable gift. Here, as everywhere, St. Thomas' old adage applies: whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient (*quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*). As persons, we are each unique and "irreducible," to borrow a favorite term from Karol Wojtyła's philosophy of person.[32] Contemplation, says Merton, is "an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God."[33] Just as no two persons are alike, so, too, no two persons become fully alive and fully themselves in exactly the same way.

Merton's works reflect a deep appreciation for the freedom and uniqueness of human persons in their search for meaning and fulfillment. We see this attitude reflected, for example, in his preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*, where he writes: "These pages...certainly do not pretend to do the reader's thinking for him. On the contrary, they invite him to listen for himself."[34] He offered his thoughts to the world in much the same manner as Herakleitos, of whom Merton wrote: "His words would be neither expositions of doctrine nor explanations of mystery, but simply pointers, plunging toward the heart of reality."[35] What Merton said about

[32] See, for example, Karol Wojtyła's article *Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being*, in: *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, by K. Wojtyła, trans. Theresa Sandok, New York: Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 209-217. *Podmiotowości i 'to, co nieredukowalne' w człowieku*, in: *Ethos* 1.2-3 (1988), pp. 21-28.

[33] Th. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 9.

[34] Th. Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "Thoughts in Solitude"*, in: *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy, New York: Crossroad, 1991, p. 111. This remark sums up Merton's views on the purpose of education in general, a theme he developed more fully in *Learning to Live*, in: *Love and Living*, ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart, New York: Farrar, 1979, pp. 3-14.

[35] Th. Merton, *Herakleitos the Obscure*, in: *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell, New York: Image-Doubleday, 1974, p. 265.

poets in *Raids on the Unspeakable* applies equally to those who would pursue the contemplative life:

> When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving [Heraklitean] river, poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it.
>
> No one can come near the river unless he walks on his own feet. He cannot come there carried in a vehicle.
>
> No one can enter the river wearing the garments of public and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin. He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for the innocent.
>
> Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.[36]

Contemplation is for everyone

> *Every man knows how useful it is to be useful.*
> *No one seems to know*
> *How useful it is to be useless.*
>
> Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*

Søren Kierkegaard once remarked that being an authentic human being is a rare sort of greatness – not because so few are called to it, but because so few achieve it. Merton shared Kierkegaard's view in this regard. He wrote: "We are all called to become fully real... by attaining to a reality beyond the limitations of selfishness, in the Spirit."[37] We attain to this reality through contemplation as the lived experience of the ground of our Being. Contemplation, then, is for everyone... and yet it eludes most of us.

Somehow in the Catholic Church the notion arose that contemplation was for a select few, the special vocation of monks and mystics. The rest of us, we were told, served God by living an "active" life "in the world." Merton, to his credit, never subscribed to such a view and did all in his power to dispel the notion that contemplation and action are somehow incompatible. Already in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote:

[36] Th. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New York: New Directions, 1966, p. 161.

[37] Th. Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "The New Man"*, in: *Honorable Reader*, p. 136.

> There is only one vocation. Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life, perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others. And if you cannot do so by word, then by example.[38]

Returning to the same theme some years later, he wrote: "Contemplation does not exist only within the walls of the cloister. Every man, to live a life full of significance, is called simply to know the significant interior of life and to find ultimate significance in its proper inscrutable existence, in spite of himself, in spite of the world and appearances, in the Living God."[39] Thus, far from regarding the contemplative life as the prerogative of a select few, Merton viewed it as the norm for all human beings—regardless of doctrinal or cultural differences.

To a Methodist correspondent, he wrote: "I think that deep experience of God should normally be the common thing for Christians."[40] He told his Moslem friend Abdul Aziz that, while it is important to try to understand the beliefs of other religions, it is far more important to share "the experience of divine light, and first of all of the light that God gives us even as the Creator and Ruler of the Universe."[41] One of Merton's most beautiful articulations of this universal call that arises out of the depths of our Being is found in a letter to the Indian poet and philosopher Amiya Chakaravarty, to whom he dedicated *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*:

> I do really have the feeling...that you have seen something that I see to be most precious – and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma... or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at

[38] Th. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 419.

[39] Th. Merton, *Preface to the Argentine Edition of "The Complete Works of Thomas Merton,"* in: *Honorable Reader*, pp. 39-40.

[40] Th. Merton, *To Mrs. Nunn*, Jan. 10th, 1964, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 311.

[41] Th. Merton, *To Abdul Aziz*, May 2nd, 1963, in: *Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 54.

one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.[42]

If we are all called to experience this dynamic awakening of ourselves in the Spirit, an awakening through which we become "fully real," then why do so few people actually achieve it? Merton's answer here mirrors that of Kierkegaard and other existential thinkers.[43] This achievement is so rare, says Merton, because most of us tend to be alienated from ourselves. We look for fulfillment in all the wrong places. We end up "living like a machine, pushed around by impulsions and suggestions from others."[44] When we live this way, "involved only in our surface existence, in externals, and in the trivial concerns of our ego, we are untrue to [God] and to ourselves."[45]

Merton does not propose that we abandon the ordinary world of work and functions. Far from it. For Merton, action is the natural fruit of contemplation. Action is the sign that our contemplation is absorption in God – and not merely self-absorption (navel gazing). When action and contemplation operate in tandem, says Merton, "they become two aspects of the same thing. Action is charity looking outward to other men, and contemplation is charity drawn inward to its own divine source. Action is the stream, and contemplation is the spring."[46] "When action and contemplation dwell together, filling our whole life because we are moved in all things by the Spirit of God, then we are spiritually mature."[47] And this is precisely the rare sort of greatness to which we are all called.

[42] Th. Merton, *To Amiya Chakravarty*, April 13th, 1967, in: *Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 115.

[43] Merton frequently referred to himself as a Christian existentialist. See, for example, *Learning to Live*, p. 4.

[44] Th. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, in: *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. by Lawrence S. Cunningham, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992, p. 372.

[45] Ibidem, p. 372.

[46] Th. Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, New York: Harcourt, 1955, p. 70.

[47] Ibidem, p. 70.

Finding communion in solitude

Love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry

Contemplation requires solitude. When we hear the word "solitude," we usually think of being alone, being apart from others. Indeed, contemplation does require such external solitude from time to time, but this is not the deepest sense in which contemplation needs solitude. For Merton, the solitude that is at the heart of contemplation and that, in a sense, may even be said to *be* contemplation is inner solitude.

Such solitude, far from isolating us from the world, puts us most intimately in touch with the world. "The first place in which to go looking for the world," says Merton, "is not outside us but in ourselves. We *are* the world. In the deepest ground of our being we remain in metaphysical contact with the whole of that creation in which we are only small parts."[48] Approaching this same theme from another angle, Merton writes: "The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God, the one center of all, which is 'everywhere and nowhere,' in whom all are encountered, from whom all proceed. Thus from the very start this consciousness is disposed to encounter 'the other' with whom it is already united anyway 'in God.'"[49]

In his preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton calls solitude the "proper climate" for doing our own listening, our own hearing. "Or perhaps better," he says, "this Hearing which is No--Hearing is itself solitude."[50] Thus, solitude is not so much a state as it is an activity, but a very mysterious kind of activity, for it is a Hearing that is No-Hearing. By means of this enigmatic expression, Merton is trying to express the sense of unity with the whole of Being that occurs in authentic solitude. This is a solitude that unites rather than separates, a solitude that transcends all divisions.

[48] Th. Merton, *Seven Words*, in: *Love and Living*, p. 120.

[49] Th. Merton, *The New Consciousness*, in: *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York: New Directions, 1968, p. 24.

[50] Th. Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "Thoughts in Solitude"*, in: *The Honorable Reader*, p. 111.

Here we encounter one of Merton's most mature and profound reflections on solitude. "Why do I speak of a Hearing which is No-Hearing?" asks Merton. He responds:

> Because if you imagine the solitary as "one" who has numerically isolated himself from "many others," who has simply gone out of the crowd to hang up his individual number on a rock in the desert, and there to receive messages denied to the many, you have a false and demonic solitude. This is solipsism, not solitude. It is the false unity of separateness, in which the individual marks himself off as his own number, affirms himself by saying "count me out."
>
> The true unity of the solitary life is the one in which there is no possible division. The true solitary does not seek himself, but loses himself. He forgets that there is number, in order to become all. Therefore he is No (individual) Hearer.
>
> He is attuned to all the Hearing in the world, since he lives in silence. He does not listen to the ground of being, but he identifies himself with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself.[51]

What we discover in such solitude is that we are *already one* with others and the world. "Communion," says Merton, "is the awareness of participation in an ontological or religious reality: in the mystery of being, of human love, of redemptive mystery, of contemplative truth."[52]

According to Merton, symbols play a central role in evoking such awareness in us. The function of a symbol, writes Merton "is to manifest a union that *already exists but is not fully realized.* The symbol awakens awareness, or restores it."[53] Merton's treatment of symbols here is very similar to Heidegger's view of the revelatory power of language: "Language alone," says Heidegger, "brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time."[54] Communication is possible only because we are already in communion.

[51] Ibidem.

[52] Th. Merton, *Symbolism: Communication or Communion?*, in: *Love and Living*, p. 68.

[53] Ibidem.

[54] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1971, p. 73, qtd. in: Boelen, p. 181.

A very simple way of illustrating this truth is to return for a moment to the lines from Merton's beautiful prose-poem "Hagia Sophia," with which we began this presentation.

> There is in all visible 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. 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, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.[55]

Why, we may ask, do these words resonate so strongly in us? Why do they strike us – and so many others – as capturing some sublime truth? Or, to put it another way, since what Merton is talking about here is "invisible," "nameless," "hidden," "mysterious," "silent," etc., how are we even able to understand him – unless we ourselves are participants in that same reality he is striving to articulate? Merton's words ring true to us precisely because they bring to light something we already know, however vaguely, in the pre-reflective immediacy of our lived experience.

The grounding of communication in communion is one of the themes Merton was exploring in the months just before his death. In his notes for a paper he presented in Calcutta in 1968, he wrote: "True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary at this level must also be 'communion': beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a 'preverbal' level but also on a 'postverbal' level."[56]

In the paper itself, Merton expressed this insight in the following way:

> The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and

[55] Th. Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 363.

[56] Th. Merton, *Notes for Oct. 23th, 1968 Talk in Calcutta*, qtd. in William H. Shannon, *Introduction*, in: *Hidden Ground of Love.*

> it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.[57]

Merton's biographer Michael Mott, in a perceptive comment on this passage, writes: "Here contemplation (the sense of God) and communication as communion (the sense of others) come together."[58]

Finally, for Merton, the most apt characterization of "this ground, this unity" in which all being hears and knows itself, is Love. "The paradox of solitude," writes Merton, "is the undivided unity of love for which there is no number.[59] It will come as no surprise to those familiar with Merton that his contemplative vision resolves itself ultimately in Love. For Merton, Being has a personal face.[60] Merton's enduring Christian faith and his personal contemplative experience both contributed to his conviction that "in the depths of our own being there is an inexhaustible spring of mercy and of love."[61]

[57] Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1975, p. 308, qtd. in M. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1993, p. 545.

[58] Mott, p. 545.

[59] Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "Thoughts in Solitude"*, p. 112.

[60] "My 'eschatology'," wrote Merton, "says that underlying all of [life and history], in the deepest depths that we cannot possibly see, lies an ultimate ground in which all contradictories are united and all come out 'right.' For a Christian this ultimate ground is personal – that is to say, it is a ground of freedom and love, not a simple mechanism or process. But since we are all in potentially conscious contact with this deep ground (which of course exceeds all conscious grasp) we must try to 'listen' to what comes out of it and respond to the imperatives of its freedom. In doing so...we will be in harmony with the dynamics of life and history even though we may not fully realize that we are so. The important thing then is to restore this dimension of existence" (*To Walter A. Weisskopf, Roosevelt University*, April 4th, 1968, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 336.

[61] Th. Merton, *The Good Samaritan*, in: *Thomas Merton Reader*, pp. 348-56.

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

Zofia Zarębianka

Meditative Experience in the Poetry of Thomas Merton*

Polish readers regard Thomas Merton mainly as an author of valuable reflections of a spiritual nature, collected in at least a dozen titles that function in public awareness. Less known, and for some even astonishing, is the fact of the literary, also poetic, activity, of this Trappist monk of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Still, Merton wrote poems all his life, devoting himself to this activity also in his monastic life, although not without some remorse. I do not suppose that it could be explained in categories of uncontrollable literary ambition, although, it should be stressed that Merton as an artist was fully aware of the complexity of technique, and what he writes is a result of frequently laborious work on words. What is more, despite his monk's robe he is not a stranger to the snares of creative egotism.

Nevertheless, the subject matter of this paper will not be Merton's creative self-awareness, nor his views on the mission of literature and writers in the modern world, both worth a closer look as they might be. Although

* Transl. by A. Muranty.

they are matters undoubtedly essential to the whole of Merton's profile, since they demonstrate the range of interests and extensiveness of his humanistic mind, despite the importance of these matters, I decided not to penetrate them, and instead to attempt to reach the core of the meaning and message conveyed in his poetic writings, which I thought even more essential.

Still, his is not the kind of poetry that is easily understood and surrenders to the procedures of interpretation. It seems that the key to interpreting Merton's poetic writings lies outside the sphere of literature itself. Thus familiarity with poetic convention and historic-literary contexts, even a good acquaintance with modern English and American poetry do not suffice to penetrate into the meaning that constitutes the specific world of his poetic pieces.

It also seems important to place the originality of Merton's poetry outside the sphere of influence of artistic quality, even though his work is clearly not devoid of it. The distinctiveness of Thomas Merton's poetic diction consists not so much in aesthetics, as in spirituality. Assertion of that fact seems to be of crucial importance in attempting to understand his poetry. Here lies both ultimate value of those poems and their originality against the background of poetic creativity of the time. Similarly, I think, in this specifically shaped inner experience, one ought to search for the key to open this poetry, for which it is the first and foremost catalyst. It is this experience that its subject is trying to find apt expression for.

Meditation practiced by the protagonist of Merton's poetic writings gives him certain distinctive features. Although it is not named in the poems, the whole sense of the world comprised in those pieces grows out of meditative awareness, which finds expression in them. It is impossible to understand Merton's poetic utterances without that meditative context, which appears not only in their level of meaning, but also in imagery based on categories fundamental for meditation, as well as the progression of certain poems, which are, in fact, minor introductions to meditation.

So it seems that the deepest basis for all these works is the need to verbalize this sphere of spiritual experiences, which in the most natural way eludes verbal articulation and weighs toward silence. Tension, which appears at the point of contact of this inclination for silence and simultaneous necessity to express, is perhaps one of the crucial factors, which endow Merton's poetic diction with its idiosyncratic and unique character. It follows that these works should be described and understood in spiritual

categories, from the field of prayer and meditative life, since they form a basis on which the whole construction of most important poetic meanings is built.

Therefore first of all one should inquire into the idiosyncratic features of that spiritual experience, which fell to the subject's lot, in order to take this roundabout way to try and capture, or, in point of fact, merely approach, deep meanings which organize his poetical universe from inside. Speaking in the most general terms, this experience is connected with the practice of prayer, which the subject of these poems gives most of his attention to... also, significantly, on the real existential level, as a real, not only virtual, author... The above observation seems important in that it allows one to realize the highly unusual status of this poetry, which does not cease to be one, and yet it remains – to a much greater degree – a witness to spiritual life, an attempt to record and understand own development. Thus Merton's poems, while being poetry, also constitute a personal document, something in the shape of personal spiritual diary. While keeping their autonomous status, they clearly complement essay writings of the author of *Seeds of Contemplation* and can be fully interpreted only with them and in their context.

The framework for the inner experience disclosed in the confessions of the narrator is set down by the rules of monastic life, whose minute, yet distinct reminiscences are present in a number of his writings and can be found already in titles of his numerous pieces, which point to a given town and name a given monastery – the Trappist Abbey Gethsemani in Kentucky – as a place of lyrical, or should I say, spiritual, action.

Such a precise location of the presented world does not at the same time deprive the narrator's experience of its universal nature. Although he allows the reader to be recognized as a member of a closed monastic community and custom, yet he remains above all a man, "everyone", searching for answers to questions about the meaning of life and directions. Monastic reality, references to liturgy, the monastic order of the day, or rule which appear in the texts, aren't of crucial significance to the sphere of profound meanings constituted by these poems, they serve rather as a kind of prop, useful for placing in reality that experience which goes beyond individuality. This operation serves not only the idiosyncratic, so to say, earthing of experiences described in the poem, but also introduces an element of authenticity, allows for identification of the protagonist as a man strongly set

in the existing and precisely presented, though to non-monks somewhat exotic, world. It seems especially important in the face of the nature of spiritual reality which ultimately cannot be clearly defined or captured, and which is in itself the main, and in fact, the only topic of Merton's poetic discourse. The purpose of such a method of imagery is in a way to authenticate for the reader the veracity of experience and inner way, whose outlines are designed by this poetry.

At the same time, on a purely literary level, the clash between the concrete and the universal becomes a factor creating certain artistic tension, just as it had in the case mentioned above of paradoxical oscillation between silence and voiced word. Two pairs of such tension – between word and silence and between the concrete and the general, functioning on the level of setting literary qualities, find their deeper and more complete justification in the dimension of spiritual experience. And so: a dichotomy of silence and speech at first draws a certain course of development, but also, having completed it, signifies Return, represents a kind of coda, in which opposites, although sharply stated at the beginning, are reconciled at the end. The case is similar with tension between the general and the concrete. Striving for the general can be seen as an effort to overcome "the world", leaving behind the earthly in order to achieve supernatural goals. Hence numerous details and references to reality present in the poems appear to be an important sign that the subject has crossed over the boundary of false individualism and achieved inner union. In both cases of demonstrated dichotomies we deal with the dynamism of changing meaning, the dynamism whose rhythm is defined by the spiritual evolution of the narrator. First of all it implies that one category encompasses various, often even opposite, meanings, depending on the context. Secondly, these poems, treated as one text, divided into many pieces, bring an extremely consistent and astonishingly exact description of the spiritual path. This path and its consecutive stages has been laid by experience of meditative practice, which, in point of fact, is convergent with Merton's discursive writings, where it is properly elaborated on. Nevertheless it seems that unlike St. John of the Cross, Merton treated separately the modes of expression he practiced. They co-exist, in a way parallel to each other, yet they were not to have, in their author's intent, mutually explanatory function, which, in itself, does not stand in the way of an interpreter's illuminating them one by the other. Let us then use several texts chosen for this purpose and ordered in a specific way to follow the stages of our hero's spiritual journey.

The starting point is the call addressed to himself, to his own soul:

> Sink from your shallows, soul, into eternity.[1]

This encouraging call comes from the narrator's awareness that the nature of the supernatural is completely dissimilar to all the phenomena he encounters on earth; awareness perhaps not finally crystallized, yet partly aroused:

> We touch the rays we cannot see,
> We feel the light that seems to sing.[2]

The nature of this reality, so completely different from everything else, cannot be presented by anything but operating with the contradictive and "diagonally" intersected paradoxes of synesthetic nature. Here "touching the rays", which is impossible in reality, and remains in discrepancy with the laws of physics, is set against the sense of sight by means of the merging of sensations. However, seeing also seems impossible to the narrator. Thus a double, two-level paradox is created, additionally strengthened by the repetition of the same catch in the next line. The phrase "we feel the light" instead of the expected "we see the light" gains the virtue of unimaginability, or even absurdity – if we are to apply earthly categories – by adding that the singing of the light is also possible. In effect the description of eternity, although encompassing the three most important senses – touch, sight and hearing – is more than ever placed beyond the possibility of articulation, which makes it even more mysterious and desired. This kind of imagery, although extremely visual at first sight, in fact builds a metaphor that cannot be translated into any images, which puts Merton among the avant-garde 20th century experimenters. In this case as before, poetic artistry finds theological justification. First of all, the paradoxical use of the senses, which turns out to be completely useless in recognizing extra-physical reality, underlines the extra-conceptual and unimaginable nature of eternity. Secondly, the synesthetic combinations of individual receptors and objects which do not confirm to, let us say, competences of those sensory organs, suggest the so-called inner senses – the term often used by mystical authors to describe the ways of cognition characteristic of the perception of invisi-

[1] *After the Night Office – Gethsemani Abbey*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1980, p. 108.

[2] Ibidem.

ble realities. One could construe that the paradoxical phrases in the poem suggest precisely this mystical understanding of the senses.

Therefore the narrator is lost in his attempts to present the goal of his longing in words. Nevertheless, this does not change his determination and conviction that it is necessary to abandon his everyday superficial self, and transcend the person as an initial, necessary and fundamental condition of setting out on an inner journey. At the same time a vague intuition begins to tell him that only in that incomprehensible and unnamed, eternity beyond him, there is a true meaning and fulfilment, which makes all surrounding things look pale and brings out their illusory appeal:

> [...] drink these deeps of invisible light.[3]

This perspective on eternity is to be the cure for the false guidance of a soul engrossed in attractive yet false appearances, which are taken for the fundamental nature, a soul immobilized in the mask that would not let it leave the shallow waters. The latter ought to be probably understood not only in terms of inner shallowness and superficiality, but also as a feeling of being at home with what is familiar, and therefore – safe, the feeling threatening any kind of development. A specific lack of courage resulting in limiting oneself to moving only on familiar ground may result in a self-satisfied torpor and lead to barrenness. It is not surprising that an ardent call to come out of the safe limits of this light, conditioned on habits "self" constitutes the most fundamental directive in the spiritual way.

The next poem – *The Trappist Abbey: Matins* discloses the next condition, or rather, two conditions, set before the soul searching for the light of God:

> Now kindle in the windows of this ladyhouse, my soul,
> Your childish, clear awakeness:
> Burn in the country night
> Your wise and sleepless lamp.[4]

Inner vigilance as a necessary ingredient of the way to salvation, understood in any manner, depending on religion, appears in all spiritual traditions of human kind. But why in Merton's poem is there mention of "childish awakeness"?

[3] Ibidem

[4] *The Trappist Abbey: Matins*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 46.

There can be three explanations, and none of them is in collision with the others. Firstly, it brings to mind the evangelical warnings of Jesus who tells us it is necessary to become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Hence, if one assumes that eternity so enigmatically presented in the previous poem as a goal of the earthly pilgrimage, denotes entering the kingdom of heaven, then the condition of regaining (or keeping) spiritual childishness is additionally strengthened. A child is perceived here as a symbol of innocence and simplicity, qualities without which all perception is contaminated, and the sense of vigilance distorted. Secondly, viewed from psychological aspect, a child – being curious of surrounding reality – is capable of true vigilance. No new element can elude a child's attention. A child intrigued with the world gives it its full attention. And thirdly, the phrase "childish awakeness" may also be an intentional reference to Buddhist writings, which compare an awakened mind to child's one – fresh, open, receptive, simple, and free of prejudice. Without such a mind cognition is impossible.

The last of the traits listed here seems to be of particular importance, because of Merton's confirmed interest in the spiritual traditions of the East and his attempts to use the wisdom of Zen in his own prayer[5]. Signals derived form remote fields of the spiritual tradition and put together in one poem express the Mertonian narrator's search for deeper unity, gradually being disclosed in the way of his meditative practices. In this way vigilance and attentiveness are both a preliminary requirement and a fruit of meditation itself, which is maturing in time, leading him through novel experiences to enlightenment.

Vigilance as a stance, being a form of attentiveness, would be convergent with the latter. Both vigilance and attentiveness take their origins from eastern spiritual traditions as well as sayings of Christ. The poem brings to mind the latter in a more conspicuous manner, both by introducing the unambiguously Christian theme of God's blood, apostles and betrayal, which are all easily identifiable evangelical events, and by subtle reference to Christ's parable of the foolish and wise virgins. The burning of the sleepless lamp in combination with the call to stay awake introduce evangelical themes taken from the above-mentioned parallel.[6]

[5] Here one cannot rule out the influence of Eastern Christianity from beyond the sphere of hesychasm, which uses similar categories of vigilance and attentiveness, and considers them important for spiritual growth. I would like to express my thanks to prof. Waclaw Hryniewicz who pointed it out to me.

[6] Cf. Mt 25, 1-13.

While open to the inspiration flowing from spiritual richness of zen Buddhism, Merton's narrator remains within the realm of Christianity. In this case it would be a misunderstanding to speak of contamination of beliefs. Interest in other spiritual traditions is not here to construct a transpersonal, amorphous, eclectic, and syncretic religiousness. First of all it is here to assist in finding a common element in the human experience of God, independently of the content of creed articulated by every religion, and secondly, but more importantly, in fulfilling the need to improve the means used for establishing a connection with God. In this respect the ways developed in the circle of eastern religions could not have escaped his notice.

In further stages of his inner journey the narrator, having been summoned to stay vigilant, meets on his way silence and loneliness. These terms function as representations of two different realities, depending on the context and stage of development in which they appear.

> If you seek a heavenly light
> I, Solitude, am your professor![7]

In effect, at the beginning of the meditative journey, vigilance, wakefulness and attentiveness are conditioned by silence and solitude, and understood first as external circumstances conducive to concentration and entering oneself:

> I go before you into emptiness,
> [...] Opening the windows
> Of your innermost apartment.[8]

At the beginning silence and loneliness are of a more external nature and play a functional role in the narrator's journey towards himself, and, finally toward God; they lead him through an increasingly deserted ground:

> When I, loneliness, give my special signal
> Follow my silence, follow where I beckon![9]

External silence and inner loneliness, indicated by monastic scenery, where poetic action takes place, are gradually changing their status, becoming more and more innermost realities and significant spiritual experiences. Yet before Silence will manifest itself as impossible to comprehend and express in words intuition of All:

> For I, Solitude, am thine own self:
> I, Nothingness, am thy All.
> I, Silence, am thy Amen![10]

So before his silence becomes the only answer adequate to enfolding the Silence of the Pre-eternal, which manifests itself as the name of the Unspeakable, he has to meet demons that hide inside him and overcome the budding temptation of despair. This spiritual struggle, comparable to agony:

> [...] a match, in which you overcome [...]
> after a long agony.[11]

leads to meeting the shadow:

> I went down
> Into the cavern
> All the way down
> To the bottom of the sea.
> [...]
> I went down lower
> Than any diamond mine
> Deeper than the lowest hole
> In Kimberly
> All the way down
> I thought I was the devil
> He was no deeper down
> Than me.[12]

in order to, after showing him his cracked nature:

> Fear not, little beast, little spirit
> (Though word and animal)[13]

lead him in the end to transcend his "self" and be reborn within himself on a new level:

[7] *Song: If you seek*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 340.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] Ibidem.

[11] *To a Severe Nun*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 287.

[12] *All the Way Down*, in: *The Collected Poem*, p. 669.

[13] *Song: If you seek*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 340.

And when they thought
That I was gone forever
That I was all the way
In hell
I got right back into my body
And came back out
And rang my bell.[14]

Inner suffering is an inseparable element of the process of spiritual growth depicted by the above quoted sequence. The way of meditation presented in this poem leads through the inner death. In this crucial stage loneliness and silence appear to the narrator not so much as the prospect of fulfilment, but as a despair generating factor. The meeting with the self in "the cavern" "all the way down", as it is described by the narrator, is in fact a descent into the bottom of his ego, into the spiritual loins of his self. This descent, necessary to the awakening on the new level of awareness, is connected with shock and numerous dangers, and, first of all, with the temptation of despair. Therefore the narrator's voice, well aware of the threatening despair and the accompanying it ruminations on hopelessness of his own position, gives a warning:

Drive on: do not consider your despair![15]

knowing full well that such reflections serve only to weaken the spirit.

Yet another kind of trap awaiting the one who keeps silent is concentration on himself and various projections concerning the shape of his own person. In this case, as before, he gives himself a sound piece of advice:

[...] Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you may one day be.
Rather
Be what you are [...].[16]

This piece of advice discloses a double status of poetic self, who has two kinds of awareness at his disposal at the same time. On one level he

[14] *All the Way Down*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 669.

[15] *To a Severe Nun*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 287.

[16] *In Silence*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 280.

participates in the process, which takes place in him through and thanks to meditation, and on the other, higher, one, he is in a way ahead of this maturing process, and by reaching to the areas of super-consciousness surveys the course and effects of changes that take place in him.

In his poem "In Silence" there appears one more hint, this time quite an intriguing one, or so it seems:

O be still, while
You are still alive.[17]

The phrase used here is based on a paradox in which someone who still remains in the dimension of earthly time – "while you are still alive" – is ordered to keep silent, which in itself is a fundamental reversion of accepted rules which function in the "normal" life. Silence and stillness are recognized as signs of death. Here they appear in combination with the level of mortal existence. If one simplifies and brings out the whole paradoxical sharpness of this recommendation, it can be rendered as: now, as long as you are here, refrain from words. In consequence, there is a hidden suggestion: you will speak afterwards. This depiction introduces two kinds of conviction – first of all it transforms the system of emotional values, according to which death is endowed with a negative, and life with a positive meaning, by giving the "post mortal" sphere significantly more significance. This death does not have to, or even should not, be understood literally. It represents the state before and after touching the "bottom". Secondly, this paradoxical piece of advice may contain an intuition that before experiencing the descent to the most profound depths of the self, there is *de facto* nothing to talk about as yet, since there has been no cognition, and the self remains in the darkness. In this understanding silence, which is created as a result of ascetic silence, would appear as a transitory state, closely connected with ... waiting:

How long we wait, with minds as quiet as time,
Like sentries on a tower.
[...]
How ling we wait with minds as dim as ponds
While stars swim slowly homeward in the water of our west!
Heaven, when will we hear you sing?[18]

[17] Ibidem.

[18] *How Long We Wait*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 90.

This experience, burdensome and prolonged at times filled with longing, wait (metaphor of the sentries and question "Heaven, when will we hear you sing?" appear on purpose and are extremely meaningful!) requires enormous patience and vigilance. It also seems to be one of the basic experiences of a human being in the meditative wanderings. One might say that it is quotidian practice of mediation. Moments of flashing light in the darkness that precede actual enlightenment:

> I am the unexpected flash
> Beyond "yes", beyond "no"[19]

are rare, the most frequently experienced feeling is monotonous and tiring waiting:

> Our minds are grey as rivers.[20]

One gets closer to the destination of this spiritual journey only by abandoning expectations to achieve any spectacular effects of one's efforts, while at the same time being persistent in undertaking them, that is by means of the combination of unselfishness with patience:

> How long we have listened to the silence of our vineyards
> And heard no bird stir in the rising barley.
> The stars go home behind the shaggy trees.[21]

The two last lines quoted above associate fulfilment with... returning from self to the world, or even more, from the state of separation to union and from complication to simplicity present in the Beginning. In this way the meditative path turns out to be the path of return... which seems to be for Merton its primary goal. At the beginning of the spiritual journey this separation from the world and listening to silence the self devotes itself to solitude, in order to discover the roots of own spiritual identity by means of painful and long-lasting deprivation:

> I've seen the root
> Of all that believe.[22]

[19] *Song: If you seek*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 340.

[20] *How Long We Wait*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 90.

[21] Ibidem.

[22] *All the Way Down*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 669.

which brings him a revelation of himself in God:

> Stand in the unspoken.[23]

The spiritual passage, marked with crises ("All the way down I thought I was the devil", "they thought that I was gone forever that I was all the way in hell") and gradual evolution in understanding silence as it is, in the end leads to personal reintegration:

> *I am all (here)*
> *There!*[24]

which enables him to understand the generous song of creation where:

> A yellow flower
> (Light and spirit)
> Sings without a word
> By itself.[25]

to join it:

> By ceasing to question the sun
> I have become light,
>
> Bird and wind.
> My leaves sing.
>
> I am earth, earth[26]

and to endure wordlessly in unity with Life, seen as the universal rule of Wholeness, to which he himself belongs with all his being:

[23] "Prologue:", 498.

[24] In reference to the poem a sense of time is an important element of this experience, a sense in which presence Now is the only thing of import. The title of this poem seems to refer to the Zen exercise practiced to this end, namely one of careful, meditative walking that frees the awareness of focused at a given moment contact with own body and surface on which one is walking. The question 'Why I have a Wet Footprint on top of My Mind' is of koan-like nature – that of a phrase based on paradox, whose studying is to open to truth.

[25] *Song for Nobody*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 337.

[26] *O Sweet Irrational Worship*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 344.

I am earth, earth

All these lighted things
Grow from my heart.
[...]
My heart's love
Bursts with hay and flowers.[27]

Need one say anything else? Is it proper to violate his silence with an untimely analysis, when Silence manifests itself to him as Word:

Let no one touch this gentle sun
In whose dark eye
Someone is awake.[28]

[27] Ibidem.

[28] *Song for Nobody*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 337.

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

ELŻBIETA KIŚLAK

MERTON AND MILOSZ IN THE FACE OF TOTALITARIANISMS*

Both Polish and American publishers agree that Merton's correspondence with Milosz is of exceptional importance. This opinion is shared by the editor of an ample epistolographical collection whose table of contents lists only the names of writers who corresponded with Merton.[1] What is perhaps more important, the correspondents themselves attached great importance to this conversation over a great distance. As Milosz, already in his third letter, wrote: "you are for me important, I feel in you a friend with whom I can be completely frank"[2]. From the very beginning their dialogue had rather intimate overtones, perhaps due to the authority of priesthood, which backed Merton up as a well-known author of spiritual books. Milosz didn't hesitate to admit to his despair, past and recent mistakes, religious doubts, trouble at home. If one adds to that an intellectual dimension of the problems he presented in his letters, there can be no doubt that his correspon-

* Transl. by A. Muranty.

[1] *The Courage For Truth. The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. C. M. Bochen, New York : Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993.

[2] *Striving Towards Being. The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. R. Faggen, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, p. 44.

dence with Merton is one of the most important pieces of self-commentary on the past, as well as a rich source for the interpreters of his works, next to the letters he exchanged with Iwaszkiewicz, Andrzejewski, Wankowicz and Wat. The high temperature of discourse between Milosz and Merton caused the former to keep certain letters he had written with the intention of sending them to Merton. They are also published in the above-mentioned anthology, next to corrected versions and additions made by both parties.

Merton contemplated Milosz's letters with even greater reverence. As he wrote in a letter, he considered them to be the best, and it must have meant quite a lot coming from him, considering the variety, vastness and abundant wealth of his contacts. He added that they were "the hardest to answer",[3] explaining why he had taken such a long time to answer. The meaning of these letters isn't connected with their frequency or regularity, there had been long breaks, sometimes several months, or even years, long. In the first two years they wrote to each other quite regularly, before Milosz moved to California; during that period they exchanged five long letters, each time waiting for a month or two for the post to reach across the Atlantic. In the following years their correspondence grew scarcer, and the breakes longer, yet their letters weren't replaced with personal contacts – Milosz managed to visit Merton at Gethsemani only once, on September 9th, 1964. In the last period their letters concerned publishing matters, those from 1968, the year of Merton's death, were often marked with haste and dealt only with practical matters. Nevertheless, they met in October 1968 in San Francisco to have dinner in a Chinese restaurant, although at the time they didn't realize that this meeting was, as Milosz later wrote, "so thoroughly leave-taking".[4] Ten days before Merton's departure to the Far East they had a somewhat more intimate, long, friendly conversation in a café. Their last contact was a postcard sent by Merton on November 21st from Darjeeling, less than three weeks before his fatal accident.

Despite the rarity of their contacts they considered each other friends. "I liked him at first sight",[5] Milosz sums up his visit to the monastery, at the same time betraying his previous reserve and fastidiousness. They had a lot in common – the same generation, a minor age difference – only three and

[3] Ibidem, p. 135.

[4] Cz. Miłosz, *Życie na wyspach*, ed. by. J. Gromek, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1997, p. 211.

[5] Ibidem.

a half years. They shared the fascinations of their generations, read the same French books – they were both greatly influenced by *Art and Scholasticism*. In Milosz's letters one can see traces of his practically ended discourse with Thomism, and it is probable that during his visit at Gethsemani Merton mentioned the other guest he exchanged letters with, namely Jacques Maritain. In his *Abecadło* Milosz says that he isn't certain how much his late friend drew from Thomism, stressing his attachment to "another medieval philosopher Duns Scotus".[6] They were both sensitive to social injustice, a trait shaped in the thirties, marked by a deepening global economical crisis,[7] and esteemed the same left-wing American magazine – *Dissent*.

Both of them witnessed the madness of the 20th century and declared peculiar aversion to nationalisms and the "nationality" section in the passport. Nevertheless, Milosz would probably think it too radical to say, as the protagonist of his favourite early Merton novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, says: "I lived in too many countries to have nationality, I love freedom",[8] seeing as he values tradition integrated in language so highly, not to mention attachment to his lost small homeland. They were both individualists, yet searching for mutual friendship, suffering because of alienation, or rather intensely feeling their own separateness, the otherness of an artist. Milosz's seclusion was increased by his emigration, he blamed it on an inopportune moment at which he had decided to break away from the Polish socialist diplomatic service. In a number of letters he spoke of the critical mistake he had made in leaving the USA and honourably returning to Poland, which resulted in his stay in France, where he was unable to find his place among intellectual circles, being ostracised as an author of the anticommunist *Captive mind* and *persona non grata* in a number of circles which passed an unfavourable judgment on him, since on the Parisian "left bank" one's outlook was estimated precisely on the basis of one's view on

[6] Cz. Miłosz, *Abecadło Miłosza* [*Milosz's ABC*], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997, p. 171.

[7] It seems to me that Milosz's views can be roughly presented by the self-characteristic of Daniel Bell, an American sociologist, translated by Milosz: liberalism in social solutions, conservatism in aesthetics, socialism in economics; while in *Ogród nauk* Merton's outlook is reduced to "American liberalism" (*Ogród nauk*, Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1979, p. 190).

[8] Th. Merton, *My argument with the Gestapo*, p. 19 (the page number comes from the Polish edition: *Mój spór z gestapo. Dziennik makaroniczny*, przeł. A. Gomola, Poznań 1995).

communism. Milosz didn't hide his separation from Merton. However, there is no way of knowing if he realised how lonely Merton was in his monastic community, described in one of the letters as "exterior darkness", where he is "without companionship".[9] In *Zycie na wyspach*, outlining Merton's figure, he mentions merely that "communal style of monastic life wouldn't trouble him if it wasn't for all the storm he raised with his books"[10] – nothing but a dark side of popularity.

Last but not least, they were both poets. The protagonist of *My Argument with the Gestapo*, who can be viewed as the author's *porte-parole* likes to call himself precisely that – a poet. Milosz had known Merton's name even before they established contacts, he came across and translated Merton's poem about St. Malachi for the American issue of *Kultura*. Notwithstanding, their poetics and poetical tastes differed significantly. Milosz preferred Anglo-Saxon poetry with its intellectual discipline to the uncurbed freedom of imagery of the Latin American poets, which Merton was so taken with; he had no liking for the baroque and surreal. He also claimed that Merton's style lacked sharpness: "a clear outline was emerging – only to become dissolved again",[11] and so went on to translate only one more poem *Elegy for Hemingway*. For Merton, on the other hand, fascinated with *The Captive Mind*, the identity of Milosz as a poet might have seemed of secondary importance, overshadowed by his essayistic achievements, especially in view of the fact that he must have taken it for granted, with only few pieces of evidence – excerpts first in French, only later on in English translation. He paid more attention to Herbert's poetry, which he mentioned several times, one may also doubt if Milosz could have been completely satisfied with his friend's complement: "your own poems are by no means the least interesting in the book"[12] – the anthology of Polish postwar poetry. He himself lamented a number of times the fact that in the West he is incidentally, and moreover falsely, known as a political writer and his relationship with Merton sprang from this misunderstanding, which, nevertheless, proved fortunate, since it initiated friendship.

Accordingly, they had a lot in common, yet there were just as many differences. Despite belonging to the same generation each had a different

[9] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 122.

[10] *Życie na wyspach*, p. 211.

[11] *Ogród nauk*, p. 190.

[12] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 159.

burden of historical experiences, which, in a way, became a source of Merton's fascination with *The Captive Mind* (incidentally coming a little late, since the American edition was published several years before, in 1953). Adversary to any war, including the cold one, convinced that "there are people there too, and they have souls as well", Merton wanted to comprehend the lot of those who lived behind the iron curtain. The book impressed him so much that he wished to share his enthusiasm with an unknown author.

For Milosz the spontaneous approval of *The Captive Mind* coming from a reader who at the same time represented the Church must have meant more than ordinary praise. The charge made the previous year by an influential critic Lionel Trilling[13] was that the book overlooked the role of the Catholic Church in the countries of New Faith, which is why the brilliant essayistic argument was to deviate from the truth. When recommending *The Broken Mirror*, the recently published English anthology of new Polish fiction, Milosz directly stressed that he disagreed with his accusations, and a little further on admitted, not very consistently, that "A great lacuna in *The Captive Mind* is, it seems to me, lack of a chapter on the Church".[14]

Merton hasn't picked up this subject, for him this book was interesting particularly because of its narrowed, limited depiction, since it was one of the very few books to present the situation of a writer, intellectual and an artist in a communist country in an individual lot. Two cases, those of Alpha and Beta (i.e. Andrzejewski and Borowski), aroused his empathic compassion.

[13] In an introduction to an English anthology of contemporary Polish fiction *The Broken Mirror* (New York, 1985, 4-5) Trilling wrote about *The Captive Mind*: "this is a work to be admired on several scores, but more than one trustworthy observer has said that it goes beyond the facts in representing the polish intellectuals as having wholly and happily capitulated to the Communist *mystique*. There was, of course, quite considerable adherence to Communism on the basis of genuine conviction. But opportunism would seem to explain the adherence of some people, as no doubt prudence explains the consent of many more. The Catholic Church was indeed hard pressed by the government and quite effectually limited and controlled. But with the population almost entirely Catholic and inclined to be devout, the Church could not be liquidated and it served as a countervailing force". Then Trilling goes on to write about Poland being oriented towards the West, which must have destined all efforts aimed at sovietization of culture to fail, and indicates possibilities for survival of independent thought, anticipating Herbert's *Kwestia smaku [A Matter of Taste]*: "it was a situation that at least licensed the awareness of boredom and disgust, from which springs much energy of the intellectual and artistic life".

[14] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 10.

In any case, he might have understood the whole thing as an idiosyncratic complement to his above-mentioned novel *My Argument with the Gestapo* – actually a fantasmatic autobiography presenting the protagonist's vicissitudes in wartime England and occupied France. In the *Captive Mind* he encountered a description of a totalitarian experience from another realm, that of real socialism, which must have been much more difficult to imagine. After many years Milosz will write in an outline of Merton's character: "his point of view was alien to mid-European experiences, although he was open enough to read about them and listen to them".[15]

Nevertheless, only this alien point of view allowed him to recognize Ketman's attitude as honest, and an admirable one at that ("that is certainly one form of honesty, and perhaps an admirable one"[16]), and not a means of adjustment or false consciousness. Although Merton knew the extent of pressure exerted by a totalitarian country (he has read *The Seizure of Power*) and had no illusions concerning Communist ideology, it appears that he found it difficult to reconstruct reality in the countries of New Faith, along with the social consequences of Ketman. Having read *The Broken Mirror* he admitted that matters which Polish writers are involved in are "quite alien"[17] to him.

Irony seemed to him to be a sufficiently effective form of resistance against totalitarian violence, just as it effectively protected the independence of the protagonist of *My Argument with the Gestapo*, defending his authentic existence from being imprisoned in the stereotypic role imposed upon him by society. In all probability Merton saw a variation of such a sophisticated game in Ketman, an attitude that was individualistic through and through, while paradoxically disregarding the irony with which Milosz described this essentially pathetic social phenomenon of adjustment – self-realization despite oneself, at the end of the Ketman chapter contrasting it with the heroic attitude that gives up the masks, and is doomed to fail. Merton, despite his full realization that the worst way out is to adjust to the conditions dictated by totalitarian society, seemed to forget for a moment the title of the book, while interpreting this game with the regime as a dialectical game with false identity – like a double affirmation which in fact constitutes a negation, while what Ketman was leading to a victory of

[15] *Życie na wyspach*, pp. 209-10.

[16] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 54.

[17] Ibidem, p. 37.

conformism, was a defence mechanism that ensured survival; independence and inner freedom weren't at stake, they constituted the cost.

Letter to an Innocent Bystander that was enclosed in the second, so to speak, round of correspondence, and later translated by Milosz for *Kultura*, constituted yet another voice in this long-distance conversation, a voice of inner dialogue, may throw some light on Merton's reading of *The Captive Mind*. The situation described there is viewed from the other side of the iron curtain, nevertheless, devoid of realities, it suggests a universal overtone. It deals with the attitude towards an omnipotent tyranny whose other form was described by Milosz. Characteristically, in this essay the enemy – "they", has no face, one only knows that they change masks, disguises, labels. They do not need to have the police force at their disposal, either, it is sufficient that they exert any kind of force in order to make an individual subordinate, in effect imposing an alien, own element on their existence. The existence of the cornered intellectualist is as unspecified as this threat – he is in the sate of vague annoyance, distraction, which Merton in point of fact justifies. The tragic lot sets one free of the vague feeling of guilt caused by one's own innocence, failure to get involved or react; as Merton concludes, "whether we act or not, we are destroyed",[18], thus giving a makeshift solution to the dilemma of contemplation and involvement in current issues that had been tormenting him incessantly. One may even suspect that by their very existence those indefinite enemies help to consolidate this liquid, suspended being, dispersed in a neurotic fog. Here the emptiness of a conformist society seems to enfold everything. Independence becomes the individualist who silently Hamletizes over his response to the tyrant, in his despair there germinates a seed of salvation, if he gives up theories, allows himself to be caught in the stream of life and ceases to mould them into imposed forms. Incidentally, Milosz, who was disappointed with theory in pure from, i.e. Heglism, must have had difficulties accepting these teachings, albeit useful, because of their vagueness and indefinite style.

Thus *The Captive Mind* might illustrate Merton's conviction that independent individuality suffers always and everywhere, unavoidably trapped between millstones of various tyrannies, harbouring the same criminal intentions to it. In these circumstances any attitude of an individualist who

[18] *Kultura* 1959, no.5, p. 9.

defends his own authentic independence seems to be justified. Characteristically, Merton often put totalitarianism and conformism together, as two aspects of repressive pressure exerted by a community on an individual, the pressure that deprived it of authentic existence, whose ideal was the centre of his anthropology. The individualist from *Letter to an Innocent Bystander* has to set himself against "collective arogance and despair of own herd"[19] that determines his situation on the supposedly better side of the iron curtain. The terror of conformism, allied with the rule of things, is dehumanising to society. Merton has never come across Witkacy, yet he apparently experienced a similar kind of anxiety, that of individuality being transformed into numbers; he presented Milosz with an apocalyptic vision of the rule of ruthless managers. He hunted down all totalitarian mechanisms in a democratic society, being of the opinion that "it is not enough to be anti-communist to preserve freedom in America",[20] or, putting it even stronger in a letter: "never was there a place where freedom was so much an illusion".[21] In the end this radicalism brought him close to the participants of the youth rebellion of the sixties and during the Vietnam War provoked him to anti-American statements, also expressed in his letters to Milosz.

Yet at the same time this broad, too broad, understanding of totalitarianism made his reading of *The Captive Mind* so innovative and profound. It revealed a spiritual, not to say metaphysical, dimension of historical circumstances, a universal disinheritance of minds. In fact, it anticipated the author's interpretation in *The Year of the Hunter*, which connects the book written in early fifties with *The Land of Ulro*, written twenty five years later: "For me it constituted a continuation of *The Captive Mind*, that is a deepening of issues touched upon there".[22] Merton was of the opinion that when the totalitarian borders do not agree with the borders of Nazism and Communism, they reach far beyond the Eastern block and the iron curtain, and "we should all feel near to despair in some sense".[23] Milosz himself gave a similar diagnosis of modern civilization in his wartime essays *Contemporary Legends* as well as in his

[19] Ibidem, p. 5.

[20] Th. Merton, *Christianity and Totalitarianism*, in: *Disputed Questions*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, p. 148.

[21] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 74.

[22] Cz. Miłosz, *Rok myśliwego* [*The Year of the Hunter*], Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1990, p. 93.

[23] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 52.

letters to Andrzejewski, in which he wrote of Europe being destroyed more in the spiritual, than in physical sense. The catastrophe of war was to be a result, not a cause of the so far unnamed spiritual disease. It wasn't until *The Land of Ulro* that this disease was to be specified more clearly, but it is in his letters to Merton that the issue of a religious imagination crisis emerges for the first time, a disintegration of the vertically-oriented world image, facing towards transcendence, in which the earth was placed between heaven and hell. Milosz was disappointed with *The Sign of Jonas*:

> I waited for some answers to the many theological questions but answers not abstract as in a theological treatise, just on that border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking: we lack an image of the world ordered by religion, while the Middle Ages had such an image [...] a reader (I can judge by introspection only) is eager to learn (gradually) what is the image of the world in Thomas Merton. In a period when the image accepted by majority is clear: empty sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death.[24]

In his letter he postulates a new religious literature, that goes beyond the framework of devotional piety, literature which would bring a vision of the world saved by Christ, a vision propagating acceptation of the creation, in a word – here emerges Milosz's new poetical agenda, the one which was to be realized in the years to come, and finally leading to *Another Space*, which in turn is heralded by a perspective of the third way, a difficult path between "literature [that] is too subjective" and "theological treatises" that are "too abstract".[25] Milosz didn't send this letter, perhaps for exaggerated fear of offending Merton with his comments on the monastic diary, or perhaps he felt a certain want in his expressions, or doubted that his dilemmas would be understood by the Trappist, whose diary carried a proof of deep faith on every single page. At the end he mentioned that he was reading Swedenborg, which proves the thesis that this excerpt from correspondence, together with several others, combine to create idiosyncratic prolegomena of *The Land of Ulro* – they show the kernel of the issues brought up in it, although as yet without stressing the basic antinomy between natural science and religious imagination. It isn't out of the question that had this

[24] Ibidem, pp. 61-62.

[25] Ibidem, p. 60.

letter been posted it would have switched the discussion to a different direction, particularly since Merton, an avid reader of Blake – next to Swedenborg and Oscar Milosz, a leading character in *The Land of Ulro*, might have taken up the mystical theme with enthusiasm. Nevertheless, one should appreciate the importance of unsent letters, which must have influenced their author, because they formed new questions, opened up new directions for his reflection.

In the letter Milosz did send, he accused Merton of a matter not less crucial, referring to questions about the phenomenon of evil that was obsessively tormenting him: "you do not pay much attention to torture and suffering in Nature".[26] For the Polish poet nature has always been a fascinating and yet fearsome theatre of terror. Hence totalitarianism in his depiction is a projection of nineteen-century scientism onto twentieth century history, an application of strict laws of biological necessity in the historical dealings of man. This view is clearly presented already in the poem he wrote in 1944, after the Warsaw Uprising – *Przyrodzie – pogróżka*.[27]

Not surprisingly, he questioned the idyllic quality of the nature descriptions in *The Sign of Jonas*, suspecting its author of escapist tendencies, searching for asylum away from society, in the much-idealized nature, while overlooking its murderous aspect. Yet Merton didn't deny that he was "in complete and deep complicity with nature, or imagine I am: that nature and I are very good friends, and console one another for the stupidity and the infamy of the human race and its civilization".[28] In the sixties this basically lyrical approach to nature, overlooking its hard laws, brought him close to the generation of young rebels, hippies, who idealized life in the open, away from civilization, in utopian communities.

Despite their search for common concerns, already in the first year of correspondence there surfaces a protocol of divergence, never fully articulated by either party. Next to their attitude to nature one should mention their different views on human nature. Merton, so readily using the metaphor of depth, was convinced that dormant in every man there is a core of goodness. Milosz on the other hand lectured him on his deep conviction that in everyone there is a seed of evil. His contacts with Milosz happened

[26] Ibidem, p. 64.

[27] Cf. Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985. vol. 1, p. 221.

[28] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 69.

at the time when he, like Mickiewicz going through incessant break-through, was striving to free his historical vision of Hegelian unalterable laws of development. In fact it was only reading Simone Weil that let him cut this knot of necessity, formed by nature interwoven with human history, by means of Manichean answer. Milosz was fascinated with a dualistic view of the world, while Merton – with mysterious unity and fullness of creation.

Their attitude to Russia should be counted as yet another fundamental difference. Milosz didn't share Merton's Russian fascinations, perhaps with the exception of Dostoyevsky. He certainly didn't share Merton's enthusiasm for Bierdayev, whom he maliciously criticized in a poem *Na pewną książkę* from the war-time series *Głosy biednych ludzi*;[29] and in his second letter to Merton, while taking up the subject of Russia and the Russian, he mentioned his lack of confidence in this philosopher and his escape into a pseudo-mystical haze. Merton didn't elaborate on this issue, yet when Milosz gave away his distrust to Boris Pasternak, he replied by sending him his essay on the author of *Doctor Zhivago*. Milosz described the booklet including *The Pasternak Affair* as "convincing".[30] All the reserve expressed in this comment was only to be revealed in the English dissertation published in 1963 *A Sober Look at Pasternak*, whose title is in fact a reply to Merton's apologetic tone. While in the famous novel Merton saw primarily the defence of individualism, Milosz exposed the weaknesses of this vision of the Russian revolution, bared its inconsequence and paradoxes, and accused it of allying with nature against the human universe of history.

Nevertheless, this dialogue is being limited by both parties. As Milosz himself admitted, he interprets Merton's meditation about Prometheus too narrowly, overlooking the profound, unique Simone Weil-like reading of the myth, which gave it an existential depth. His aversion to psychoanalysis and psychologising, to mulling over the problems of self, caused him to consider himself closer to the traditional reading, with which Merton is arguing in *A Note: Two Faces of Prometheus*, presenting a "progressive" interpretation, according to which the titan is a symbol of technological genius and the cosmic aspirations of man, perhaps additionally complicated by the promethean features of Mickiewicz's Konrad, the poet of *The Great Improvisation* seized with pride. However, he tried to assimilate Merton's

[29] Cf. *Wiersze*, vol. 1, p. 191.

[30] *Striving Towards Being*, p. 65.

meditation through Manicheism: "And perhaps Prometheus was not an ancestor of modern revolutionaries, perhaps he was in revolt against a heavy, false god, but not against God the Father?"[31] They were united by another figure from *The Behavior of Titans*, that of Heraclitus. Significantly, Milosz , himself the author of an essay on Heraclitus included in *Kontynenty*, discovered Merton's essay "with astonishment".[32] Both texts were partly made up of fragments.

In the sixties the ways of the two friends began to part. When Milosz found stabilization in the States, Merton was feeling uncertain – "culturally, intellectually and politically".[33] He didn't find what he was looking for in his friend, namely understanding for his political involvement against the nuclear bomb, the Vietnam War, for the human rights movement and revolutionary forces in South America, he was agitated by racial and social issues, which called for obvious ethical choices. Milosz saw them in the perspective of global politics, *cui bono*, and this is why in *Ogród nauk* he accused Merton's frantic activity of lacking historical imagination and demonstrating political naivety.

In fact it was Merton who stressed their bond more often: "our problems are very alike, in the professional and intellectual field at any rate",[34] "we are in many respects very much alike",[35] "to you I can talk, and begin to say what I want to say".[36] This kinship was later revealed in subsequent writings of Milosz – such books as *The Land of Ulro*, *Hymn to the Pearl* and finally *Druga przestrzeń*.

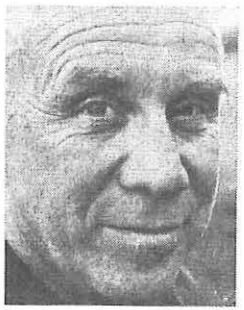
[31] Ibidem, p. 51.
[32] Ibidem, p. 100.
[33] Ibidem, p. 42.
[34] Ibidem, p. 99.
[35] Ibidem, p. 108.
[36] Ibidem, p. 127.

Studia Mertoniana 2/2003

KATARZYNA BRUZDA

THOMAS MERTON – AN ARTIST*

"It is not easy to be a monk with a spiritual heritage of an artist"



"Merton an artist". Such a formulation seems to define most precisely who he was. Not "Merton – a painter", "Merton – a poet", or "Merton – a writer". Obviously, one can discuss only those particular aspects of his art works, and his identity. But first of all Merton did have the soul of an artist. It is hard to say if Merton as a graphic, drawer or photographer might have become someone famous, someone who's artistic works we could esteem as we do appreciate his writings. It seems that without his special personality, his way of spiritual quest, his attempts to live as a monk, still being in progress, continuously open, we could not have the access and the key to a perception of his artistic works. One can even say that his writings clear us the passage to his person, and the meeting with him, with Thomas Merton himself, allows us to see all aspects of his work.

Thomas Merton, a son of a couple of artists, imbibed with the atmosphere of artistic perception of the world, and above all the artistic climate of

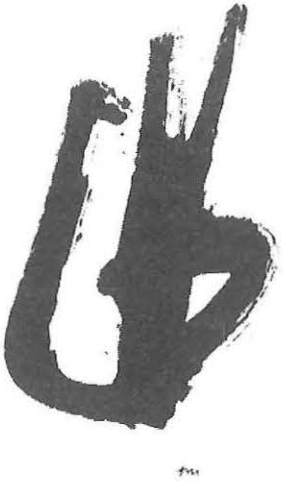
* Transl. by A. Wojtasik.

freedom and unconventional existence, for all his life was sensitive to art, understood as an expression of freedom, as a way of describing spiritual states, and as a contact with the Reality, as it appears.

A conflict mentioned in his remark on the spiritual heritage of an artist shows Merton as a person aware of tensions. Merton's paradoxes, living within the conflicts, and, at the same time, reaching some unexpected solutions in the midst of contradictions seem to be the essence of his life's quest. Thomas himself dealt with the problem of an apparent conflict between his artistic identity and his monastic vocation. He wrote about the increase of this tension within him. Already being in Gethsemani, he knew, that in his blood he had the sense of art and understanding of artists, which could not be taken away or internally denied. In the beginning however, the way of a monk seemed to be opposed to such a sensitivity and contradictory to his own need of expression as a writer or an artist. Initially he tried to isolate himself from his needs of answering to important matters using the language art, but, as Andre Malraux said rightly about Picasso, "We call 'artists' the people for whom the art is a need, no matter if they create it or perceive it. If we love a certain being, it doesn't mean that we think he or she is the world's seventh wonder, but it means, that he or she is necessary to us".[1] People internally connected with art, and Merton was such a person, cannot deceive themselves, cannot betray their own humanity described by art, cannot kill the artist within themselves, even being a monk. It was the artist's soul

that opened Merton to the depths of his monastic vocation. It is possible to suggest that the very essence of Thomas Merton's monastic vocation and his faithfulness to what was the most important in his way of existential searching was the result of his great artistic sensitivity, which, if fair, is usually associated with deeper and deeper opening to freedom and truth. And Merton was a seeker of truth and freedom. Thanks to this, in his art he could stay authentic and at the same time his artistic identity would not allow him to stay in

[1] A. Malraux, *Głowa z obsydianu*, Warszawa 1978, s. 125 [*La tête d'obsidienne*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974].



the closed world of spiritual ideals and schemes of institutions but pushed him to penetrate new areas and depths.

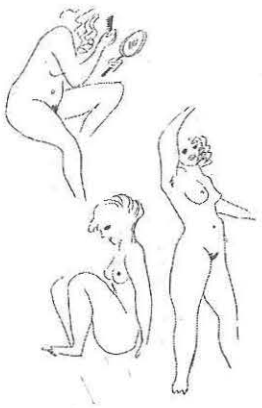
Thus let's try to analyse his artistic development, which ran in parallel to his existential and spiritual discoveries, and to find both the sources of his inspirations and the areas he reached thanks to it.

I would like to mention that it is going to be only a very brief journey through the art of Merton. The subject calls for deep studies, and the amount of works made by Merton (for example, a collection of 800 drawings in the Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, and the collection of numerous photographs) suggests that such studies are surely more complicated than it may initially seem. The character of my lecture and the time limits do not allow for more detailed analysis. In some cases I failed in precisely locating the time and place of particular works; also not all of the works (especially the earliest ones) presented in my expose are matched to the times of described events from Merton's life, I tried however to maintain the general chronology. Also I do not analyse Merton's theoretical attitude to art. He stated his opinion on those questions many times, for example, expressing his negative attitude to poor sacral art.[2] I consider only those threads that directly influenced his own artistic expression.

Generally speaking, Merton's artistic activity can be divided into three periods or formally into four groups of works differentiated according to various means of artistic expression. **(1a)** Early works: ink drawings, caricatures and funny sketches made before 1940, and **(1b)** formally similar but thematically changed ink drawings and paintings, made after entering Gethsemani (approx. 1950), then **(2)** an extraordinary cycle of female portraits dated before 1960, and **(3)** after 1960, photographs, dominating as a means of artistic expression, as well as **(4)** numerous calligraphies made with ink and brush.

[2] Cf. Th. Merton, *Sacred Art and the Spiritual Life*, and Th. Merton, *Absurdity in Sacred Decoration*, in: *Disputed Questions*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960.

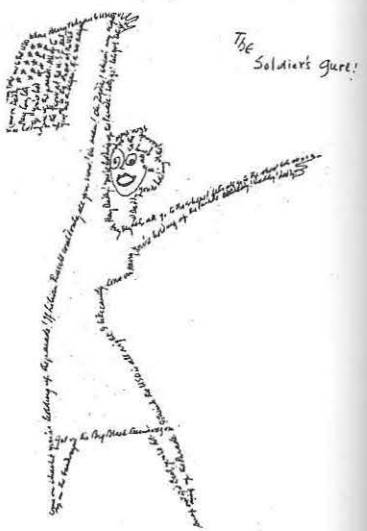
Riot and optimism. Caricature and early sketches



After his childhood, filled with many sad and important events, Merton begins his education in Oakham Public School in Rutlandshire, England. In this way he enters in his stormy youth, full of contrast events. In 1931 he becomes the editor-in--chief of *The Okhamian* and is responsible for the graphic department. In that period his attitude towards reality is complicated. Being already orphaned after his mother's death in his early childhood, he experiences again the passing of a close person: his father dies. It is a shock for Merton who more and more closes internally, at the same time engaging in social life and conflicts. In that period he develops his gift of writing. Drawings are somehow a support for his literary expression. He draws small illustrations to a magazine.

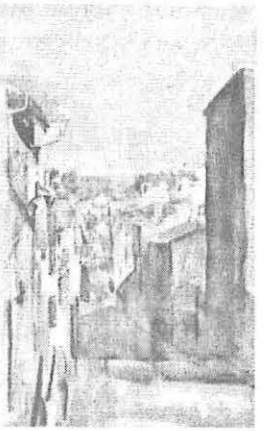
Merton enters into a stormy pubescence. He often falls in love, suffers and is a subject of erotic fascinations. In his pictures one can see joyful nudes of laughing women, naked young girls, provocative and full of energy. The pictures perfectly catch the movement and vitality of young bodies, however it is hard to call them serious works in any sense. They are just sketches.

As a student at Columbia University, six years after his graphic trials in *The Okhamian*, he gets a post as editor-in-chief of the *Columbia University Yearbook* and becomes art editor of *The Jester* magazine. Again he is responsible for graphics and uses a language of line.

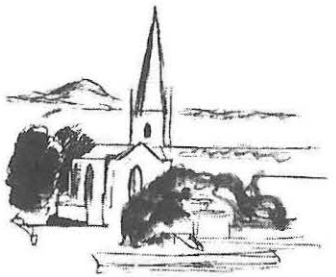


Merton's drawings from that early period can be formally classified as illustrative sketches. They reveal also his sense of humour. One can observe the critical sense of young Thomas, and at the same time his joy and power of life in the midst of dark and cynical moods. These works prove his skill of using lines and his natural sense of observation, especially visible in the presentations of humans (it must be remembered that, however

being bred by his parents-artists, Merton received no formal artistic education). His works are neither symbolic nor allegoric, but based on the synthesis of from within the realistic frames. His interest in contemporary art is clear. In the first period of his stay Gethsemani, in his journals he comments on the works of famous artists. He mentions Picasso. In Merton's pictures from that period on one can easily see his knowledge of contemporary artists. Thomas's father, Owen Merton, in some works inspired by Cezanne's paintings, but also by a synthetic Cubism, simplified and geometricised a form. Thomas's drawings prove his inspiration taken form the Cubists' strong and emphatic line, as well as their tendency to formal simplifications and ignoring the details. In later period it will be visible even more. However, at the same time he is dominated by this illustrative attitude.



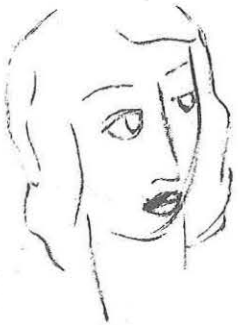
After entering Gethsemani Merton still expresses his sympathy towards drawing, by "illustrating" his interests with the topics important to him. Some figures of the saints and scenes from the Bible appear and, worth mentioning, more and more synthetic portraits. We can see the face of Christ too. Merton's later works, both paintings and graphics, still having a sort of "topic" as a subject, are much more developed. Merton uses a wide brush and ink. Patches are brave and emphatic. The observation is more accurate and simple. Expression of vitality is visible in a patch. Some of his works are inspired by Expressionism. In the background of his work there is an echo of Munch's famous "Scream". Dramatic impression and strength of affections are present in his works, but one can still find also a sense of humour and a healthy distance in them. There is also a visible simplification of form and a gradual giving up illustrative elements.



To put things in order I would like to mention that there are also some other Merton's drawings different from the dominating subject of portrait of the human figure, focused on still life study, as well as small landscape studies, formally belonging to "pen notes", and made with wide movements

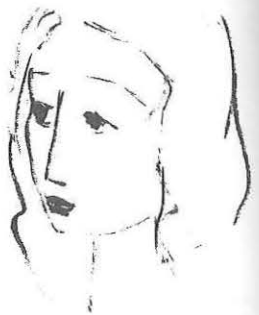
of charcoal or brush. Those topics were drawn by Merton in various periods, but generally they belong to the first one.

Reality and dream. Female portraits



One cycle of works made before 1960 deserves a separate discussion. It needs to be commented within the context of, extremely important for Merton, the time of a new discovering of his identity.

The key to the gallery of female portraits we find in Merton's notes, letters and poetry. The portraits are parallel with Merton's dreams, that he remembered in detail, described and tried to note their impression in a form of drawings. Deepening, experienced at that time by Thomas is associated with a more full, intuitive understanding of the importance of female element both in his life and his identity as a man, as well as in the cosmic aspect, within everything around us, and finally within God Him/Her-self.



The idea of meeting the female aspect, shown with a deep affection in the portraits, had its literary sources in Boris Pasternak's texts, known by Merton and in letters they exchanged, in writings of Evdokimov, an Orthodx theologian, as well as in texts and meeting with Stern, a psychiatrist of Jewish origins and a Catholic convert.[3] The female thread is associated for Merton with the contemplation of Hagia Sofia, the Divine Wisdom. At the same time he experiences a mystical vision in Louisville, described as a deep awareness of unity of all people, of an absence of strangeness, and being ravished by the beauty of every person. Merton takes that experience as a gift of Wisdom, as a grace of meeting Hagia Sophia. "I shall never forget our meeting yesterday, he writes. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and Truth. Only with you are all things found, dear child, sent by God."[4]

[3] Cf. J. Montaldo, *A Gallery of Women's Faces and Dreams of Women From the Drawing and Journals of Thomas Merton*, in: *TMA* 14 (2001) 155-172, pp. 156-157.

[4] Journal of Th. Merton, March 19th, 1958, qtd from J. Forest, *Living With Wisdom. A Life of Thomas Merton*,Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 132.

Women have entered his dreams. He confesses his dream to Pasternak: he dreamt of a Jewish girl, pure and beautiful, who hugged him in a passionate but virgin way. Merton associated this figure with St. Anne, but he was also convinced that it was a meeting with Hagia Sophia. In a sense he interpreted all his dreams archetypically. The following dreams are a dream about a female teacher of Latin, elegant and lost in men's world, who Merton tries to help, he dreams also about a Chinese princess, "Last night my dream about a Chinese princess obsessed me for the whole day again "The Proverb", a close and real person who comes in my dream in various and mysterious ways"[5]. In a later period he dreams about a Black nanny, cuddling him to her heart. "I had a moving dream about a Black mother. . . . She stood at the front of me – her face was ugly and severe, but a great warmth came from her to me and we hugged each other with great love (and I hugged her with gratefulness). What was recognisable, it was not her face, but the warmth of the hug of her heart. We danced together a little bit. Me and my Black mother."[6] It is a sort of memory from childhood. He dreams that he is awakened from his dream by a delicate hand of a nurse. At the same time he writes a poem titled "Hagia Sophia", saturated with allusions combining all those figures in one.

So, she is Eve – who he escaped from and who he desired, but who was not to disturb him, and who returns to him as the most intimate, internal truth, and at the same time, the Holy Virgin, giving him a refuge, as well as the Divine Wisdom, by whom he feels to be awakened to a new life. A girl, a woman who appeared in his dreams and is recognised in particular pictures is called "A Proverb". "A Proverb", or "A Parable" is associated with the Book of Proverbs, wonderfully describing Wisdom – God's masterpiece, playing with Him and being His delight

[5] Cf. *A Gallery of Women's Faces*, p. 168.

[6] Ibidem, p. 169.

(see Proverbs 8, 22-30). Jonathan Monthaldo in his analysis on female portraits by Merton, suggests however an interesting and original thesis, that for him "a proverb" can be, apart from all archetypical associations with met and dreamt women, also Merton himself. Discovering in himself the female element he identifies himself with Hagia Sophia, with the Embodied World of God, and accepts it in himself at the deepest level of his existence. It is an interesting thought, also in the context of later Merton's love episode in 1966 when he fell in love with a young nurse known as M. It seems as if in this person, met in reality, with whom he experienced an extraordinary time of love, fascination and unity, Merton found an embodiment of his theological intuitions, and the deepest unity with his own being. It is thanks to that mutual love that he discovered a deeper sense of his vocation to the fullness of unity, he experienced that what counts is such a devotion when "our verz being surrenders itself to the nakedness of love and to a union where there us no veil of illusion between us".[7] Drawing the portraits Merton expresses himself, his prayer, his need of unity. And the high temperature of his heart, which is directed to God.

In a later period he writes about "A Proverb" and about "M": " I dreamt in several different ways of trying to contact M. I cannot remember what the dreams were, only that the last one, before I woke up, was that I was sending a child to the hospital to tell her that I love her. . . . I almost never dream about M. as she is but of someone who, I instinctively know, represents her. . . . Still, just when I wake up, the archetypal M. and the reality merge together."[8] Thus there was an internal connection in Merton's consciousness between M. and Wisdom, and Mary, Eve and Proverb, as well as with himself in his deepest interior.

There are also two very interesting drawings that show a figure of Christ taking off a veil or a scarf from the head of a young woman. The other picture shows the face of Christ stamped on the veil, "Veron Eikon" known from Christian iconography. Insightful analysis of the way the pictures were produced

[7] *Living With Wisdom*, p. 181.

[8] *A Gallery of Women's Faces*, p. 171.

leads us to conclude that the female figure is an Old Testament type – the Divine Wisdom dancing in the presence of the Highest; the veil is taken off and "uncovered" by the Incarnated Word, Christ, the Incarnated Wisdom. In 1959 Merton saw the picture made by Victor Hammer showing the Virgin Mary putting a crown on the Christ's head. "The feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of creative realization of God's glory",[9] he writes to the author impressed by his painting. Yet Merton in his work presented another interpretation of this motif. It was an intuitive grasp of God, as uniting male and female elements. Merton identified a female figure in Hammer's painting as the Wisdom.[10] Also in his own work Merton shows Christ who represents Wisdom, Christ and the young Woman personify the Hagia Sophia, and the paradox of joy full of embarrassment or pain is visible.[11] It is a sort of allusion to sad Madonnas presented in Orthodox icons. Christ takes off the veil as a Bridegroom showing the light of beauty of his Bride. But She herself is an image of the Word, a New Face of God. It is interesting in this context to discover some visual resemblance between this Woman – the Wisdom, young, joyful and affected, with the nurse named Margie, who Merton fell in love with. Michael Mott suggests that both the dreams and the drawings, as well as the visualisation of a Jewish girl are reflections or reminiscence of his beloved M.[12]

The works from this cycle are also formally interesting. Merton's artistic sensitivity does not weaken, on the contrary, despite the fact that it is not the main domain of his activity, he works with increasing verve and concentration. His paintings are simple and deep. At the same time one can feel his

[9] Letter of Th. Merton to Victor Hammer, May 14th, 1959, qtd from: *Living With Wisdom,* p. 132.

[10] Cf. M. B. Betz, *Merton's Images of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God,* in: *TMA*, 13(2000), pp. 190-207, 202.

[11] Cf. ibidem, p.204.

[12] Cf. M. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, San Diego: Harvest Books, 1993, p. 578.

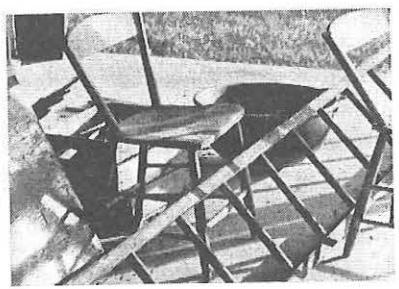
fascination and admiration of women's beauty. He shows their beauty in many different forms, their faces represent various physiognomies, but they all have a sort of common feature. The visual form of the works was influenced by both theological studies of Wisdom, and Merton's sensitivity to the beauty of the human beings surrounding him in reality and in dreams. Through the images from the dreamy meetings he seems to try to get to the core of the reality. To find the meaning and harmony. Dream and reality do not merge, but they enable him to get deeper into his own being and the essence of the world, universe, reality. Merton's art is indissolubly interlocked with meditation and contemplation. It is out of the verbal (and possibly trustful) way of telling the mystical experience of meeting the Hagia Sophia.

Those works, just like the works from the previous period, show Merton's temperament, strong personality, perceptiveness and idealistic tendencies. In the same period he made also portraits and paintings of figures belonging to some other thematic groups.

Unspeakable and real. Photography

Jim Forest in his biography of Merton notices that Mertons "affair" with photography began in autumn 1964.[13] More or less at the same time Merton, continuing his painting experiences begins his experiments with marking paper with black ink abstract, "signs". Experience of photography and calligraphs is the expression of completing a spiritual search and inner journey.[14]

Yet Merton's attitude towards photography is surprising. It was a kind of "transposition" or extraction of the inner, intuitive cognition of the essence of things into the visual world, because this essential world is hidden inside of it. Initially, in the earlier period Merton did not trust photography, because he thought that its advertising function made it submitted to social mechanisms,



[13] Cf. *Living With Wisdom*, p. 159.

[14] Cf. Th. Merton, *Circular Letter to Friends, September 1968*, in: Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, London: Sheldon Press, 1973.

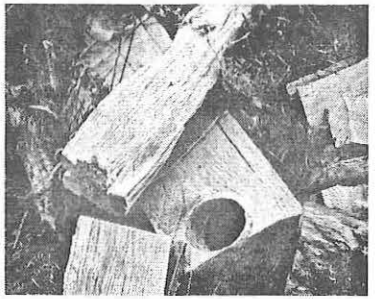
which misrepresent a human being. He thought that advertisements seduce us, to feel the craving to have an item from the picture. However, when as a child he saw the photographs of various parts of France – in the albums bought with the money given by his grandfather – he felt an unsatisfied desire of wandering and he wanted to possess everything he saw. Maybe he was seduced by the illusion of photography, but thanks to it he discovered also the call for wandering, taking a journey, and visiting the places that charmed him with their climate. By the encounter and more serious study of Eastern philosophical thought, especially the intuitions of Zen philosophy, he discovered some extraordinary means of expression, "noting the traces of things", with the help of a camera, as well as the paper covered with light-sensitive emulsion, and the light itself. He noticed that the light as such somehow "works", writing its reflections of objects.

The way photos are made appealed to Merton, and the process of developing them, "calling up" the already noted pictures on paper. It was similar for him to the most important processes in everything that exists, in the Reality. Photography could elicit what analogically happens in the structure of being, everywhere around, within him, and within every human being. He noticed that the same happens when the light of God enters into our life, leaving a mark in it. We can "develop" it, or keep it hidden. The world is like a negative waiting to be transformed by the light of Christ.[15] This way of "illuminating" an object, casting an eye on it and freezing the image caused photography to become a witness of Merton experiences. It began speaking the language, which was different to the language of advertisement he had met and criticised. It allowed for a contemplative perception of an object without the need of possessing it. As if the very sight was an act of entering an object. The way of meeting it, and the union with it, without violating its integrity and virginity. It was the same period when Merton wrote his moving essay titled "Rain and Rhinoceros" about the

[15] Ch. Meatyard, *Merton's "Zen Camera" and Contemplative Photography*, in: *The Kentucky Review* VII, 2, p. 137.

unselfishness of being experienced and described thanks to his ability of admiring the rain, just raining, wanting nothing.[16] This kind of unselfishness is deeply felt in Merton's photography.

Acquaintance and friendship with artists-photographers helped Merton to learn the secrets of photography.[17] Ralph Eugene Meatyard was one of them. Christopher Meatyard in his excellent article analyses the development of both artists.[18] They had many common passions – photography, similar attitude towards the outside world, and their fascination with Zen – that gave them a common language on a very deep level. Meatyard's opinion on photography, his experimental achievements put some professional discipline in Merton's photographic attempts. Meatyard's pictures are like paintings, full of eccentric mysteriousness, sense of humour, and at the same time visionary. But the very essence of his pictures was a response to the aggression of photographic advertisement. Building a picture Meatyard used the "Zen technique" – anti-logical illusion – to expose the mechanism of obsessive attraction, and through the reaction of rejection, to cause a viewer to detach from the object. On the other hand, Merton's pictures are full of simplicity, and reverence towards a common, very important, and, at the same time, totally unimportant object, focused on respect to every detail.



In photography Merton proved to be the most fulfilled artist, showing his excellent intuition in composition, sensitivity for space, climate of the places and objects. We want to meet the things Merton shows us. And, as

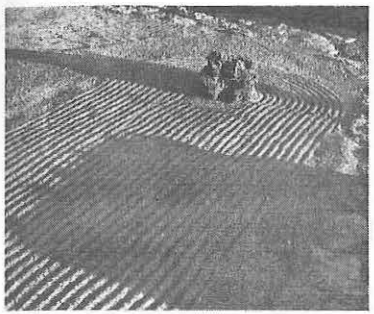
[16] Cf. Th. Merton, *Rain and the Rhinoceros*, in: *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New York: New Directions, 1966, pp. 9-23.

[17] *Merton's "Zen Camera"*, p. 122.

[18] Ibidem, pp. 122-131.

Merton himself felt in the past, we feel the urge to be in these places. Through the pictures we absorb a kind of inner strength from these objects. We want to meet them almost as persons, and such a meeting takes place thanks to the picture frozen in the photo. At the same time we are sent to the object, not the same, but the one which is close to us, to learn how to see it in a free way, without possessiveness, aware, not desiring it, and calling for nothing.

Merton is able to gain the affect of abstraction, which has a deeper meaning. One of Merton's biographers, John Howard Griffin, noticed that Merton was not interested in normal photography, but used it as a focus of contemplation.[19] Merton called the camera he used the "Zen-camera". This was what he noted photographically was a way of meditation on objects, and the act of contemplation was a picturesque metaphor, a kind of allusion. Merton wanted an aware revision, an insight into the visual world. Studying Zen helped in such "insight". He knew that Zen is neither theology, nor an aesthetic rule, but that it is included in religion or artistic expression.[20] Both Meatyard and Merton, while following slightly different paths, gained similar results. They both wanted to say, that there is no need to possess everything we see, and that there is no need to explain everything completely. One can experience the encounter with Reality, one can participate in it in an aware and contemplative way and one can gain deeper and deeper freedom. Merton noticed that the Eastern style of Zen art uses abstractions and minimalism to detach the observer from the observed object, (this detachment can be called "poverty"), and as a result, or at the same time, to liberate the consciousness. Despite many obvious differences the Zen experience proved to be very close to Christian experience. Thus the photography was also a witness to these similarities.

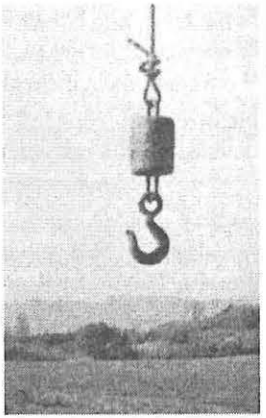


Photography allowed him to contemplate the visual objects and, at the same time helped to liberate him from them. Photography as such is a means

[19] Cf. ibidem, p. 140.

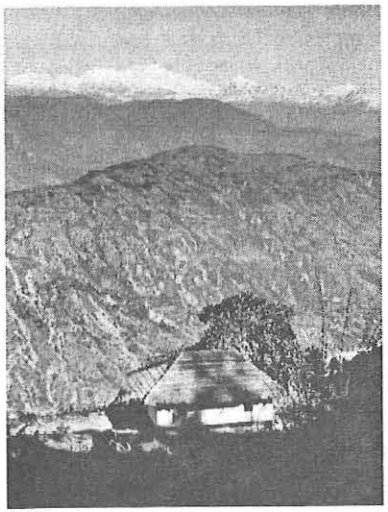
[20] Cf. ibidem.

of "factualisation" – but Zen makes us realise that "when a fact is isolated from the stream of reality, it becomes a false representation, an illusion, a contradiction".[21] Abstraction and minimalism, but also paradox, incoherence, contradictions, and eccentric behaviour aim to destroy the foundations of ready explanation and to remove what is essential in the conjectured "experience". Such are the origins and the aim of Merton's photography – to deal with the facts and to get, through the contemplation of an object, to their hidden meanings.



Merton shows also his sense of humour, when in a paradoxical Zen manner he presents "the only known picture of God", with nothing (or Nothing?) suspended on the empty hook in the centre of the composition.

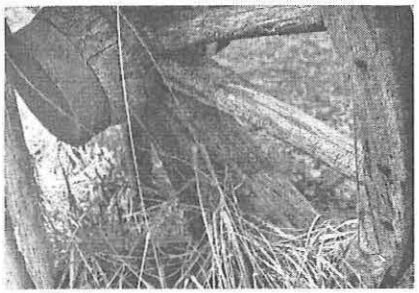
It is worth mentioning here another of Merton's ambiguous fascination with one of the Himalayas' peaks, the Mount Kanchen Junga, the affection born during his Asian journey.[22] Initially he was irritated with its proud height and the necessity of seeing it every place. But later on he met the mystery of the mountain and wanted to take pictures of it. He realised that on all available postcards the mountain is presented only from one side. He discovered the other, hidden, dark side of the mountain, invisible for people. In *The Asian Journal* Merton carried away by passionate affection wrote: "O Tantric Mother Mountain! Yin–yang palace of opposities in unity!(...) A great *consent* to be and not-be, a compact to



[21] *Merton's "Zen Camera"*, pp. 122-131.

[22] Cf. *Living With Wisdom*, pp. 206-207, and *Merton's "Zen Camera"*, p.134.

delude no one who does not first want to be deluded. The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and it is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN".[23] Merton again dreams about what is most important for him, this time about Kanchen Junga. Then he takes pictures of his new love and notes: "I took three more photos of the mountain. An act of reconciliation? No, a camera cannot reconcile one with anything. Nor can it see a real mountain. The camera does not know what it takes: it captures materials with which you reconstruct, not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful, of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it – especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene".[24] Merton expresses his credo as a photographer: a picture helps to realise the illusions we are usually submitted to, but we are usually not aware of. But only the awareness of illusion, and letting it speak allows for meeting the Truth. In his opinion photography is more similar to a thought than to a painting. His pictures show how he perceived, how he "thought" the world, and show his kindness and love towards the world.



As in the case of his calligraphs, Merton's pictures can be described with a focus on their aesthetic values and his technical skills. We can mention here briefly: he photographed objects, landscapes and people. A separated group contain his photographic notes from his journey to California and New Mexico, when he took pictures of many poetic landscapes as well as nature's details. He photographed also places and people during his journey to the East. Pictures of the Buddha figures in Pollonaruwa are especially interesting, as they re-create the absolute beauty and harmony of the monuments and the climate of the cool silence and concentration.

[23] *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 156-157.

[24] *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 153.

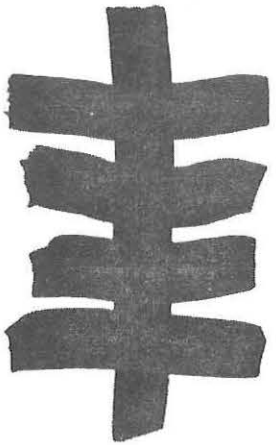
The majority Merton's pictures are black and white. They have many aesthetic values associated with composition, black and white contrast, graphic gradation of greyness, and the work of light. Bur the essence of these written actions was seeing and detachment from seeing to get to non-seeing, to void where all facts, objects and axioms are lost, to communicate with the Truth and Wisdom as it is, without any certainties. Thus, for Merton, with the Person of God.

Solitude and compassion. Calligraphy.

Calligraphy is a further accomplishment of photographic experience. An adventure with photography begins about 1960. Initially Merton studies Oriental thought, among others a Buddhist Zen scholar from Japan, Doctor Suzuki, he initiates the correspondence, and even is able to meet Suzuki in New York, he next studies authors and thinkers and he dreams of a journey to the East. In 1968 he goes to Asia for the Benedictine and Trappist monks conference near Bangkok, and allowed to visit some other places on the way. As it is known, it was the his last journey. It ended with Merton's tragic death in Bangkok. The origins of Merton's interest in the East come deep from the past, through numerous episodes directing his quest. One of the important moments for understanding the philosophy and religion of the East, before he began his journey, was, apart from studying his thoughts, his own experience of contact with the idea of Japanese Zen art. Merton did not deal with it as an imitator; it would be missing its essence anyway. He put his marks individually, not trying to "repeat" the alphabet. The discovery of Zen art was for Merton a very important step in approaching the Truth. The essence of Zen was to destroy the apparently true reality in our minds to let us see directly.[25] Making

[25] Cf. *Merton's "Zen Camera"*, p. 142.

use of his previous painting experiences and experiments with wide spots Merton bravely enters the world of calligraphy, treating it as an abstract, objectless utterance. He puts black ink marks on paper. The very mark is at the same time its own signature. The Chinese and then Japanese calligraphs were like that. At the same time they were haiku poems and pictures. A short paradoxical thought liberating from the sense, written in a form, which itself is liberated from the meaning.[26] Formal minimalism and non-attachment to the form were to preserve the freedom from it.[27] The function of beauty, Merton writes in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, is to be "an epiphany of the Absolute and formless Void which is God. It is an embodiment of the Absolute mediated through the personality of the artist, or perhaps better his "spirit " and contemplative experience. The contribution of Zen to art, he continues, is then a profound spiritual dimension and transforms art into an essentiallz contemplative experience.[28] Merton notices that there is a coherence between art and life, that in the experience of traditional Japanese art they constitute the inseparable unity.



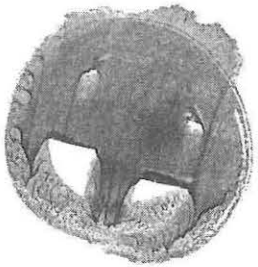
Calligraphy – in contrast with photography, born in Europe, but treated by Merton as his own "Zen tool" – originated directly from the culture of the East, from the period when the Buddhism in China produced a new current of so-called "contemplative Buddhism", that later developed in Japan as "Zen Buddism" (approx. 13 century).[29] Merton for the first time found himself in a completely new area, as far as art is concerned. In Merton's hitherto works one can clearly see his more or less conscious inspirations with European art, contemporary painting,

[26] Cf. A. W. Watts, *The Way of Zen*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1958.

[27] Cf. *Merton's "Zen Camera"*, p. 142.

[28] Th. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York: New Directions, 1968, p. 90.

[29] M. Prodan, *Sztuka chińska*, Warszawa: PIW, 1975, pp. 133-134 [*An Introduction to Chinese Art*, London: Sprong Books, 1966].



pictures of Cezanne, drawings of Picasso, and the artistic climate of his family. Calligraphy, while being for Merton a sort of "borrowed" artistic means, soon became his own, very individual way of artistic expression, but it was not what he thought while painting calligraphies. The artistic field was prepared by Merton's impetus, perceptiveness, sensitivity, and his sense of composition, but what is most worth to be esteemed is that they became his extremely personal and individual way of coming into authentic contact with the Reality. They were his own meditation taking him off the subject, meditation negating the *a priori* meanings. The artistic progress made by Merton here is enormous and seems to go in parallel with a sort of passing of another internal mountain from where he could suddenly see the astonishing landscape, full of light and space. We should remember that his last painting works are the female portraits described before, still close to the subject, even if only a dreamy one, or associations with nature. And suddenly, after his experiences with recognition of the Hagia Sophia in many female figures, Merton enters the way of positive negation, as if not experiencing Wisdom through intuitive contact with it, but perhaps being pulled by the "vibrating space" or the "great void" known in Zen, and as a result deepening his recognition of the Beloved Divine Wisdom. I cannot say what Merton's spiritual experience was like, but his pictures rapidly turning from illustrative into abstract, with the usage of almost the same formal means prove an inner metamorphosis of Merton. As in Chinese or Japanese art colour was rejected "to let the intuition rule freely, because *colour is an illusion, and illusion is colour*",[30] Merton gives up nice female faces, rejects images and his attachment to forms (even the most lovely, but only allegorical ones), that he used to dress God with. He moves to the pure form, included within itself, suggesting

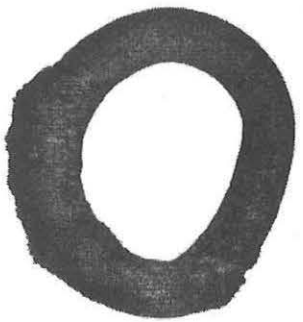
[30] *Sztuka chińska*, p. 134.

nothing and having no additional meaning. In my opinion Merton's calligraphies are the mute witnesses of his contemplative enlightment. The calligraphies emanate from Merton's solitude and silence. There is a tension, speed and rapidity in them. A line is ruled almost by an accident, but the spots are placed harmonically and sometimes they suggest symbolic associations, such as the sign of the cross, and they are still formally ascetic. In this way the cross becomes a universal note. It seems that it is also a means of some kind of contact, harmony and communication which is commonly understood, or rather commonly not understood. The signs – without meaning constitute the code of communication, a kind of empathy with all people, cultures and religions. Finally Merton found his solitude and silence in the very centre of his experience of meeting with people, that he was missing so much, just before he met his death. During his journey to the East he realised the meaning of compassion. He also met people, with whom he established such a deep communication, that he was joyfully embarrassed and astonished. One such meeting was the encounter with Chatral Rimpoche, described as the experience of being on the verge of "the great realisation".[31] Compassion, the sharing common feelings could become deeper for Merton thanks to his previous meeting and experience of the art of Zen Buddhism assimilated as his own "Christian" experience of liberation from form for the meeting with the Incarnated Truth and Wisdom. The calligraphies that he painted he called "the seeds that sprouted as the call for the consciousness".[32]

[31] *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 141.

[32] *Merton's "Zen Camera"*, p. 142.

Summing up, one can notice that Merton's artistic way is the witness of his quest and spiritual journey in time and space. It is the record of his following the path of gradually deeper and clearer consciousness, and at the same time the witness of his vivid temperament and unusual dynamism from his youth till the end of his life. For all the time he is deeply involved not only in verbal but also visual expression. In the beginning his drawings show his internal struggle, mockery and criticism. Then various visual means become helpful in recording the process of recognition of himself and finding his identity. In the final period Merton treats art, especially photography, as a means of a dialogue with society, which has difficulties to get into contact with its inner self, and, on the other hand, as a means of clearing the consciousness and the way of contemplation, which is visible both in photography and in calligraphs. In Merton's opinion an artist should focus on his own task, and not on the role society tries to impose on him. Merton himself for all his life unmasked the stereotypes of thinking about himself within the categories of the roles he played. He was himself as much as it was possible. Thus he did not play the role of the artist. He w a s an artist – as his talent and his fair quest prove.



Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

JAN BEREZA

THOMAS MERTON'S THEOLOGY OF *SELF**

The false self

Describing Thomas Merton's views as the theology of the self seems to be very suitable. His entire quest expressed in all his literary output can be summed up in the question about the self, about who am I!? This question accompanied him when he wrote about the European and Indian philosophies, theology, monastic life, Christian and non-Christian mysticism, yoga, Taoism, Zen or social issues.[1] It was not only an intellectual problem, but it became his constant meditation. In one of his first books, *Seeds of Contemplation,* Merton identified the false self, which he called a mask, an illusion, ego, and the empirical or external self, with hell. Hell is the cult of nothingness. It is not, however, the nothingness of our body or corporeality. For Merton, the body is not a prison, as it was for the Platonists, it is the Church of God and therefore it is holy. Freedom and joy are thus not attained through the liberation from the body, but through overcoming fear in love,

* Transl. by P. Kaźmierczak.

[1] Cf. Jan M. Bereza, *Mistyka Dalekiego Wschodu a poznanie Boga w pismach Thomasa Mertona*, unpublished.

fear that leads us to creating illusions, building walls, putting on masks, acting and deepening the feeling of loneliness. The life of a monk, the life of voluntary solitude is – for Merton – a way of experiencing and overcoming the nothingness of the false self, which has been built by years of confrontation with others in order to confirm the narcissistic feeling of safety. The prayer of the monk in solitude brings him face to face with the appearances and the triviality of his own self-image as well as the inauthenticity of his life and the pretence of what we acknowledged as 'I' and 'mine'. Faced with loneliness and death, which should always be on his mind the monk experiences the truth of his own 'I' in its entire absurdity and terror. Merton exposed this problem in the life of both ancient monks and existentialists, especially Marcel and Heidegger; he also seems to have drawn on the thought of Kierkegaard.

It must be added that the solitude of the monk is not – for Merton – a goal in itself. The solitude of the monk does not result from the negation of other people. The only motive for the solitude of the Christian monk can be love. The experience of love for all people in spite of the feeling of loneliness and miscomprehension was given to Merton. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he describes the experience he had in the shopping centre in Louisville, when he was suddenly swayed by an unshakeable conviction that all people are his and he is theirs and that there is no strangeness between them. 'My loneliness, however, does not belong to me, since I can see to what extent it belongs to them and that I am responsible for it to them, and not only to myself. Just because I am one with them I owe it to them that I can be alone, and when I am alone, they are not 'they', but my own self. Strangers do not exist'.[2] He calls this experience a gift. He believes it is attainable for everyone, because 'the gates of heaven can be found everywhere'.[3]

Merton realised, however, that before we experience this unity with all people and God, we have to go through the often painful process of encountering the nothingness, helplessness, pettiness and illusoriness of our own false self. It is the way of humility, which he must have known well from the Rule of St. Benedict and the doctrine of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The humble rejection of one's self is, according to Merton, kenosis, bereavement, repulse, loss and purification taking place within. Overcoming a false

[2] Th. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1966, pp. 222-223.

[3] Ibidem, p. 225.

self-image, rejecting every notion of self such as I should be or as I seem to be is necessary, because this misrepresentation hides us from being known by God and separates us from His grace and thus it reinforces our persistence in sin. Merton alludes on this point to the biblical vision of 'the fall'. In his opinion sanctity means being oneself, so it comes down to getting to know who I am that is to say rejecting my false self and discovering my true self in God. Merton identifies discovering the true self with an inner transformation, a new birth, with metanoia that is the conversion of heart and mind. It seems to be close to the religious condition of salvation. Of course, Merton is convinced that salvation is God's gift and that he owes the discovery of his true self to God's grace. However, he is also aware that we have to prepare ourselves to receive the gift, hence such an important emphasis on asceticism and discipline both in his teaching and in the entire monastic tradition.

Thomas Merton's doctrine of the necessity of rejecting one's false self appears to be merely a reformulation of the ideas of the Christian mystics, especially St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas. They speak of the need to detach oneself and turn away from the things of the world in order to become completely unified with God. Thomas Aquinas enumerates precisely the goods of the created world in which man often seeks the fulfilment of his desires being aware at the same time that none of them can give him happiness. They are the following: material goods, fame, honour, power, pleasure, the health of the body and the natural perfection of the soul. St. John of the Cross, like Merton, is not a Gnostic and he does not claim that the created world is evil. He emphasises that the problem lies not in created things, but in us. It is not things, but the desire of them that we are to transcend. Otherwise we remain in the slavery of the mind subordinated to objects. An object can belong to the realm of things as well as to the realm of concepts, notions or ideas.

What St. Benedict in his Rule called discernment proves helpful on the way to freedom. Discerning what things are, and who God is helps us detach ourselves from the entanglement of illusory desires. Showing us the truth about creatures, discernment enables us to long for the good and the supreme happiness that is God himself. When our knowledge and our love find their fulfilment in God, then we also find joy, beauty, and good in all creation. Getting to know God is not, therefore, an escape from the world, but the confirmation of its worth in God.

The empirical self and death

In the Platonic philosophical tradition death is conceived of as the separation of the soul from the body. This concept cannot be found in the Bible. It also seems that Thomas Merton did not attach much importance to it, especially in the later period of his life. He perceives death only as 'the death' of the empirical, that is, false self. What remains is the true self or real self, identified by Merton with the person. The true self is what is real in us, what cannot be annihilated by death. The empirical self is for Merton – following the words of Christ quoted in the Gospel according to Matthew (17:25) – what we have to lose in order to attain life. As William H. Shannon observed, the new English translation of the Bible is close to Merton's understanding: 'If anyone loses his life in my name, he will find his true self. What gain is it for a man to have won the whole world and to have lost his true self or what can he give to save this self'.[4]

Death and dying in the sense of self-denial, giving up one's own will or detachment from the world is well known to Christian mystics, especially to St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. The latter repeated so often: 'I'm dying by not dying', and he certainly did not have the common sense of death in mind. Christian spirituality is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, from them it derives its saving power as well as the encouragement to die with Christ and in Christ in order to become one with Him. The death of the false self may be called the first death. The second death, which is the end of the earthly life, affects it too, but it has no power over the true self.

The true self

According to Merton, the inner or true self is not an idea or a perfect self. It would be just another illusion. The true self is our very own self in all its uniqueness. It seems that Merton did not identify it with a soul in the Platonic sense or with the individuality of the psyche or the body. Rather, he conceived of it as a being or a substance, as created by God, though existing beyond our ordinary consciousness. However, at times, during the deepest contemplation, which is also a gift of God, the curtain falls down

[4] *Thomas Merton and the Quest for Self-Identity* by William H. Shannon, Cistercian Studies, XXII/1987/2, p. 174.

and we can realise what we are. The inner transformation or the spiritual awakening do not create our true self, but only reveal them to our experience. Our true self exists from the beginning of our life. The discovery of the true self is the new birth in God, in Christ.

Getting to know the true self, like getting to know God, does not take place in a sensual-intellectual process, it unfolds beyond the intellectual construct of a subject and object.

The knowledge of the true self and the knowledge of God

According to Merton, the knowledge of the true or real self and the knowledge of God are conditioned by each other to such an extent that our true self is identical with God. It does not seem to be an existential identity, but a subjective experience of our total dependence on the Creator. It means – as William H. Shannon emphasises – that my subjectivity has become one with God's subjectivity.[5] It can also mean that on the plane of the subjective experience, where the distinction between the subject and object is not known, the two subjects appear to be one. Thomas Merton stated it most emphatically in his book *The Climate of Monastic Prayer:* 'Our knowledge of God is, paradoxically, not a knowledge of Him as an object of our inquiry, but of ourselves as totally dependent on his saving and loving knowledge'.[6] Augustine's *noverim te, noverim me* can be read as the correlation of knowing oneself and knowing God, that is to say I can only know myself when I know my total dependence on God. Likewise, I can know God only when I discover my true self, the self that has been known by God. Merton is certainly close on this point to the Rhine mystics, who spoke of the 'bottom' or the 'base' of the soul existing beyond the reflective consciousness. It seems that the issue of the unconscious (the subconscious and the hyperconscious (superego) plays a very important role in the spiritual experience, which is a fruit of contemplation made possible by love. 'The unification in love of the simple light of God with the simple light of the human spirit – writes Merton in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation* – is contemplation.' Love, which is an act of will – as we know- acts on a higher level than the intellect, so it cannot be wholly available for the intellectual cognition. Merton surely learnt the importance of the unconscious thanks to the con-

[5] See Ibidem, p.184.

[6] *The Climate of Monastic Prayer,* Kalamzoo, Cistercian Publications, 1973, p. 13.

temporary psychology as well as Indian philosophy, especially the philosophy of yoga, which gives priority to the state of 'concentration without consciousness' over the state of 'concentration with consciousness'. Contrary to what is generally accepted it does not mean the depersonalisation of an individual, but only the transcending of the empirical individuality understood as ego. Merton identifies the concept of a person with the true self, which is unknowable for the reflective consciousness, but is the indestructible essence of our being, recognised in God and by God.

Inner transformation and contemplation

Thomas Merton distinguishes individuality understood as the false self, which develops in isolation, and derives its strength from opposing others, from the person, identical with the true self, which is free, open to others, and builds unity with others. In the first case, solitude becomes an escape into illusion and the confirmation of selfishness, in the other, it is a gift for others. Today, observing Thomas Merton's experience of loneliness in retrospect, we can be sure that it is an unending gift for many of us.

It appears that whatever Merton wrote had a subjective dimension, that is to say he wrote mainly about his own experiences, even when he referred to the views of others. On the other hand, his works were what he shared with others. It must be said, though, that from its very nature, the path of knowledge that he followed involved the most existential aspect of our life. You cannot discover your true self without a radical inner transformation, as well as the change of your attitude to God, people and the world. Everything has its foundation and fulfilment in prayer, leads to contemplation, and flows from it. One year before his death, in December 1967 Merton said to a group of contemplative nuns: 'Our prayer should be directed within. God is not an object... God is a subject, the deepest self. He is the Basis of my subjectivity. God wants to know himself in us.'

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

KONRAD MAŁYS

THOMAS MERTON READS BERNARD*

If we ask a question about a few essential traits of the figure of Thomas Merton, the answer could be as follows.

First of all, he was a man strongly convinced of the bond between truth and life. He believed that a man who is looking for the truth, at the same time strives for the fullness and beauty of his humanity. He is thirsting for his identity, which being incomplete, causes a certain drama on different levels of his experience, and he is searching for the way that would unable him to form that identity.

Secondlly, Merton possessed a unique ability to reflect on his own experience. He was a skilful critic in evaluating what he managed to discover. Among many inner and outer lights, he was able to distinguish the most important ones, which were not always the ones that seemed to shine brightest at first. In this respect he was characterised not only with courage to form his opinions, but also he didn't feel attached to them if they turned out to be insufficient or false.

Thirdly, if Merton's reader follows his works chronologically, as they were written, they will be stricken with the fact that Merton's reflection

* Transl. by A. Pogodzińska.

constantly deepens. The effort accompanying the struggle for the right light, often dramatic, is visibly heading inward, extending, at the same time, to new realities of the Church and of man.

And finally, Thomas Merton is a writer, who managed to establish very original dialogue with his reader, being convinced that it is necessary, if he wants to remain truthful in his search. His works, to a large extent, have a character of personal confession, sharing his experiences, but also, one that is intently listening to its reception, in order to verify and move forward.

Features of his character, his way of thinking together with the ethos of his life, create a picture of a unique person who cannot be perceived through some rigid rules of conduct or superficial piety. On the other hand we cannot think of him as an individualist who breaks the traditional canons just to be original.

Thomas Merton is a trappist and represents a very interesting school of spirituality, that has its roots in the Cistercian tradition reaching to XII century. And if you look closely, this particular tradition helped him to become the person with the traits of character that were mentioned above.

Looking through his works in which he comments on the source texts of Cistercian monasticism, especially the ones of St. Bernard, we can see that all he achieved and who he was, was, among other circumstances, a result of looking deeply into the ideals of the Order, he joined.

We cannot really exhaust this subject in such a short presentation, but let me draw your attention to a few of the main issues. I will base my observations on a few articles about St. Bernard, which were published by Merton between 1948-54, and that were later published in the volume of the "Cistercian Studies Series".[1]

The identity of man in the thought of St. Bernard.

Merton looks closely into the source texts of Cistercian monasticism, represented by St. Bernard's works and states that in the centre of Cistercian thought lies a particular interest in the identity of man and a desire to shape the fullness of humanity within him. The path on which this identity is shaped is in a way a journey to the source-creative love of God.

> *The whole aim of the cistercian life – writes Merton – and the Fathers of the Order are unanimous on this point – is to set men apart from the world, that their souls may be purified and led step by step to perfect union with God by the recovery of our lost likeness to him.* (107)

[1] *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard*, CSS 9, Kalamazoo, Michigan 1980.

But what is this similarity? Well, when it comes to a man's identity, Cistercian theology is based on a very important distinction between the image of God in a man, and the likeness to God in him. We can see this difference clearly in the text from the Genesis: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Gen 1, 26). The Cistercian fathers, by making this statement one of the main pillars of their theology of the inner life, state that there is a difference between the image of God in a man and likeness to Him. The image of God is something that cannot be destroyed in a man, even after the sin; the likeness, on the other hand, is what man lost because of sin.

There are three elements that are essential for the image of God that a man continues to reflect:

1) natural simplicity of man
2) natural immortality
3) inborn freedom of will

Natural simplicity means that for a human soul being and living, *esse* and *vivere* is one and the same thing. An existing soul is always living in the same time, but this "living" does not have to mean that it is happy. And that is because the happiness of a man depends on his likeness to God. What is this likeness? It is a love of man for his Creator. It is a "free" answer to a gift of being an image of God. Cistercian spirituality states that the greatness of man lies in his dignity, but neither dignity, nor greatness make a man happy. Only life in dignity can make it happen, and life in dignity means love. And so being the image of God means being immortal and free, while being like Him, means to be loving/to love. Only the latter truly mean living and being happy, to be of his likeness, in which not only existing/being and living is one, but also living and being happy mean the same thing.

After the sin, a man did not lose the image of God within him – his greatness and dignity – but lost the likeness – the love for his Creator and for his "fellow man". But at present, when a man will realise his dignity, he may discover that he is still able to regain this likeness and happiness. It cannot be done in any other way though, than through the power of God's grace, because he cannot love by himself, but only through participation in the inner life of the Holy Trinity.

Merton says:

> *We always remain, what God has made us in our essence, but the tragedy is that God's good work is overlaid by the evil work of our own wills.* (109)

The awareness that we still remain an image of God, creates a living hope within us, that we will become like Him:

> *Now the greatness of man consists not only in his own essential simplicity, but in his ability to rise to a participation in the infinitely perfect simplicity of the Word. We too can share by grace, the unity of esse and beatum esse, which is his by nature.* (108)

Than Merton states, that St. Bernard proved the goodness of human nature to greater extent than any other philosopher or theologian did before him. But within a man, there appeared a certain tragic duality: he was still an image of God but without that likeness to him. He has the greatness, but he is not happy. He has the dignity, but cannot love (as strong) to its extent.

> *We are at once great and nothingness. The greatness in ourselves is God's work; the evil, the vileness, is the work we have done with our own will, in direct contradiction to our own nature as it was created by God.* (113)

But if the nature of man is good, then an awareness of it gives him strong support and strengthens him in his desire to regain the fullness of his identity.

> *And if the first step in the Cistercian ascent to God is for the monk to know himself, we may reasonably say, that, in some sense, the whole life of such a one will consist in being himself, or rather trying to return to the original simplicity, immortality and freedom, which constitute his real self, in the image of God.* (118)

In this simplicity, says Merton, lies the whole Cistercian ideal:

> *Meanwhile on earth our chief, in fact our only task, is to get rid of the "double" garment, the overlying layer of duplicity, that is not ourselves. Hence the fact, that the whole of Cistercian asceticism may be summed up in that one word.* (119)

Looking at Merton as a man who is a pilgrim on the way to his own identity, we understand his being ingrained deeply in the Cistercian tradition. One of its main features is a deep, theological vision of the identity of man. What makes this particular view attractive is its simplicity. And it is because the Cistercian fathers, while talking about the identity, are pretty clear on what it is exactly: a man is himself only when he is a loving man.

Characterising this love as an inner measure of identity, the Cistercian spirituality is clearly stating that a man cannot reach the ideal on his own. The love comes from God – as St. John says, because God is love. A man can only regain his identity, by opening up to a disinterested gift from God by himself, and there is only one way to do so. This way is a way of humility (and being humble), which is – as Cistercian fathers say it – meeting with truth and accepting it.

The fact that humility is the way, first of all results from the essence of sin itself, which is pride. Yielding to the devil's temptation to "be like God", the man rids himself of God's love, acknowledging himself as an independent being:

> *Satan, however, tempted Eve to desire what man was not made to desire: divinity not by participation, but independently of God's free gift, by our own right, by our own nature.* (109)

This pride in a man became in a way a constant tendency...

> *...to make himself like unto God, to put himself in the place of God, that is, to make his own ego the center of the universe.* (113)

From this essence of sin results a conclusion that the return to the fullness of humanity must be characterised by humility. Merton – still following St. Bernard's thought – analyses also the second important pillar of Cistercian spirituality.

Humility as a way to the truth.

Cistercian spirituality looks more deeply into the virtue of humility in comparison to different scholastic moral treatises, which rate it among so-called "passive virtues". Following St. Benedict's Rule and the theology of the Fathers of Church, especially of St. Augustine, Bernard and other Ci-

stercian Fathers see humility as the fundamental way that unites man with God. Because man's sin consists mainly in pride, his return to God should be based on humility. And humility is not exclusively a painful recognition of one's wretchedness, but most of all it is the path Christ walked himself, who in this respect gave himself as an example to be followed, saying: "Learn from me, for I am silent and humble at heart". For the Cistercian Fathers this humility is seen as a path of embodied love of God. If God is love, and humility is God's path, that can mean only one thing, that when a man is humble, at the same time he becomes loving!

Humility, in this respect, is seen as a true unity of the way and it's destination, the aim that man tries to achieve. When the heart of man becomes humble, it starts to imitate the One who is love, and thus starts to love. In this way, man rebuilds his likeness to God. When love seems to a man to be a mountain too high to climb, seeing his wretchedness, he descends to the valley of humility, and there he finds the truth – only by descending he acquires love, the highest peak. Humility is a path of love and so St. Bernard and the Cistercian Fathers speak the words of Christ, who spoke of himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life." They bring to our attention the fact that this statement unites humility and love, truth and life in one entity. Therefore, through becoming humble a man "learns the truth", and it makes him happy as well. Knowing the truth, he not only "understands", but also loves, and it fills him with the Spirit of Truth, who is a great fact of life, and to be precise – the divine life itself, which is the fullness and beauty of our humanity.

But what does it really mean to be humble? Following the thought of St. Bernard, Merton describes humility as simplicity, distinguishing two kinds of it: intellectual simplicity and simplicity of will.

Intellectual simplicity.

Intellectual simplicity consists in realising that a man cannot reach the fullness of his humanity by himself, for he is only clay, dust, which was raised to the highest dignity by God. Acknowledging this fact is the first degree of humility. The second one, of equal importance, is agreeing to recognise one's dignity and greatness. When a man accepts his wretchedness, he cannot deny his dignity, which he never lost. What he should do is to admit that he doesn't live up to it and that he cannot do it alone. In that

respect humility means self-cognition, which generates fear of God and is a "beginning of wisdom", but it also means getting to know God, which is a supplement to wisdom and its perfection.

Another important element on this way/path is a characteristic emphasis that the Cistercian fathers put on choosing only the knowledge that serves the inner growth. Merton analyses the word *curiositas*, used by Bernard, which means false knowledge:

> *Curiositas is that vain and illusory knowledge, which is really ignorance, because it is the exercise of our intellect not in search of truth, but merely to flatter our own self-satisfaction and pride.* (133)

And that is why man cannot learn the truth, says Merton. This *curiositas* is a first step to pride and a main cause of man's downfall in paradise.

> *But God had already given Adam and Eve all the knowledge, that was worth having, all that really perfected their souls, all that was really true. Hence, the only addition the devil could contribute was the knowledge of evil, of falsity.* (133)

Cistercian spirituality in a particular way encourages us to look for the truth, seeing life and happiness in it, and to reject falsity, which proves to be a great deal of effort.

> *What is the wisdom, that is fitting for us to have? The knowledge and love of truth. What is the wisdom, that we should not seek? The knowledge and love of falsity.* (134)

Merton notices that St. Bernard doesn't say anything that we could call anti-intellectualism. His main stress lies in his statement that a man should ably posses his knowledge, so that it could serve his spiritual development. Cognition should bear the fruit of growth and a deepening of the inner life. A man's mind is not storage where different objects can be kept. It is a cognitive power. And the aim of cognition is the life and identity of man in love. If a man learns to govern his cognition so that he can grow in the spiritual life, then his cognitive skills will multiply. Thus we see that those who accused St. Bernard of anti-intellectualism were wrong. This misunderstanding results from the fact that for St. Bernard, cognition is not merely a simple result of the thinking process itself. It is also a gift, a domain of

contemplation, towards which the mind ascends thanks to grace. In this contemplation, what is important, in not reserved only to mystics. It is a gift that every man can be granted. We can even say it is a gift every man should be open to.

This intellectual simplicity, as Merton calls it after Bernard, leads to contemplation.

It consists in not limiting one's knowledge, but in being alert not to make a mistake of a so-called "own judgement" (*proprium concilium*) of reality. It is a mistake, which caused the downfall of man: a desire of gaining knowledge without loving its Source. The knowledge is not the only aim of cognition. The other one is participation in the life of The Holy Trinity. Merton emphasises Bernard's belief that man can never be satisfied with God by means of rational knowledge, by imagination, or even mystical vision:

> *...but that soul will only be content, when he receives God with secret love, as He descends into the soul from heaven. For then he will posses the One he desires, not in a figure, but actually infused, not under any appearance, but in the direct contact of love.* (136)

And this gift can be granted to a man...

> *...if only the soul will not cling to its own lights, to its own opinion, to its own way of doing things...* (137)

On the basis of this analysis we can see that Bernard as a thinker and writer is faithful/true to his Cistercian school, and we can even say, to the monastic tradition in broad sense, both before, and after Bernard. It isn't hard to find a connection with, for example, the latter Carmelite tradition, which Merton does in an extensive article where he compares Bernard and John of the Cross.

The simplicity of the will.

This love is a unity of man's and God's will. Just as "own judgement", "own will" is a cause of man's unhappiness. The mortifying of one's will is stressed in the discipline/obedience of all orders. This obedience, which Merton explains, is mortifying of one's will in three dimensions: *nihil plus, nihil minus, nihil aliud.* That means not doing anything more, less, nor different than what has been agreed.

> *The chief characteristic of voluntas propria is (...) a spirit of separation, of self-exaltation in a private heaven, which belongs to us alone, by our own right...* (139)

Merton emphasises that own will is a corruption of our natural freedom, natural simplicity. It is always accompanied with the urge to be pleased with oneself, which is directed to satisfy our own desires. But it does not mean that all will is bad, but only the one that opposes God.

The mortifying of one's soul also has another dimension: it opens one for the mystery of Christ's obedience, who gave up his own will to look for his father's will in all, even though his own will was great and sacred.

There still reminds a question about God's will. Cistercian spirituality gives a great answer to that question. As the fathers of the order state it, is a common will of a particular community. It is this Cistercian *voluntas communis*, which was described in a document named *Charta caritatis*, as a kind of Cistercian constitution:

> *The will of others, the will of community, the Order etc. Is God s will, and to submit to our superiors and our brethren is to submit to God and become united to him.* (139)

And it is not only about doing what we are told by others, but about thinking of the whole of community we belong to in our obedience.

> *The chief means for destroying self–will is not merely obedience. It is obedience regarded as subordinate to charity, and as integrated in the common life.* (137)

This common will is something very specific, it is a spirit that revives a particular community, which allows one to see precisely what should be followed and what rejected. The Cistercian fathers write openly that it is the Holy Ghost who creates and leads a particular community!

> *The common will is a participation in the life of God for it is charity. It is God's will, God's love, the vinculum pacis, the bond of peace uniting man to one another and to God himself.* (143)

Thus first of all a man is stimulated with longing, so that he can mortify his will adequately, and as a result he is given this particular sense of common will, that guides him through different inner and outer complexities and

in the end dignifies him. And as this is a particularly beautiful Cistercian ideal, let us hear what Merton himself has to say about it:

> Frag. ze s.148 *No matter from what angle we approach cistercian simplicity – Merton summarizes – the core and essence of it always turns out to be one thing: love. The will, for St Bernard as for all the Augustinians, is man's highest faculty. Therefore the highest and most perfect simplicity attainable by intelligent beings is union of wills. The all–embracing union of charity, which is effected by the Holy Ghost himself, unites men to God and men to men in God in the most perfect and simple union of one loving will, which is God's own will, the voluntas communis. This union is what Christ died to purchase for us. It is the work of his Spirit in us, and to realize it perfectly is to be in heaven: indeed the whole work of achieving this final magnificent and universal simplicity of all men made one in Christ will be his eventual triumph at the last day.*
>
> *Hence we see, that the very essence of Cistercian simplicity is the practice of charity and loving obedience and mutual patience and forbearance in the community life which should be, on earth, an image of the simplicity of heaven. We now begin to see something of the depth of this beautiful Cistercian ideal!*
>
> *On the other hand, the devil is always working to break up this simplicity, to break the Order down into separate groups, the groups into conflicting houses, the houses into cliques and the cliques into warring individuals. St. Stephen's Charter of Charity was explicitly directed against this work of hell.*
>
> *The chief weapon used by the devil in this conflict is our own corrupt self-will, our self-judgment, and the two together are commonly called pride, which makes us idolaters, self-worshippers and consequently unitatis divisores, disrupters of union, destroyers of simplicity.*
>
> *(...)*
>
> *The culmination of Cistercian simplicity is the mystical marriage of the soul with God, which is nothing else but the perfect union of our will with God's will, made possible by the complete purification of all the duplicity of error and sin. This purification is the work of love and particularly of the love of God in our neighbor. Hence it is inseparable from that social simplicity, which consists in living out the voluntas communis in actual practice. This is the reason for the Cistercian insistence on the common life: the Cistercian is almost never physically alone. He has opportunities to give up his will to others twenty-four hours a day. It is precisely this which, according to the mind of St. Bernard, St. Alered and our other Fathers, should prepare him most rapidly for the mystical marriage.*

What is the highest of Cistercian's simplicity is a mystical nuptial of the soul with God, which is nothing else than a perfect unity of our and God's will, which is only possible through a complete purification from the duality of fallacy and sin. This purification is the work of love, especially of Gods love in our fellow man. Thus it is insupportable from this simplicity in community, which is about putting voluntas communis into effect through precise kind of practice. That is the reason of Cistercian's stress on "living together", Cistercian in almost never physically alone. He has opportunity to give his will to others twenty for hours a day. According to opinion of St. Bernard, St. Elred and of our other Fathers, it is (exactly) the quickest way to prepare him for the mystical nuptial.

From here, Merton, consequently, moves on to a subject of the mystical marriage, which is about the unity of God's will and ours, and therefore love. But we cannot achieve it other than with the help of the Holy Spirit, who constantly enlightens and unifies the Church:

> *...the operation of the voluntas communis (common will) and the operation of the Holy Ghost are one and the same thing, and the man, who wishes to become united to the Holy Ghost only has to enter into participation in this unity of charity by humbly giving up whatever is disordered in his own will to that of the Church, the Order, his superiors, his individual brethren and through all these to God. Sanctified by this participation in the common will, which is God himself working in men and in the Church, the individual monk is prepared for the graces of infused contemplation.*

Summarizing, we can conclude that Cistercian theology, and especially that of St. Bernard, exerted an essential influence on Thomas Merton. Firstly, he found his own interest in the identity of man in it, and then, a harsh but

clearly directed school of asceticism of cognition and will, which led to this identity. This school formed in him the ability of critical self-reflection, as well as the ability to find a way in the various intricate realities of the contemporary world. Being one of the biggest virtues it also formed this particular sense of great human community, whose distinctions guard the unity which can really only be achieved on the level of the Holy Spirit, who gives life. Merton himself was an original man through and through, but what we will not find in his originality is the "Cistercian" defiance, which those revolutionizing the Church propagated: "don't search for new ways, it is enough that you take the one others took before you".

Studia Mertoniana 2 (2003)

PAUL M. PEARSON

MERTON SOCIETIES

Thirty five years after his death interest in Thomas Merton seems to be increasing. The years immediately after his death saw a number of publications[1] and the consolidation of the Merton Collection at Bellarmine University which Merton himself had established. The first Merton organization I should mention is the Merton Legacy Trust, Merton's literary trust, set up by him, with prompting from his publishers in 1967 to look after his literary affairs after his death. The current Trustees, Bob Giroux, Anne McCormick and Tommie O'Callaghan, along with the Abbot of Gethsemani, hold the copyright for Merton's estate and decide what can and cannot be published. They also hold the copyright to Merton's drawings and photographs, and to many photographs taken of him, such as those by John Howard Griffin, John Lyons and Sibylle Akers.

It was only in 1978, ten years after his death, when major commemorations were held in such places as Columbia University, New York and in Vancouver, British Columbia that the real expansion of interest in Merton

[1] Of particular note would be: *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* and *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*.

Vancouver, British Columbia that the real expansion of interest in Merton began and it has continued unabated. With delays in the publication of the official biography 1980 saw the publication of Monica Furlong's biography of Merton, eventually followed in 1985 by Michael Mott's official biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. The publication of the official biography opened the way for further major publications, as stipulated in Merton's trust document – selections of letters and then the seven volumes of his long awaited personal journals.

Against the background of the growth in publications individuals in many different places were coming together to study and ponder Merton's life and writings. Although some of those gathered in Vancouver in 1978 discussed the possibility of founding a society, nothing came of it at the time. The first official society was formed in Belgium in the autumn of 1986 after a Merton weekend held at Oude Abdij (Abbey) in Drongen. This group continues to meet regularly and to publish four times a year a small journal called *Contactblad Merton-Vrienden*.

On May 29th 1987 a group of fourteen Merton scholars met together at the Thomas Merton Studies Center[2] at Bellarmine University and the International Thomas Merton Society was formed. Over the course of their meeting a tentative constitution was drafted, an initial general meeting was planned for May 1989, and they designated 1988 a "Celebrate Merton" year to raise awareness about Merton and to promote the fledgling society[3] publishing articles in a number of journals and even persuading a couple of key journals to devote whole issues to Merton.

The ITMS set itself the following seven goals:

• To encourage research, study and reading of the works of Thomas Merton.

[2] Christine Bochen, David Cooper, Lawrence Cunningham, Robert E. Daggy, Br. Patrick Hart, Glenn Hinson, Dewey Kramer, Victor Kramer, Patrick O'Connell, Anthony Padovano, Ron Seitz, William Shannon, Bonnie Thurston and Sr. Mary Luke Tobin.

[3] William Shannon was elected president, Robert Daggy vice-president, Christine Bochen corresponding secretary, Glenn Hinson recording secretary, and Bonnie Thurston treasurer.

• To promote the writing of both scholarly and popular books and articles about Merton.

• To assist members in exploring the unique spiritual journey of Thomas Merton through shared insights.

• To promote recognition of Thomas Merton as a spiritual theologian, a social critic, a catalyst for inter-religious dialogue, and as an important American literary figure.

• To encourage and assist in the formation of local and regional chapters of the ITMS.

• To promote communication among members through biennial general meetings, special meetings and various publications.

• To assist in the designing of graduate and undergraduate courses on Thomas Merton in various disciplines of study.

The Merton Seasonal, already being published by the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University and in its 13th year of publication, was adopted as the official publication of the Society, with a newsletter, published twice a year, being added in 1994.

To assist in fulfilling some of these aims and objectives the Society has created Daggy Youth or Student Scholarships and Shannon Fellowships.

Daggy Youth or Student Scholarships enable young people (ages 14--29) to participate in an ITMS General Meeting, thereby inspiring the next generation of Merton readers and scholars. These scholarships honor the late Robert E. Daggy, founding member and second President of the ITMS. These scholarship pay the conference costs for the participants requiring them just to fund their travel expenses to the General Meeting.

Up to five Shannon Fellowship awards, of a maximum of $750 each, are awarded annually to enable qualified researchers to visit the Merton Center archives in Louisville, Kentucky, or other major repositories of Thomas Merton materials, such as the Lentfoehr Collection at Columbia University or the St. Bonaventure University Friedsam Library archives in Olean, New York. The awards are named in honor of William H. Shannon, founding President of the International Thomas Merton Society, general editor of the five volumes of Merton's correspondence and the author of numerous books including the *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*.

Applications are encouraged from established scholars, from researchers without academic affiliation, and from students and younger scho-

lars, including those engaged in research for theses and dissertations. Occasionally awards have been made for other reasons for example, to assist with the translation and publication of Merton's first books in Russian and to assist with the expenses of this conference.

The International Thomas Merton Society has continued to organize general meetings every two years since 1989 with the last such meeting, the seventh, at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, the eighth being planned for Vancouver, Canada in June 2003 and the ninth for San Diego, California in June 2005.

Although the International Thomas Merton Society attempts to be international interested groups in other countries have formed their own societies, normally affiliated to the ITMS. In 1993 the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland was formed after an initial conference in Winchester to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Merton's death. That society has now grown to over 350 members, organizes a biennial residential conference, other day conferences and retreats and publishes its own journal, *The Merton Journal*, now about to enter its tenth year of publication. It has also published three volumes of conference papers with a fourth currently in preparation.

Less formal groups are also in existence in Spain, Brazil, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and most recently Canada with the thriving Vancouver Chapter of the ITMS recently becoming the Merton Society of Canada.

One final organization I would like to mention briefly is the Thomas Merton Foundation. The Merton Foundation was set up in 1995 to, and I quote, "raise awareness of spiritual and contemplative practices in individuals around the world as a means of addressing global issues and assisting them to integrate the spiritual into their everyday lives." Their two major goals were to gather resources to ensure the preservation of Thomas Merton's original documents and to share Merton's life-changing spiritual legacy with people. Thus far most of their work has focused on the latter goal with the provision of a variety of lectures, retreats, programs and other events reflecting Merton's spirit and interests. With its emphasis on fundraising this organization tends to appeal to a slightly different audience than the Merton Societies that I have been describing.

How does one define a Merton Society? I think it is impossible. A Merton group or society will be as diverse as the people who read Thomas Merton. The ITMS is a very formally organized society with by-laws, charitable non-profit status, with a formal structure of officers, board, elections and the other constituent parts of such an organization. The TMS-GBI, has followed a very different path with a very informal structure and the decision not to organize itself into a legal entity. Both models function equally well. The less structured model though can be a good model to follow, and certainly less daunting at the beginning.

At the Merton weekend held in Winchester, England, in 1993 – a gathering very similar to this gathering now – a small committee was formed to bring the Society into being. Using the list of attendees of the conference, along with addresses of others who expressed interest, a simple membership leaflet was mailed outlining, very simply, the basic aims and objectives for the Society and asking for a five pound subscription for membership. The subscription was just to cover basic costs, especially mailing and the printing of a newsletter. The newsletter became *The Merton Journal* and the initial issues included the papers from the inaugural weekend conference, along with some book reviews and other items of interest to members. Gradually materials began to be sent in for inclusion, and sometimes articles were solicited, so that the content of the journal is now more or less self-generating. It is published twice a year at Easter and Advent.

The founding committee also made plans to have a residential conference in May of 1996 and, in the interim, organized a one day conference in December 1994 so as to keep the momentum of the new society moving. April this year saw the 4th general meeting and conference of the society, a gathering of about 100 of the members including participants from Spain, the Netherlands, the USA and Canada. By contrast the 7th general meeting of the ITMS, held at Bellarmine University in June 2001, attracted around 400 participants.

Both organizations are thriving and suggest models for organizing a Polish Merton Society. The basic requirements I would suggest are:

– a small organizing committee

– a mailing list of interested people and a subscription fee

– a regular means of communication, such as a newsletter, magazine or the like

– future events.

Hopefully we can discuss some of these options shortly.